

***Labourers in The Vineyard:  
A Dialogue<sup>1</sup> between Jesus  
and a Modern-Day Disciple  
about being Good, Just, and Generous like God***

*[Written by Zac Klassen, performed by Zac and Jaren Klassen at  
Bloomingdale Mennonite Church on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023.]*

*Jesus and disciple walk along the road, chatting and laughing, and come upon the front display of vines and work gloves. This leads Jesus to be reminded of the parable that he told his disciples from Matthew 20:1-16. They sit down and dialogue ensues between Jesus and the disciple. The disciple thinks he knows what the parable is about, but Jesus surprises him by helping him see perspectives about the parable that he never saw before.*

*\*PROPS\* - NRSV Bible and Phone*

**Disciple:** I can't believe that I ran into you, Jesus. No one is going to believe me when I tell them that I found you while walking outside.

**Jesus:** It's not hard to find me, you know. Seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened.

**Disciple:** *\*Naively\** Which door?

**Jesus:** *\*Exasperated\** No, it's...oh, never mind.

*Come upon front display of vines, tools, work gloves.*

**Jesus:** Ah, now what do we have here.

**Disciple:** Looks like somebody is getting ready to work-look-there's pruning tools, and work gloves.

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<sup>1</sup> This dialogue's theological conviction, that Jesus was telling a parable about economic justice, generosity, and our human tendency to avoid such justice and generosity, was inspired by the wonderful chapter "The Laborers in the Vineyard" in Amy-Jill Levine's book *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Levine alerted me to a number of textual nuances to this parable that cast it in a different light than many other interpretations.

*Pause, observing*

**Jesus:** This reminds of me of a story I once told my disciples. Sit down and I will tell you about it. It was a story about a householder who was looking to get some work done and went looking for help.

**Disciple:** Oh! I know this one! Let me guess: The Little Red Hen!?

**Jesus:** The little red what?

**Disciple:** The little red hen! You know, the story where the little red hen is doing all the work around the house and the yard while her housemates stand idly by.

**Jesus:** I'm not familiar with it. How does it go?

**Disciple:** Basically, the hen wants to make delicious fresh bread and she keeps asking for help from her housemates. She asks the cat and the dog and the mouse for help saying, "Who will help me," and each time they say, "Not I!" because they were lazy. The best part comes at the end of the story when the little Red Hen says, "Who will help me eat the bread!" and the cat and the mouse and the dog say, "I will!" and the Hen proudly reminds them of how they contributed nothing all day long before saying "I will eat it myself." Dejected, they all watch as she eats the bread.  
*\*chuckles\** That'll teach them, eh?

**Jesus:** That wasn't the story I told, but it sounds...interesting. No, I was thinking of a story I told my disciples about householder who went out really early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. He met with some labourers and they agreed to the wage he would pay them and they went to work. Later in the morning, around nine o'clock, this householder went back to the marketplace and found some people standing there...

**Disciple:** Oh, ya, ya, ya. I vaguely remember this one. Your apostle Matthew recorded this story. Let's see if I can remember: *\*Thinks\** The householder went back to the marketplace and saw people standing there being lazy, and he told them that they should come work for him too.

**Jesus:** Not quite. Wait. [Pause] Where did you get the idea that the people in the marketplace were being lazy?

**Disciple:** It says right in the Gospel of Matthew. Here, let me consult my bible. *Flips around in Bible, eventually finding Matthew 20:3 (NRSV)* and reads it. "When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace." See! "Standing Idle" In other words, lazy.

**Jesus:** Woah, woah, woah. "Standing idle?" What version is that?

**Disciple:** The New Revised Standard Version.

**Jesus:** The New Revised Standard version? Was there a revised standard version before the new one?

**Disciple:** Yes, there was, in fact!

**Jesus:** Well, what about that one? What does it say?

**Disciple:** Oh...um. I don't have a Revised standard version here. Oh! I know...I'll check my Bible app. *\*Pulls out phone from pocket\**

**Jesus:** Your what?

**Disciple:** My app! I can access the Revised Standard version, the NIV, the KJV...

**Jesus:** How many different versions of my words are there?

**Disciple:** Oh, lots, Jesus! *\*Consults Phone\** Umm...let me see...oh, here, yup. The Revised standard also says the

people were "standing idle" in the marketplace. Now, what about the New International Version? Ah, ok, here we go: "he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace *doing nothing.*"

**Jesus:** Hmm...that's maybe a bit better but still not quite right. This must be a lost in translation situation. What I said was "When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others in the marketplace who were *without work* - in other words, *they were unemployed.* I didn't say they were intentionally idle or lazy.

