



THE SCANDAL OF GRACE

*Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend
of tax collectors and sinners! (Luke 7:34)*

GRACE, IN THE HANDS OF JESUS, IS DIFFICULT TO ACCEPT. IT IS NO respecter of conventional social boundaries. His stories and his meals and his healings betray a decided preference for the socially marginal, for the religiously unrespectable. Indeed, Luke records Jesus' own admission that, in the eyes of his critics, he was nothing other than a "friend of tax collectors and sinners." In a word, in the message and public ministry of Jesus grace is offensive, even scandalous. In this chapter we explore several sayings of Jesus which provoke the hearer with their celebration of the offense of divine grace.

THE "GOOD SAMARITAN": REIMAGING AN ENEMY (LUKE 10:30–35)

Translation

A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who after stripping and beating him went away, leaving him half-dead. Now by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. In the same way also, when a Levite came to the place and saw [him], he passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan on a journey approached him, and when he saw he was moved to pity, and coming up he bound his wounds, pouring on

[them] olive oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper; and he said, "Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I return."

An Interpretation

The story about an anonymous man robbed and beaten on the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30–35) is one of the best known of Jesus' parables. If we follow the clues left by Luke in his crafting of the narrative, we read the parable as an "example story" illustrating the "love of neighbor" emphasized in the preceding conversation (Luke 10:25–29).¹ By turning the question "who is my neighbor?" into the question "which [one] was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?", the parable refuses to set any limits on the command to love. The Samaritan functions, then, as a model of Christian love. If a despised Samaritan can show love of neighbor in this way, certainly a Christian reader can do the same (v. 37: "Go and do likewise"). This interpretation of the parable has considerable force; after all, it appears to be the way Luke read the parable and wished his first readers to hear it; moreover, it can inspire a hard-hitting sermon motivating concrete acts of compassion toward those in need, no matter what their race, class, or nationality.²

But if we approach the parable with an eye to its setting within the ministry of Jesus himself (as distinct from the narrative setting Luke has provided), we may discover a particularly hard saying of Jesus. It is instructive to ask how the first audience of the story—Jesus' hearers—would have made sense of the parable. Would they have identified with the Samaritan as a positive role model? Or would they rather have identified with the nameless man in the ditch and reacted to the story's plot through his eyes? The story begins, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." A Jewish listener would assume that the man was a fellow Jew, since he is not otherwise identified.³ Particularly in light of the misfortunes that overtake the man, Jesus' hearer would identify with

the man lying in the ditch. The parable entices us to view what happens through his eyes.

Two religious leaders happen upon the scene, one a priest and the other a Levite. It is possible that both are returning to Jericho, a town where many priests reside, after fulfilling their temple duties, but the parable does not say so. In any event, both men cross to the other side of the road, failing to assist the victim. The parable is silent concerning their motivation. Did they fear an ambush? Did they suppose the man was dead (the parable describes him as “half-dead”) and so wish to avoid the ritual impurity which would accompany handling a corpse?⁴ The parable’s hearer can only guess, but that leaves the listener in exactly the same position as the man in the ditch. Whatever the reasons for their inaction, the priest and the Levite have failed to show compassion. Suspense builds: will help arrive in time?

With the failure of two priestly functionaries, one expects a Jewish layperson to appear.⁵ The surprising twist the story now takes will not be lost on Jesus’ listeners—indeed, it will offend them—and it also indicates that the point of the story is not an attack against the clergy. A Samaritan arrives on the scene—that is to say, a person whom victim and listener alike distrust, dislike, and despise. We can only expect the worst. So the story will end on a tragic note? Yet this Samaritan, of all people, shows compassion to the man in the ditch, to the point of paying for several days’ rest and recuperation at an inn. Lying helpless, vulnerable, at the mercy of his enemy, the man must accept aid from even such a one. Loving an enemy is one thing; in that case one remains in control, one derives satisfaction from being unusually magnanimous.⁶ But seeing oneself as vulnerable in the face of an enemy, and helped by him rather than by one’s own kind, is disconcerting. The parable forces a hearer to reimage the enemy and so disturbs the order of a world where friends are friends and foes are foes.

The story of Jewish–Samaritan hostilities is a long one; we do not need to review it here.⁷ Two somewhat later Jewish texts will serve to illustrate the disdain Jews felt for Samaritans, thus confirming the reading we have given the parable. Mishnah

tractate *Šebi'it* 8.10 reflects the hostility of Jews toward the Samaritans: “One who eats bread [baked by] Samaritans is like one who eats pork.”⁸ And according to tractate *Sanhedrin* (57a) in the Babylonian Talmud (compiled in the fifth century CE), while a Samaritan guilty of murdering a Jew must be punished, the death penalty does not apply in the case of a Jew’s murder of a Samaritan (Cuthean). Clearly, this parable about a “good Samaritan” challenges and overturns a deeply held rejection of Samaritans as outsiders. Victimized by bandits from one’s own people, one is rescued by an enemy. The story affords a disturbing glimpse of the world, threatening to undo carefully cultivated distinctions between “us” and “them.” It explodes the “cold war” mentality and presses beyond *détente*, beyond a peaceful, yet uneasy coexistence, to acceptance of the full humanity of the other and of the genuine good that lies within him or her. Divine grace can offend my religious sensibilities, for it sometimes comes from the most unexpected of sources, from a person I would rather hate. Now, Jesus has taken that option away from me!

From Text to Sermon: “Friend or Enemy?”

Familiarity can make us blind. I use the telephone many times a day. But don’t ask me to draw a picture of the dial and put all the digits and letters in their proper places. What about traffic signals? We encounter scores of them every week. But is the red light or the green light at the top? I had read the parable of the “Good Samaritan” and the story of the rich ruler (Luke 18:18–25) countless times. But only after thirty years or so did I notice that these two—the parable and the story—begin with the same question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Yes, two different people ask Jesus the same question. One questioner is a lawyer, a student of Scripture. The other is a Jewish ruler. Jesus recognizes, in his conversations with both, that their theology is sound. Yet each has a problem with living out his faith, and that problem assumes a different shape for the two. Each therefore requires a different answer. The ruler, we learn, is a wealthy man (Mark’s gospel describes him as a “young man”). He has a problem with *things*. Jesus tells him,

“Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor.” In other words, “Your problem is money.” We can hear the wealthy man respond, “Money a problem? Not for me. I have plenty!” We can also hear the Master’s answer: “Yes; but money has plenty of you. You can’t manage it. Money is managing you.”

The problem of the lawyer, on the other hand, is not things, but *people!* To inherit eternal life one must be able to accept and relate positively to people, all kinds of people. Loving one’s neighbor begins with the dimensions of the heart and not the size of the neighborhood! The lawyer wants Jesus to set boundaries to define “neighbor”: race, religion, nationality. He wants Jesus to draw a circle around “neighbor.”

It is time for a story! We call it “the parable of the good Samaritan.” A man—undoubtedly a Jewish brother—is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is beaten, robbed, and left half dead. A priest and a Levite, in turn going down the road, pass by on the other side. Perhaps questions like these cross their minds: Is the victim a “brother”? Is he still alive? Can I risk defilement? Can I risk involvement? Dare I take the time to investigate? For the priest and the Levite, life is not *on* the road but *at the end of* the road. (How much do we all miss because we see the journey on the road not as part of life but as merely the way to life at the journey’s end?)

A shocking thing now takes place. A hated, heretical half-breed—a Samaritan—stops, administers first aid, and on his own beast of burden brings the victim to the nearest inn. He makes provision for the man’s care, room, and board. An enemy sees his enemy as a fellow human being in need and responds accordingly.

Jesus does not answer the lawyer’s query, “And who is my neighbor?” For the lawyer has asked the wrong question. At the end of the parable Jesus poses the right question: “Which one was a neighbor?” Boundaries and barriers disappear! The question of “neighbor,” we discover, begins in the heart, not in the hinterland of one’s likes and dislikes, peeves and prejudices. Christ calls us to *be* neighbors rather than merely to *have* neighbors. Christian love does not pick and choose.

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.⁹

One does not draw the line between friend and enemy, white and black, American and Russian, Muslim and Christian, Arab and Jew, poor and rich, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic. We in the United States some fifty years ago regarded Germany and Japan as our enemies. Now we count them as friends. The change occurred because, among other things, we decided to be neighborly. Just a few years ago, who would have dared to hope that the wall dividing East and West Germany would finally be torn down? And who would have thought that the heads of the Palestine Liberation Organization and of the state of Israel would shake hands—in a courageous gesture of mutual respect and commitment to the precarious task of peacemaking? Enmity can give way to friendship, animosity to respect, distrust to trust. But such change requires persons of vision, persons of faith who will take the risk of being neighbor to an enemy. Let that miracle take place in Sarajevo, in Northern Ireland, in Beirut, in Tel Aviv, in Baghdad, in Washington, and in my own hometown, my own church.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of attending the General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in San Antonio and extending greetings from our sister denomination (United Presbyterian Church U.S.A.). I forget what I said. I still remember, though, what the moderator of the Second Cumberland Church (predominantly African American) said in his message to the same Assembly. He spoke of how the time long since had come when the two denominations (Cumberland and Second Cumberland) should unite. He said, “We have churches in the same towns, on the same streets, and on the same street corners. Our trouble is: we are close enough together, but we are too far apart!” What he said could have applied not long ago to more than one hundred years of separation between the “northern” and “southern” branches of the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

The victims of prejudice, injustice, and violence are waiting for a “good Samaritan.” I need grace—grace to accept an enemy’s kindness, grace to love a stranger, an enemy. God help me to be a neighbor.

For Further Reading

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- James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 158–83.
- Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke*, 2.882–90.
- Jan Lambrecht, *Once More Astonished: The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 57–84.
- PHEME PERKINS, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1981) 112–23.
- Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 189–202.

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR AT PRAYER: THE SCANDAL OF GRACE FOR SINNERS (LUKE 18:10–14a)

Translation

Two men went up to the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself,¹⁰ prayed these [words]: “God, I thank you that I am not like other human beings—robbers, swindlers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay a tithe [on] everything that I buy.” But the tax collector, standing far off, did not wish even to raise his eyes toward heaven; rather, he was beating his breast, saying: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” I tell you, this man—not the other—went down to his home vindicated.

An Interpretation

Beyond a doubt, Pharisees are the villains in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ public ministry. They appear as self-righteous, greedy, envious, and hypocritical. An occasional excep-

tion does not affect this dominant image of the Pharisees left by the gospels. Because of this characterization of the Pharisees, which modern readers are inclined to accept at face value as part of the interpretive apparatus they have inherited, Jesus' story about a Pharisee and a tax collector at prayer often goes unrecognized for the hard saying it truly is. Hearers today applaud this deserved reproof of a self-righteous, pompous Pharisee. And indeed, Luke tells the story to make precisely that point. In introducing the parable (18:9), he offers his own editorial comment: "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Moreover, Luke clinches the parable's point by adding, at the end, a saying of Jesus about role reversal: "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (v. 14).¹¹

But would Jesus and his listeners have heard the story in this way? It is crucial to recognize that the gospel portrayals of the Pharisees are caricatures, shaped to a great extent by conflict between the first generations of Christian Jews (after Jesus' death and resurrection) and their non-Christian fellow Jews. After the destruction of the temple and the crushing defeat suffered by Jerusalem at the hands of Rome in 70 CE, it was the Pharisees and their heirs who would emerge as architects of the future of Judaism. Other influential Jewish groups from the pre-war period lost influence and ultimately disappeared from the scene altogether. As a result, when early Christians experienced conflict with Jews, whether it occurred within the synagogue between Christian and non-Christian Jews, or between the synagogue and Christians (Jewish or gentile), it was increasingly conflict with a rabbinic Judaism which preserved the traditions of the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Small wonder, then, that the gospel writers, in narrating Jesus' public ministry, told the story in light of the sometimes heated controversies of a later day. As generally happens in such controversies, caricatures took the place of accurate characterizations of one's opponents. It is imperative that the modern interpreter of Jesus' teaching recognize this process through which the life and teaching of Jesus were refracted in the last half of the first century CE.¹²

As we have seen, Luke presents this parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector at prayer as a rebuke of self-righteousness that despises others as less worthy than oneself. Yet, for Jesus' first hearers, the Pharisee in this story, far from being the epitome of a false piety corrupted by self-righteous pride, would have represented a model of piety and virtue worthy of their emulation. The Pharisee offers a prayer of thanksgiving for the exemplary life God has enabled him to live.¹³ He has gone far beyond what the Torah requires, fasting twice weekly¹⁴ and showing himself so scrupulous in tithing that he pays the tithe even on items he purchases (even though the seller likely would already have paid a tithe on them). But everything rides on the comparison the Pharisee's prayer now draws between himself and "this tax collector." Thank God I am not like him!

Of course, he is right. Jewish tax collectors in the time of Jesus were regarded, with reason, as sinners, whose conduct was antithetical to God's Torah. They were notorious for overcharging their fellow Jews, in order to ensure collection of the requisite taxes for payment to the local governing authority.¹⁵ A job entailing such risks (and earning such contempt) surely warranted profit-taking as well. Not only did these tax collectors accumulate their wealth at the expense of their fellow Jews, but also, in the process, they made themselves perpetually "unclean" through their contact with gentiles and gentile coin. Evidently, the tax collector of Jesus' parable was no different from "the rest," for in his prayer he acknowledges the sad truth: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." The man knows full well that he has no business being in this place of holiness, symbolic of the divine presence. His halting plea for mercy accompanies body language that is equally revealing. Beating his breast in remorse, he cannot even bring himself to lift his eyes toward heaven (the conventional posture of prayer). The Pharisee's prayer of thanksgiving is justified. Thank God I am not like him. Thank God the world has good, upright, responsible, obedient people alongside others who respect neither law nor fellow human being.