*Disciple puts down phone*

**Disciple:** Oh. Ok. So, they were without work, well, that changes things a bit. Well, go on. Tell me the rest of the story...in the JAV.

**Jesus:** The JAV?

**Disciple:** *\*Cheekily\** The Jesus Authorized Version.  
*\*Laughs\*.*

**Jesus:** *\*Looking unimpressed at joke\** I'll do my best to translate the story into your English language - it was so much easier in Aramaic. Ok. So, at 9am the householder invited these labourers to also come work for him and told them he would do right by them as far as payment goes. They were unemployed so he offered to pay them a living wage for the day - enough payment to supply about three to six days of food for a family.

**Disciple:** Seems like a nice householder.

**Jesus:** Indeed. Well, after a while this householder went back out to the marketplace again at noon, then again at 3 o'clock, and finally one last time at 5 o'clock. Each time he went, he saw more unemployed people standing there, and each time he asked them why

they didn't have work and they said: "No one has hired us." So, he hired them.

**Disciple:** Wow. This householder has quite the labour-force now. I hope he had enough work in his vineyard to justify all that hiring. His returns will sure take a hit if he has more labour-power than work. Plus, I don't know how financially savvy it is to get new hires involved as late as 5 o'clock - they hardly would have worked by the time the day was done.

**Jesus:** True, the workday did soon come to an end and the householder then needed to fulfill his obligations to all the labourers he had hired. So, he got his manager to pay everyone. Since you seem to remember some of this story, do you remember what happens next?

**Disciple:** I'm a little fuzzy on the details but I think if I recall, he paid everyone the exact same wage, didn't he? And the labourers that started working earliest in the day were not impressed.

**Jesus:** That's right. The people who started working at the beginning of the day began to grumble saying: "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'

**Disciple:** They have a point, don't they? I mean, it's a little like the Red Hen story I told you about at the start. Like the Red Hen, the first labourers worked all day long to gain their wage (or in her case, the bread), while the last labourers who had been lazy, standing around all day just showed up at the end, and got to reap the equivalent rewards. Doesn't seem right to me.

**Jesus:** You said it again.

**Disciple:** Said what?

**Jesus:** You said they were lazy. I didn't say that. I said they were unemployed.

**Disciple:** Ok but let's be honest. They are probably unemployed for a reason, right? I mean, if they really had wanted to work earlier, they probably could have, right.

**Jesus:** They *did* want to work. When they were offered a job from the householder late in the day, they took it. The only difference between them and those hired first was that they showed up looking for work later in the day. You don't know their whole story. What if they were working a second job somewhere else or what if they had children or aging parents to care for?

**Disciple:** I guess you have a point. I just think that it still seems unfair for them to receive the same wage as the people who worked a full day.

**Jesus:** Let me ask you a question. Do you have a job?

**Disciple:** Yes, I do!

**Jesus:** Are you a business owner or a labourer?

**Disciple:** That's more than one question, Jesus.

*\*Smirks\** A Labourer.

**Jesus:** Do you earn a living wage? Can you feed your family and pay your bills?

**Disciple:** Yes, it's a modest income but I can feed my family, pay my bills, and still have some left over at the end of the day.

**Jesus:** Do you belong to a community that supports you and helps you in your time of need?

**Disciple:** Yes, in fact, I have a church community that does just that.

**Jesus:** Does your city have unemployed people living in it?

**Disciple:** Yes, it does.

**Jesus:** What about the poor? Does your city have poor people?

**Disciple:** Yes.

**Jesus:** What about those with no supportive community?

**Disciple:** I think you know the answer, Jesus. Yes, there are people in my city without supportive communities there to help them.

**Jesus:** Why do you think people in your city are unemployed, poor, or without community?

**Disciple:** I...I don't know, I suppose there are probably a lot of reasons. I guess I'm not sure - I haven't really thought about it.