And yet . . . and yet it is just this contrast between righteous Pharisee and unrighteous tax collector, assuming (appro-

priately enough) the moral and religious superiority of the Pharisee, that is the crux of the parable. Something has gone wrong here, where the good man claims—even as he gives credit to God for the moral chasm that separates him from the tax collector—to stand in the favor of God while the other does not. The parable does not expose the hypocrisy or rebuke the arrogance of a self-righteous Pharisee. Its edge is much sharper than that. Instead, it calls into question the apparently reasonable belief that God’s gracious presence honors obedient piety while scorning those whose lives have been marked by disobedience. In fact, God’s response to these two prayers surprises the hearer, for the self-admitted sinner, not the virtuous man, is said to return home *dedikaiomenos*, that is, vindicated, acquitted, in the right [with God]. Small wonder, indeed, that the one who told this story earned the rebuke: “a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”

The scandal of grace, as expressed in this story of two men at prayer, is that the righteous stand no closer to God than do those among the unrighteous who recognize the divine presence for what it is—a holiness that puts to shame all human deeds laying claim to divine grace. The initiative of grace lies with God, and in its freedom to embrace a sinner—perhaps even over the objections of an exemplary individual—it shatters the expectations of human beings who prefer to structure their social world into polarities of good and bad, holy and unholy, pious and godless.

From Text to Sermon: “Overheard at a Prayer Meeting”

The author of the Letter of James writes, “The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects” (5:16 RSV). But Jesus told a parable in which the prayer of an evidently righteous man effected only his own judgment. Why? It appears that, for Jesus, there is a righteousness that shuts off life from grace. We call the story the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (tax collector) at prayer. According to Luke, Jesus’ audience was a group of people “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

An old African-American spiritual celebrates the fact that in heaven slaves, who were barefoot on earth, and all God's other "chill'un" would have shoes. But the same song reminds us that some of those who talk about heaven "ain't goin' there." In Jesus' parable a Pharisee—one of religion's elite—took for granted that he would be in the vanguard of the heavenly parade. In his prayer the Pharisee thanked God that he was not like other people. And isn't the world a better place because of good, dedicated persons like this Pharisee? Yet, even as he gave credit to God for his exemplary life, he patted himself on the back. He had no rival in self-esteem; no one could love him more than he loved himself. He was like Edith in a novelist's description: Edith was surrounded on east, west, north, and south by Edith!

As the Pharisee prayed he saw out of the corner of his eye a publican also at prayer. Probably he was amazed to see a despised tax collector praying. For tax collectors in an occupied land were collaborators with the enemy. They were betrayers of their own people. The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like that publican. Perhaps he thought: How dare that man use God's name in prayer? Or presume to darken the door of the temple? "Twice a week," the Pharisee continued, "I fast. Every shekel I tithe."

But as the proud man, standing off by himself, prayed in this way, the publican with down-turned eyes prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Would God hear the prayer of such a man as this? Jesus surprises us with his picture of God's response to this prayer. The flood gates of heaven open wide, and this social and religious outcast's life begins to overflow with grace. Jesus said, "I tell you, this man, rather than the other, went down to his home justified."

Before we throw stones at the Pharisee, whom Jesus unmasks as blameworthy even in his righteous prayer, let us ask where we nourish our own pride. A church school teacher was once telling this parable to the girls and boys in his class. When he had finished, he said, "Now, let us bow our heads and thank God we are not like the Pharisee!" (We chuckle because we think we are not like the church school teacher!)

While I was serving a church in Buffalo, New York, our custodian each week placed a quote or saying on the bulletin board in front of the building. One week he had the line, "This church is for sinners only." Later that week I received in the mail an anonymous letter which went like this: "I am shocked to learn that our church is for sinners only. I've been a member of this church for twenty-five years, and I never realized that I was out of place and not welcome." When I showed the letter to the custodian, we agreed on a quote for the following week. It came from Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The parable about two men at prayer underscores the scandal of grace for sinners. Humility is the great equalizer. Pride separates a person from other human beings and from God. At the cross, all stand or kneel on the same level. No pedestals or high horses or step ladders are available to accommodate proud Pharisees or pompous Presbyterians.

This parable is for preachers, too. Those of us who proclaim the Word from the pulpit are susceptible to grandiose illusions. A parishioner once said to the preacher as he left the worship service on Sunday morning: "Pastor, did you know that was a great sermon you preached today?" "Yes," the minister replied, "the devil whispered that to me just as I stepped out of the pulpit!"

According to Luke, Jesus told the parable to those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." God forbid that our attitudes or our conduct—even in our goodness, our righteousness—should be destructive, like the prayer of that righteous Pharisee. What do others see? Citizens of the United States alienating Canadians and Mexicans because we think we are better? Homeowners looking down at the homeless because they are shiftless and lazy? Those on diets to keep trim or get thin belittling the hungry because they go through the trash to keep alive?

The offense of grace! "Truly I tell you," Jesus said on one occasion, "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matt 21:31). Does such a word make us angry? Let us then be angry . . . until we are

ashamed. Finally, even if we are righteous Pharisees, we shall pray, in all sincerity, with the publican: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” And then we shall be saved. But only then!

For Further Reading

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Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke*, 2.1182–90.

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ALL IN A DAY’S (OR AN HOUR’S?) WORK: WHEN GRACE IS NOT FAIR (MATT 20:1–15)

Translation

[There was once] a man, a householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the workers on a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And as he went out at about the third hour,¹⁶ he saw others standing in the marketplace idle. He said to those men, “You, too, go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. At about the sixth hour and at about the ninth hour he went out again and did the same thing. Now when he went out at about the eleventh hour, he found others standing [around], and he says¹⁷ to them, “Why have you stood here idle all day?” They tell him, “Because nobody hired us.” He says to them, “You, too, go into the vineyard.”

Now when evening came, the owner of the vineyard says to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last and on up to the first [hired].”¹⁸ And when those who [had been hired] at about the eleventh hour came, they received a

*denarius apiece. So when the first came, they thought they would receive more. Yet they, too, received a denarius apiece. As they took [the money], they were complaining against the householder, saying, "These last worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Didn't you agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go. (Nevertheless, I want to give to this last one just as [I gave] you. Am I not allowed to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or is your eye evil because I am good?)"*¹⁹

An Interpretation

Jesus' parable about two men at prayer may well provoke the protest, "But that's not fair!" This protest, now articulated for the listener by characters in the parable, is the crux of the story of the vineyard workers, all of whom receive the same wages although some have worked all day while others have labored for only one hour.

This story must have struck Jesus' first listeners as especially true-to-life. It presupposes the hard facts of life known to first century Palestinian Jews (and to many people of the twentieth century as well): high unemployment, exhausting labor for a subsistence wage (for those fortunate enough to secure work), and the considerable power wielded by a landowner over both his land and his hired workers. "Am I not allowed to do what I want with what belongs to me?" Indeed. Yet, this is not a tale about a capricious, wealthy landowner who drives a hard bargain. The owner surprises with his unpredictable behavior, to be sure, but his caprice benefits rather than harms, defying the expectations of others in the direction not of hard-heartedness but of compassion.

The parable is laden with suspense. While an explicit contract was formulated in the case of the workers first hired ("at a denarius for the day"), we do not know how much those hired later will receive. As they go to their labors in the vineyard, they can only trust in the fairness of the owner, who pledged to give them "whatever is *dikaion* (just, right)."²⁰ And here is the surprise. Although the vineyard owner does not show himself to be unreservedly generous and holds to the

original terms of the agreement reached with his all-day workers, he does display a measure of generosity when he insists on giving the same amount to laborers who worked only part of the day, even and especially to those whose one hour of toil was lightened by the first cool breeze of early evening. In the owner's eyes, that is the fair amount.²¹ In the eyes of the full-day laborers, however, this is not at all fair.

The point of the parable is not, as many interpreters have suggested, the abundant grace or generosity of the vineyard owner.²² One denarius for a day's hard labor would represent a subsistence wage, appropriate to the social and economic norms of the day, but certainly not an abundantly generous wage. Nor does the accent fall on the exclusion of the grumbling, full-day workers from grace, as if the owner's dismissal of them, with their wages, at the story's end meant that they were departing forever from his gracious presence.²³ No, the crux of the story is the contrast between these two groups, one earning their just wage, the other receiving it as an undeserved gift. As the tax collector at prayer received surprising vindication from God, despite his unworthiness, so too here the one-hour workers are awarded a full day's pay, despite their failure to earn it.²⁴ The challenge posed by both parables is the demand they make of the hearer to recognize and to accept God's embrace of the less deserving. This appeal will gain in dramatic urgency in the parable of the "prodigal son."

The parable of the vineyard workers leaves the angry laborers with a question, and since we hearers have identified with those workers in their outrage at an instance of evident injustice, the story leaves the same haunting question with us as well. "Is your eye evil because I am good?" We might paraphrase: Are you so tied to an egocentric vision that you discern in my gesture of kindness to another only an act willfully depreciating you? Therefore, like the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector at prayer, and like the parable of the "prodigal son," as we will soon see, this story appeals to its hearer to accept God's scandalous embrace of those who are undeserving. God's grace scandalizes; in our concern for justice will we fail to recognize divine presence? (The vineyard, of

course, is a long-standing metaphor for Israel, the people of divine promise and divine presence.)²⁵ With this parable, then, Jesus may be responding to the anger his own acceptance of the unrighteous has kindled among the righteous.²⁶ The story summons modern hearers to respond to that same surprising grace. Are we able to perceive divine presence even when, in its acknowledgment of the unworthy, it appears to contradict the conventional calculus of right and justice in human society?

From Text to Sermon: “Grace Is Not a Fair-Minded Lady!”

W. A. B. Martin wrote a little book entitled *Grace Is Not a Blue-Eyed Blonde*. We may title a sermon about the parable of the vineyard workers “Grace Is Not a Fair-Minded Lady.” For once again, as in the parable of the good Samaritan and the parable of the Pharisee and the publican at prayer, we are tempted to protest the offensive, even scandalous nature of God’s grace. The parable of the good Samaritan pictures neighborly love coming from an enemy. The parable of the Pharisee and the publican at prayer pictures the grace of acceptance offered not because of the devotion of a good man but because of the confession of sin by a notorious sinner. The parable of the vineyard workers paints a shocking scene in which day laborers who put in one hour get paid the same wage as workers who put in twelve hours.

Life isn’t fair! We have heard the line countless times. Perhaps we have voiced the words ourselves. And the words are true! Life is unjust. And a Christian faith worth its salt admits it. The great playwrights have tried their hand at solving the riddle, beginning with the author of the Book of Job and continuing through Archibald MacLeish’s *JB*. To paraphrase some lines of the late Harry Emerson Fosdick, this is a world in which Socrates drinks the poison hemlock and Joan of Arc perishes in flames. We may add that it is a world in which one saintly friend, who never smoked cigarettes, died of cancer, and another, who never drank alcohol, had life snuffed out by a drunk driver.

The workers who picked grapes all day received a denarius. It was evidently the daily wage of a laborer in those

times—just enough to keep body and soul together and provide food and shelter for the family. They “filed their complaint” when those who had labored for just one hour not only were paid first but also received the same amount.

Not fair? The employing householder reminds the unhappy laborers that their contract calls for a wage of one denarius for a full day’s work. He adds, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (RSV).

The parable is not a model for labor negotiations, or a guideline for labor-management relations, or a blueprint for the economics of the modern business world. No, the point of the parable has to do with life in the kingdom of God. God’s grace is for the undeserving as well as for those who think that they have earned their place. Now, the twelve-hour workers might well quote the advertisement, “We make money the old-fashioned way. We earn it.” But those who enter God’s realm are (with an eye to John 1:13) “born not of blood, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man”—or of the work of one’s hands, or of the goodness of one’s character, or of the duration of one’s service in God’s vineyard—“but of God.”

Matthew sets this parable in the midst of the disciples’ reactions to Jesus’ comment after the rich man departs. Jesus tells the disciples that a rich person (by his riches) cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. One cannot buy his way or her way into the divine realm any more easily than a camel can go through the eye of a needle. What about us, the disciples ask? Led by Peter, they want to know what their rewards, what their wages will be in light of all their sacrifices. Jesus assures them that their rewards will be great, culminating in the gift of eternal life.

This parable, then, is for disciples—ancient and modern—and for the righteous, faithful, dutiful worker in all of us. At the portal of the kingdom we have no rights, we possess no merit, we produce no work, we earn no wages which guarantee entrance. Before God anything we get paid is too much! Suzanne de Dietrich writes, “And those who believe that they enter it ‘by right’ strongly risk being among the last.”²⁷ In the

words of an old hymn, “Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling.”

What do we work for, when we work? Those laborers in the vineyard who are working under contract appear to be working for wages. Those who are forced by circumstance to wait until the final hour before being called to the vineyard appear to be working on faith and out of gratitude. The master tells the workers called at various times during the day: “Whatever is right I will give you.” Motivation for service differs from person to person. Recall the three masons in a modern parable who are working on a building project. When asked what they are doing, the first says, “I am laying bricks.” The second responds, “I am building this wall.” The third answers, “I am building a temple.”

What are we working *for*? There is a story of a missionary returning by ship to China. On board he meets a corporate executive whose company is seeking to expand its business in China. The businessman is impressed by the missionary’s vast knowledge of Chinese culture, customs, history, and language. “Come to work for me and I will pay you five times what the church pays you.” The missionary without hesitation declines. “What’s wrong?” the man asks, “Is the salary I offer too small?” The missionary replies, “No, the salary is large enough. But the job is too small.” God’s realm is the same for all. The rewards are not payment for service rendered but gifts which we do not earn. Clearly, some work for gain, others for gold, and some out of gratitude.