**Jesus:** Ok. Let's do a thought experiment: what if your boss put up a poster at an employment services office, offering contract work to people in positions of unemployment in your city. Let's say she got a response from 10 different people willing to work and hired them at her business.

**Disciple:** That sounds great. 10 more people employed and making an income.

**Jesus:** What if you were to find out that your boss agreed to pay them the same, modest wage for the day that you earned, even though they had just started working at this business and even though some of them only worked half a day?

**Disciple:** I know what I'm supposed to say, Jesus, but if I'm honest, I don't think that would be fair. I

would have seniority over them. I should get paid more than a person who just showed up one afternoon.

**Jesus:** So, you want preferential treatment?

**Disciple:** I don't know if I'd call it preferential treatment, just treatment based on what is deserved. They don't deserve the same wage as me.

**Jesus:** They don't deserve a living wage?

**Disciple:** I didn't say that. I just think I deserve to get more because I worked more.

**Jesus:** But you agreed to the wage you receive, didn't you?

**Disciple:** Yes, but...

**Jesus:** And, really, aren't you already in a more privileged position than this hypothetical person? You have a stable job, are financially independent, and have a supportive community while they are being offered contract work, are financially at risk, and lacking community supports. Could you really begrudge your boss for giving them a living wage to help get them on their feet?

**Disciple:** I'm going to have to wrestle with this one for a bit. *\*Quieter as if thinking to themselves\** That or consult Human Resources. [Pause] I think I'm just having a hard time seeing your point.

*\*Pause\**

**Jesus:** It's your evil eye that's the problem.

**Disciple:** Excuse me?

**Jesus:** Your evil eye. The first labourers in my parable had the exact same problem.



**Disciple:** What's wrong with my eye and how, exactly, can it be evil? And, wait, I don't remember anything in your parable about an evil eye.

**Jesus:** It should be there. Check one of your other versions. It's the part where the householder responds to the grumbling of the first labourers.

*The Disciple picks up phone again*

**Disciple:** Let's see, here. Ooh! Let's try the King James Version. Ah, here it is, verse 13: <sup>13</sup> But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? <sup>14</sup> Take *that* thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. <sup>15</sup> Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? **Is thine eye evil, because I am good?"** Jesus, what does that even mean?

**Jesus:** It means your eye isn't viewing your neighbour with their best interest at heart. This problem isn't new - it's always been with us. Way back when God gave the law to Israel through Moses, he gave them laws about redistributing wealth in the sabbath year to help the poor and when he gave those laws, he told him to tell the people of Israel to "Be careful not to entertain a mean thought [or let their] eye be evil toward [their] needy neighbor and give [them] nothing."

**Disciple:** I didn't realize I had a problem with the way I viewed others.

**Jesus:** Don't worry. You're in good company. The first labourers in the parable struggled with evil eye syndrome, and so did my disciples. One minute, I would think I was getting through to them and the next I would listen to them argue over "Who was my favourite" or "Who would be first in the kingdom."

[Pause]

**Disciple:** Jesus?

**Jesus:** Yes?

**Disciple:** Is this story about a generous householder or is it a story about God?

**Jesus:** Can't it be both? Maybe if a wealthy business owner hears this parable of mine, they might think about their responsibility to help the unemployed and the poor in their city? And, maybe if a labourer who grumbles over the good fortune of their neighbour \*wink wink\* hears this parable, they might consider how the well-being of their neighbour is connected with their own well-being? Maybe they would be inspired to regard their neighbour with love and act generously toward them too? Hopefully both would consider the fact that we are called to imitate God, who is kind, generous, and just, and who is the source of every good and perfect gift given (James 1:7). [PAUSE] Now, it's time we get on our way. From the position of the sun, I'd say it's almost 5 o'clock and all this talking has made me hungry.

*Both get up to leave.*

**Disciple:** 5 o'clock you say? Time to get some dinner. Hey, Jesus, do you see that? Look over there. Those folks look hungry.

*Gestures to the congregation*

**Jesus:** Hey! Good eye!

**Disciple:** Maybe we should invite them dinner. What do you say?

**Jesus:** I'd say that sounds a lot like another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like a banquet..."

*Disciple and Jesus walk out, while calling to the congregation to come to dinner with them.*