What are we expecting for our labors? Those under contract in the vineyard expect a denarius . . . until, that is, they see those who have worked only a part of the day receive a full denarius. Then the full-day laborers expect more. In their disappointment they complain. Like them, we divide people into the more deserving and the less deserving. This happens at home, in school, and at work. We expect rewards and recognition to be proportionate. We want “the pie sliced” accordingly. We are not prepared for another kind of measuring stick. Two brothers were eating the lunch prepared for them by their mother before she left on an errand. For dessert she set out two

pieces of pie, one larger than the other. The younger brother reached out quickly and took the larger piece. The older boy, irritated, issued this reprimand: “Don’t you know that when there are two pieces you are supposed to take the smaller one?” The younger brother asked, “Which one would you have taken?” Big brother replied, “The smaller piece, of course.” “Then why are you complaining? You have it!” End of argument! But not the end of hard feelings! Expectations die hard. But in the language of God’s realm, another reward is given. Not a denarius, but grace!

Is there no salve to soothe the wounded spirit of a righteous Pharisee or a faithful disciple? As Luke tells it, a penitent thief from his cross—asking for a blessing in this final moment of his life, and receiving the promise of Paradise (a home fit for the righteous!)—enters Paradise. But is it possible that not as much Paradise enters him as enters the life-long disciple? The water is the same in a quart jar as in a gallon jug, yet the gallon jug has a greater capacity. Perhaps a Peter or James or John or Mary, because of the life-long working of God’s Spirit in his or her life, will possess a greater capacity to experience eternal life—now and in heaven—than a penitent thief.

But we should not cover over the sting and jab of this story about laborers in a vineyard. In the realm of God our pay is always too much. Or, in the words of the apostle Paul: “. . . by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8–9 NRSV).

For Further Reading

Breech, *Silence of Jesus*, 142–57.

Donahue, *Gospel in Parable*, 79–85.

Eugene L. Lowry, in *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons* (ed. Eugene L. Lowry; Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) 115–31.

Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus*, 137–46.

Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 390–95.

Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 281–98.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in *A Chorus of Witnesses* (ed. Long and Plantinga) 12–20.
Via, *The Parables*, 147–55.

ON BEING A PRODIGAL FATHER (LUKE 15:11–32)

Translation

There once was a man who had two sons. And the younger of the two said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me.” And so he divided his living between them. And a few days later, when he had gathered everything, the younger son went away into a distant country, and there he squandered²⁸ his property by living dissolutely. And when he had spent it all, there was a severe famine throughout that region, and he began to experience want. So he went out and got himself hired by one of the citizens of that region, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he longed to be fed from the carob pods that the pigs would eat, yet no one gave him [anything].²⁹

And when he had come to himself, he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food,³⁰ while I am perishing here from hunger! I will get up and go to my father and say to him, ‘Father, I sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired hands.’” And he got up and came to his own father. But while he was still far away, his father saw him and was moved to pity,³¹ and running up he put his arms around his neck³² and kissed him. And the son said to him, “Father, I sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring out the most important robe and put it on him; and get the ring for his hand and sandals for his feet; and bring the fatted calf, kill [it], and let’s eat and celebrate! For this, my son, was dead and came to life again; he was lost and has been found.” And they began to celebrate.

Now his older son was in the field, and when he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So calling over one of the servants, he asked what this meant. And he told him, “Your brother has come, and your father killed the fatted calf because he received him back in good health.” And he was angry and did not want to go in, but his father came out and was pleading with him. But he

answered his father, "Look, how many years do I serve you, and not once do I disobey your command—and not once did you give me a kid so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came—who devoured your living with prostitutes—for him you killed the fatted calf!" And he said to him, "Child, you are with me always, and everything that is mine is yours. But it was necessary to celebrate and rejoice, because this, your brother, was dead and came alive, lost and was found."

An Interpretation

This longest and best known of Jesus' parables generally carries the title "the prodigal son." The younger son, whose misadventures create the plot of the story, is indeed "prodigal," that is, wasteful. After all, he squanders his entire inheritance! Nevertheless, the truly prodigal figure, and also the central character, of the parable is the father of these two quite different sons.³³ It is the father whose excessive extravagance—of mercy—qualifies him as truly prodigal. And it is in this way that a familiar story becomes a genuinely difficult saying of Jesus.

When our approach to this parable is guided by Luke's reading of it—displayed in the composition of chapter 15 of his gospel—we hear the story as the final, climactic piece in a trilogy celebrating God's merciful acceptance of the "lost" in the ministry of Jesus. So the lost sheep (15:3–7), lost coin (15:8–10), and lost or prodigal son (15:11–32) all serve as metaphors for lost human beings, for those "sinners" (transgressors of the Torah) whom Jesus embraces in his ministry of healing, teaching, and meal fellowship. Together, the three parables defend Jesus' conduct—his association with sinners—against the barbs of scribes and Pharisees (15:1–2). The point, then, is that Jesus involves himself with the irreligious (and intimately at that—meal fellowship!) because God has forgiven them and reserved for them a place in the company of the saved (at the feast of the "reign of God").

As the culminating member in this trilogy, the parable of the prodigal son lends both poignancy and urgency to Jesus' message for his righteous critics. The intensely human drama

that unfolds from the first line until the last cannot fail to engage the deepest emotions of the hearer. For the story concerns those relationships and values that lie at the heart of Jesus' culture (and our own): the integrity of the family, and of one's religious community; love and respect between father and son, brother and brother (we may extend the parable to embrace relationships among mothers, daughters, and sisters); and provision for the future well-being of the family. But the parable also advances beyond the first two in its final, urgent appeal to the older brother to be reconciled to his wayward younger brother. So the conclusion of chapter 15 returns full circle to its beginning: Jesus implores the righteous to accept the wayward to whom he has offered God's gracious acceptance. And like the parable of the vineyard workers, this story ends by leaving the final response of the offended righteous party in doubt. In this way the parable lays its appeal at the feet of the hearer. Now the hearer must decide whether to go in to the feast or remain outside, unreconciled to father and brother alike.

The parable already risks offending the listener. For who (except, perhaps, a restored prodigal) would not share the older brother's complaint at this unjust turning of the tables? Honor for the son who dishonored his family, and a public rebuke for the son who fulfilled his family and community obligations! But there is more here, and the issue of honor and shame is the key.

The prodigal son is a source of shame for himself and for his family. His list of "crimes" is long and egregious; long after his departure, his shameful conduct will be remembered in the town. First of all, by asking not only for a division in the estate which he and his older brother will inherit,³⁴ but also for the right to dispose of his share now, he has in effect treated his father as dead.³⁵ The older brother's later indictment of "this son of yours" has real force (whether or not the mention of prostitutes is accurate): he has "devoured *your living* with prostitutes" (15:30). The prodigal son has treated his father with utter contempt, to the point of disposing of his share of the estate while his father is still alive,³⁶ and so also jeopardizing

the future security of the entire family. After leaving home, of course, the younger son goes from bad to worse, hitting bottom as a feeder of pigs for a gentile boss. He has deserted family, and now he forsakes his religious community and his faith as well. Hunger in time of famine is the least of his problems, though it does turn out to be the stimulus for change and a return home.

Yet the father, too, has brought shame to his name. His willingness to give the younger son his property early certainly proved to be foolish (cf. the warning in Sir 33:19–23!). But what brings disgrace to the father is his effusive behavior at the return of his wayward son. The images are graphic: running out to meet the prodigal; an affectionate public embrace; restoration to the position of honored son (using the tokens of the best robe, the ring, and the sandals); and a festive dinner party celebrating the return of one who had (after “killing” his father)³⁷ been as good as dead. No wonder that the older son should object. It is not good for morale! The obedient, responsible son feels taken for granted, while this spectacular sinner who has made the family a laughing-stock basks in the glory. Without question, the father has been excessive in mercy, in generosity to one who had shamed and manipulated him. It is the father who is truly prodigal.

And that is the point. God’s treatment of the disobedient, of wayward “sinners”—at least in Jesus’ vision of God’s reign *and in his practice of it*—cannot fail to offend the righteous. Pharisee and tax collector, full-day vineyard worker and one-hour worker, older and younger son: again and again is enacted the dynamic of reversal. The undeserving receive surprising grace, and so the deserving are scandalized. It is not an approach likely to ensure popularity among those who, like Jesus, take their religion seriously. But it is Jesus’ way. God is prodigal in grace toward sinful human beings. The challenge is to see oneself—no matter how impeccable one’s life or religion—in the ranks of the undeserving. Having felt outrage at the scandal of grace, one is then moved to celebrate God’s merciful acceptance of all who respond to divine love, *including oneself*.

From Text to Sermon: “Lost and Found”

Things have a way of getting lost. In a recent “Lost and Found” column in the Classified Ads of a daily newspaper, the “Lost” included five cats, twenty-one dogs, one bird, a billfold, and a bracelet. The “Found” listed four cats, eighteen dogs, and a passport. People often leave items in church buildings. Some time ago the sexton of one church found a large package of “green stamps” in a pew after morning worship. He brought them to the pastor and exclaimed, “What do people think this is—a redemption center?”

People, too, have a way of getting lost. Chapter 15 of Luke’s gospel is the “Lost and Found” Department of the Bible. Here Jesus tells stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son.

The sheep is one out of a flock of one hundred. It is a symbol of the person who gets lost *in the crowd*.³⁸ Only one in a hundred! Or a thousand. Or 250 million. Just a drop in the bucket. The size of an atom. A person who feels that she or he does not count. Schools and corporations and churches are full of people lost in the crowd.

The silver coin is one out of ten owned by a poor woman. One day it slips through her fingers and rolls across the hard earthen floor and disappears. The coin is a symbol of the person who becomes lost *by the crowd*. Through no fault of the individual, he or she is overlooked, bypassed, snubbed. Children may be lost in the shambles of a broken home or by neglect or by over-indulgence. A mother said to a judge before whom her delinquent son stood, “I don’t know why he gets into trouble. We’ve always given him everything he ever wanted.” Tragically, some people are lost by the church. In a typical church, half the persons who come into membership through the front door go out the back door, becoming inactive members.

We call the lost son “prodigal.” Apparently he finds life too dull and drab on the farm. The days are filled with drudgery. So he asks for his share of the family estate in cash, and then goes into a far country. There he spends all his money in

“dissolute living.” His fair-weather friends disappear, leaving him lonely and alone. This young man is a symbol of the person lost *with the crowd*. Peer pressure and crowd mentality prevail. How often parents hear the lines, “Everybody is doing it. Everyone is going.” “Somebody” does the thinking, trend setting, and fad fashioning for everyone else. Not just young people feel this pressure; adults, too, go along with the crowd. We take our cues from commercials. We become chameleons of creature culture. Each may choose his or her own “far country.” Each may choose or drift into a particular path the crowd takes. Like the prodigal son, a person becomes lost with the crowd.

Can the lost be found? Is the sheep really lost if it remembers the sound of the shepherd’s voice, and if that shepherd is out in the hills and wilderness looking for it and calling it by name? Is a person lost in the crowd actually lost if someone (or Someone) believes that the person does count—does have worth, is a child of the Creator? God pays attention to little things—lilies and leaves and blades of grass. God’s eye is on the sparrow. God is the Good Shepherd, who rejoices when one out of one hundred is found.

Is the coin really lost if it is stamped with the image and inscription of the king, and if the woman is searching every nook and corner until she finds it? Is the individual lost by the crowd really lost if she or he bears the image of God, marred though it may be? Is the person really lost if there are people who say, “We are sorry that we hurt you and let you down?” If someone cares or speaks or shares or invites or welcomes? If someone forgives and loves and embraces? The Maker of all things takes the fragile and fractured life and makes “all things new.” Joy in heaven breaks out because a person begins again.

Is the young man lost with the crowd in a far country and in a herd of swine really lost if he remembers his name and his roots and knows where home is? If he has a father or mother waiting and watching and praying for the son to come “to himself” and come home? Is the person lost with the crowd really lost if our heavenly Father has a light in the window and waits with amazing grace and open arms? If someone or some group in the community has a word other than condemnation?

If the neighbors give the person a chance? If church members look with something other than a cold stare, or speak kind words rather than repeat vicious gossip? If parents and acquaintances and church people forgive?

But the stories in Luke's fifteenth chapter are not ended. Jesus tells the story of the prodigal's older brother. He is the family's "pride and joy." He stays on the farm. He works hard. He is obedient. He is upright in character. He never gets into trouble. When his brother returns, he comes back from a long day in the fields, only to hear the sound of music and laughter. A servant explains, "Your brother has come." Your father is welcoming him with a big party—beef barbecue, a top band, new clothes, a gold ring, a dance for the whole neighborhood.

The older brother is incensed. His father's attempts to appease him have no effect; he refuses to go in to honor one whom he no longer regards as his brother ("This son of yours . . ."). He wants no part of this welcome home to the "black sheep" of the family who has wasted his life—his father's life!—on "wine, women, and song." So he separates himself from the scandalous affair going on in his own home.

The older brother is a symbol of the person lost *from the crowd*. This is one who thinks he or she is different and better and more holy. This self-appraisal may be true, indeed (even as it was for the Pharisee at prayer in the temple): sterling character, spotless reputation, excellent work habits, high ideals, exemplary conduct.

And this brings us to the reason Jesus told these stories. Luke informs us that the so-called outcasts and outsiders were flocking to Jesus. "And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" Jesus' response? These three parables (Luke 15). Perhaps Jesus' hearers were disturbed most when, in the parable of the prodigal son, the father says, "This, my son, was dead and came to life again; he was lost and has been found." The celebration and the merriment seemed out of place. Why not a party for the son who stayed home, worked diligently, and kept out of trouble? Why the fuss over the boy who turned his

father's hair grey and aged his mother beyond her years and squandered the family fortune?

Can we live with the offense of grace? Jesus said, "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." What are we to do with such a God?

Some years ago, a boy and a girl came to see me in my study. He was seventeen; she was sixteen. They wanted to be married. The girl said, "I know we're young, but we're in love and I am pregnant." I explained that they had other options, that they did not "have to get married." Her mother, who had been waiting outside the office, joined us, and as we all talked, I became convinced that, young as they were, these two possessed a quality of love and an understanding of commitment beyond their years. I agreed to marry them after they had come for several counseling sessions. In one of those sessions the girl said, "My mother tells me that I cannot be married in the chapel because I am pregnant." I said, "Of course, you can be married in the chapel. That is why the church has this chapel: so that you may be married in it." Later in the same session, she said, "My mother tells me that because I am pregnant I cannot be married in a white dress." I replied, "Of course you may be married in a white dress. That is why Jesus came to earth and died on the cross: so that you might be married in a white dress." I think the Holy Spirit rather than my own dull mind prompted me to quote the lines from Isaiah: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool" (Isa 1:18 RSV). Tears flowed down her cheeks. I knew in that moment that if this sixteen-year-old girl never again understood the wonder of God's love, she knew it in that instant.

When God's grace offends one person, it well may bring joy and life to another. Pharisees and theologians and "good church folk" should not want to be "the older brother." We—all of us—can and must live with the offense of grace . . . if we are to live at all. Only so will we experience the joy heaven knows at the coming home of all God's children. Home to our prodigal father.

For Further Reading

- Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 158–206.
 Breech, *Silence of Jesus*, 184–214.
 Donahue, *Gospel in Parable*, 151–62.
 Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke*, 2.1082–94.
 Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 101–105.
 Schweizer, *Good News according to Luke*, 246–52.
 Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 99–125.
 Mary Ann Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 93–114.

ENDNOTES

¹ So, for example, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 28–28A; 2 vols; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981–85) 2.884–85; and I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC 3; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 444–45.

² Indeed, such a reading of the parable, in the light of its narrative context in Luke, informs the homiletical reflections offered below (“From Text to Sermon”). This understanding of the Samaritan as model of compassion has been a significant factor in altruistic behavior in American society (see Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* [Princeton: Princeton University, 1991] 157–87). Note, however, Joel B. Green’s cautionary remarks on this interpretation of the parable in its context in Luke’s gospel (*The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* [NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995] 129–30, 139).

³ So also Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 194.

⁴ This is a generous reading of the priestly functionaries’ actions. Lev 21:1–2 stipulates that a priest may not “defile himself for a dead person among his relatives,” except for immediate family. The high priest is to avoid contact with the dead body of even a father or mother (Lev 21:11). Nevertheless, in view of the special importance given to burial in Jewish culture, it is not clear that they thus escape blame. Note, for example, m. *Berakot* 3.1: “One whose dead is lying before him [awaiting burial] is exempt from 1. the recitation of the Shema, 2. and from [wearing] phylacteries” (translation from Jacob Neusner,

The Mishnah [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988] 6). And according to later Jewish interpretations of this text in Leviticus, there are exceptions to the command that a priest not “defile himself for the dead among his people.” The tractate *Nazir* in the Mishnah (compiled about 200 CE, but containing earlier traditions) records a debate over the question whether even a high priest should contract uncleanness by handling a neglected corpse, with R. Eliezer arguing that he should (*Nazir* 7.1; see Neusner, *The Mishnah*, 443). If the priest and the Levite believe the man is dead, it may be that they have an obligation to see to the corpse’s burial. See further Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 195–97.

⁵ The pattern “priest, Levite, Israelite” is conventional. See the discussion in Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 198.

⁶ Not that love of enemy is an easy achievement. Indeed, perhaps it is the experience—in parable—of compassion at the hands of one I am inclined to despise that creates for me even the possibility of love of the enemy.

⁷ Of course, the roots of this mutual antagonism lie in the rivalry of northern and southern kingdoms earlier in Israel’s history, and hostilities were sharpened by the existence of rival centers of worship in Jerusalem and Shechem. In 128 BCE the Hasmonean ruler of Judea, John Hyrcanus, destroyed the Samaritans’ temple at Shechem, an event which further damaged Jewish-Samaritan relations. Although the Samaritans revered the Pentateuch (the first five books of Jewish Scripture, or Torah), Jewish people perceived their temple worship as illegitimate (this assumption underlies the conversation narrated in John 4:20–22) and the people themselves not as true Jews but as foreigners. For a brief sketch of Samaritan origins and history, see James D. Purvis, “Samaritans,” *HBD*, 898–900. See also Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), vol. 1, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, 247–49.

⁸ Translation by Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah*, 87.

⁹ Edwin Markham, “Outwitted,” printed in *The Best Loved Poems of the American People* (ed. Hazel Felleman; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1936).

¹⁰ The expression “the Pharisee, standing by himself” (v. 11) is parallel to “the tax collector, standing far off” (v. 13). This parallelism indicates that the phrase *pros heauton* (“by [to] himself”) in v. 11 describes the Pharisee’s location, rather than presenting him as the party addressed by the prayer. Several modern translations (e.g., the RSV, Phillips, and Fitzmyer’s Anchor Bible translation [*Gospel according to Luke*, 2.1186]) have the Pharisee praying to, with, or about himself.

¹¹ This saying appears also in Luke 14:11 (and cf. Matt 23:12).

¹² In numerous publications (e.g., *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977] and *Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983]), E. P. Sanders has insisted forcefully on the necessity of

reconceptualizing Pharisaic Judaism (and other forms of early Judaism as well). For a brief introduction to Sanders's work, see his article "Judaism and the Grand 'Christian' Abstractions: Love, Mercy, and Grace," in *Int* 39 (1985) 357–72. Also useful is Anthony J. Saldarini's discussion of "Pharisees" in *HBD*, 782–83.

¹³ A strikingly similar prayer of thanksgiving appears in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Berakot* 28b, where a rabbi thanks God for the blessing that comes to him because his life has been devoted to the study of the Torah, while others follow a life of frivolity to destruction.

¹⁴ The Torah called for an annual fast on the Day of Atonement (see Lev 16:29,31; 23:27,29,32; Num 29:7). See also the helpful notes by Fitzmyer (*Gospel according to Luke*, 2.1187).

¹⁵ In the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Sanhedrin* (25b), tax collectors are among those said to be disqualified from service as witnesses or judges because of their occupation as "robbers." For a brief but helpful sketch of the system of taxation in Roman Palestine at the time of Jesus, and of popular Jewish attitudes toward tax collectors, see John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (LEC 2; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 77–78; Saldarini, "Publicans," *HBD*, 841.

¹⁶ That is, at about 9:00 a.m.

¹⁷ The narration shifts to the present tense for the verbs in vv. 6b–8. Such usage of the historical present lends immediacy and vividness to the story, and in this case it also casts the spotlight on the pivotal interchange between the householder and his one-hour "day" laborers (vv. 6–7), and on the suspenseful summons to the workers to claim their wages (v. 8).

¹⁸ This explicit directive to pay the last hired first may strike some readers as odd, even objectionable. Has the owner deliberately sought to provoke these laborers who, in their own words, "have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (v. 12), by stirring within them expectations of generous pay beyond the terms originally agreed? Or is Matthew himself responsible for the order of payment? Thus he sets the stage for the saying with which he clinches the parable (v. 16): "So the last will be first and the first will be last." We believe the order of payment is a necessary part of the story's plot. The last-first inversion creates suspense: Will the owner be just as generous with the workers hired earlier, going beyond the original terms? In fact, if payment were received in the order of hire, there would be no parable! (cf. Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus*, 139; Schweizer, *Good News according to Matthew*, 392; Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 294; Dan O. Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967] 148–49). The point of the story concerns the apparent injustice done to the twelve-hour laborers, *as they see it*. But

they must first know of the vineyard owner's relative generosity to the one-hour workers before they have any reason to protest.

¹⁹ Crossan (*In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* [New York: Harper & Row, 1973] 111–13) and Scott (*Hear Then the Parable*, 285–87), among others, have argued, on the basis of the language used (e.g., the antithesis “good” vs. “evil”), that Matt 20:14–15 is secondary, added by Matthew to the original story. Matthew has retold the parable, to be sure, and does add v. 16 to emphasize the theme of role inversion (cf. Matt 19:30); nevertheless, comparison with the closing dialogue between father and older son in Luke 15:29–32 suggests that vv. 14–15 may belong to the original structure of the parable (see Perkins, *Hearing the Parables of Jesus*, 137–38). In each parable ending, the character accused of unjust action (the householder in Matt 20:1–15, the father in Luke 15:11–32) explains/defends his benevolent treatment of the needy party (the one-hour workers; the younger son). And with the explanation comes an implicit appeal for a changed heart in the dutiful (the all-day laborers; the older son).

²⁰ We must assume that the promise received by workers hired at the third hour, “I will pay you whatever is right,” extends also to those hired later in the day (see v. 5). It is striking that the workers hired last are simply told to go into the vineyard; there is not a word about payment (an omission corrected by some later manuscripts). This silence certainly heightens the suspense about the treatment they will receive. Because after this point the parable throws the spotlight on those hired at dawn and those hired near evening, leaving the intermediate groups out of view, the contrast is especially stark. The heart of the parable, therefore, is its resolution of this tense contrast between early morning workers, who *know* what they will receive, and part-day workers, who must rely on the benevolence of the vineyard owner.

²¹ Jeremias (*Rediscovering the Parables*, 28) conjectures that the owner awarded a full day's pay to all the laborers out of pity for their poverty, but the parable does not say as much. Indeed, it does not probe the motivation behind this unusual action; all weight falls on the initiative and freedom of the vineyard owner, whatever his motives. Not even the apparent urgency of these hirings—to the point of finding additional laborers for an hour's work—is explained to the hearer. Is this actually the time of harvest, and the onset of the rainy season calls for urgent action (suggested, e.g., by Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 108–9)? But then why have so many workers been standing idle in the marketplace throughout the day? About many such questions the parable—like other good stories—remains silent, teasing the hearer to apply his or her own creative imagination in making sense of the narrated events.

²² Scholars who have read the story in this way include John P. Meier (*Matthew* [NTM 3; Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1980]

224–26) and Eta Linnemann (*Jesus of the Parables* [New York: Harper & Row, 1966] 84), among many others. Scott's critique of this interpretation is helpful but, in our view, too sharply drawn (see *Hear Then the Parable*, 282–84). Jeremias emphasizes the generosity of the householder, even naming this parable the “parable of the good employer” (*Rediscovering the Parables*, 108), yet he is also well aware that the “good employer” displays measured, not unlimited generosity (p. 28). Jeremias observes that a subsistence wage, and nothing more, is paid; nevertheless, it remains significant that a subsistence wage is paid even to one-hour laborers who, in the prevailing economic system, could scarcely lay rightful claim to it. If not in the case of the full-day workers, certainly in the case of the one-hour workers the householder's action must be described as relatively generous. Still, the chief issue here is not the householder's generosity in itself, but the contrasting treatments given these two groups.

²³ Via (*The Parables*, 147–55) reads the parable in this way. This interpretation places too much weight on the final command, “Take what is yours and go.” Even if the parable originally ended here (at v. 14a: so Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 282), there is no indication that the dismissal involves a permanent exclusion. And if the subsequent remarks by the landowner—explaining or justifying his action (vv. 14b–15)—belong to the original form of the parable, then, as in the case of the parable of the “prodigal son,” we are left with a figure accused of injustice appealing for *metanoia*, a transformed perception, on the part of a slighted party. In other words, the story has an open ending, with the final response of the angry workers (Luke 15: older brother) remaining unknown. Via is correct to insist (see also Schweizer, *Good News according to Matthew*, 390–95) that the vineyard workers are offended by the owner's show of grace to the less deserving. We believe, however, that the path to reconciliation is left open; the hearer must decide the issue.

²⁴ This is so whether we believe or whether we doubt the one-hour workers' excuse for their day's idleness (“nobody hired us”). The contrast between them and the full-day laborers shows that they have not earned the denarius given them by the householder.

²⁵ Or divine judgment! On the vineyard as metaphor for Israel, see, e.g., Isa 5:1–7; Jer 2:20–21; 5:10; 12:10; Hos 10:1.

²⁶ Many scholars find the original setting of the parable of the vineyard workers in Jesus' defense of his association with sinners. See, e.g., Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 29, 108; John C. Fenton, *Saint Matthew* (PNTC; New York: Penguin, 1963) 319; Schweizer, *Good News according to Matthew*, 394; Via, *The Parables*, 149–50.

²⁷ *Matthew* (LBC 16; Richmond: John Knox, 1961) 105.

²⁸ Literally, “he scattered,” the same verb used of the steward accused before the rich man in Luke 16:1–8a.

²⁹ All the verbs in this sentence appear in the imperfect tense; that is, they point to repeated action, to an ongoing situation of need, unsatisfied desire, and failure to respond.

³⁰ Literally, “bread (loaves).”

³¹ This is the same verb used of the “good Samaritan” in Luke 10:33.

³² Literally, “he fell upon his neck.”

³³ Jeremias terms this the “parable of the Father’s Love” (*Rediscovering the Parables*, 101).

³⁴ Since the family in this parable has only two sons, the younger son will receive one-third of the inheritance, his older brother two-thirds. See Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke*, 2.1087. For helpful discussion of the traditional theme of the younger and older brothers, see Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 111–13.

³⁵ See Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*, 101; Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 109–11; Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 164–65; but cf. Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke*, 2.1087.

³⁶ It appears that even in a case such as this, where the father gives property to an heir before his death, the father retains the right to maintain himself from the property; the interest from the property is legally his. See Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke*, 2.1087; Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 109–11. The younger son’s actions in this story ignore such concerns altogether.

³⁷ See Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 111.

³⁸ I am indebted for some of the symbolism in these sermon reflections to a message I heard years ago by the late Ralph W. Sockman, long-time Methodist minister of Christ Church in New York City.