

Jesus and the Farmworkers

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This won't be what you are thinking it is. You are not herewith invited to be a spectator, or auditor, as I discourse about what I see to be the relevance of Jesus' teachings for the present situation of the United Farmworkers (Cesar Chavez and people of that sort). No, things are going to come much closer home. We will be examining what Jesus has to say about you (and me and everyone else) and how you are doing in your assigned role as "farmworker for the Lord."

I find six of Jesus' parables talking about farmworkers. Three of these are shared among the Synoptics — each being found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The other three are apportioned out — one unique to Matthew, one unique to Mark, and one unique to Luke. That is a neat enough arrangement, to be sure — yet I can't find it to be anything but entirely coincidental. Conversely, however, I find the six parables to have a great deal in common with each other; to form something of a logical sequence; and to focus upon one particular point. And this I see as being anything but coincidental. I am convinced we are here getting a hold on a central strand of the mind of Christ. These parables should be very important to us.

However, whether the parables are considered individually or in sum, the fact is that we don't come off very well as God's farmworkers. We have not proved very satisfactory help either in understanding our job or in doing it. Indeed, the case is that we would all have been fired long ago — except for the fact that the boss is such a nice and understanding guy.

1. Mk. 12:1–9 (Mt. 21:33–41; Lk. 20:9–16)

In this parable, the owner built and planted a beautiful vineyard, let it out to farmworker tenants, and went into another country. The workers immediately misused their position, refusing to come across with either produce or profits when the owner sent his representatives to collect. They even killed the owner's son, the representative who should have been most respected.

The farmworkers of this story are very severely castigated and actually damned. The problem, obviously, is that they were where they were — not out of any interest at all in serving the owner and his project — but simply to get whatever they could for themselves. And that added up to massive failure.

The indications are that Jesus addressed this parable to the multitude in general rather than pointedly to just one particularly guilty group. And this must mean that he saw people generally (including us) as being much more interested in their own cause than in God's.

Was he right? As hard as it is for us to have to admit it, the answer must be "Yes, dead right." I will enter but one charge:

Consider how completely, in our evangelistic efforts and general promotion of Christianity (church membership), we appeal to people on the grounds of what benefits they will derive for themselves. Do we ever say, "It is not a case of your personal pleasure. The Lord has enlisted you as a worker in his vineyard; and he is asking that you to come across with what you owe him."

I maintain that Jesus' parable has us dead to rights. We want books entitled *The Payoffs of Discipleship* — not one called *The Cost of Discipleship*.

2. Mt. 20:1–15

This time the vineyard owner brings in different squads of harvesters at different hours of the day. But then, at evening time, he pays each and every worker the same wage — the one penny for which each had bargained. He gives no regard to how long or short a time any person had labored.

Once again the workers wind up being chastised. This time it is for failing to understand that God operates according to “grace” — while they insist that he must operate according to “rights” and “deserving.” They have so unrealistic an evaluation of themselves and their work that they think they would come off best by getting what they’re worth.

In actuality, of course, by God’s standards, any of us has done poorly enough in being what he created us to be that God certainly doesn’t owe anybody anything. No, the debt balance runs just the other way. We are all so completely indebted to God that there isn’t a chance in the world of us making as much as a beginning in repaying him. We would be far ahead to forget the business about demanding our rights (and thus inviting him to start demanding his) and, instead, gratefully accept whatever God, in his grace, chooses to give us. That way, every worker on the place gets far more than he earned — and God is left free to give with the lavishness that always has been his.

My feeling is that Jesus again has put his finger right on the spot — in identifying us as the complaining (and even striking) farmworkers who show absolutely no understanding of our own situation and so are hurting our own cause by demanding that God renounce his grace and relate to us on the basis of our deserving. Consider how very grave an insult to God it is for us to act so.

3. Lk. 17:7–10

This parable simply extends the line of thought. Here, there is just the one farmworker who has been out plowing the field and tending the sheep. Yet, having completed that work, he is admonished not to come back to the house thinking that he is finally ahead of the game and that now it is the master who owes him a good supper and what all. No, he is to keep on doing all the master asks him to do and then say, “I am an altogether useless servant; I have only done what was my duty.”

Notice, nothing is said about the master proceeding to treat this man as an unworthy servant. The implication is just the opposite: once the worker has become honest enough to confess his unworthiness, the master most likely says, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of thy lord.”

But again, we dare never let ourselves get so self-confident that we think we now have the ledger reversed to where God owes us rather than our owing him. No way! We can work like a dog for God from dawn to dark; but if we then come in saying, “OK, boss, you owe me for that” — well, we’ve blown the whole relationship. However, if we come in ready to say, “Yeah, I did work like a dog. Thank you for letting me do it; but I know nothing I can do begins to measure up against what I owe you” — well, then, God can respond, “That was just what I was waiting to hear. You well understand how things stand. So come on in and let’s whoop it up a bit. There’s the table; so dig in.”

Yet isn't it very sad that we humans are so proud (and just plain bullheaded) that the last thing we're willing to do is bow down and confess, "You're right, Lord, I am an unworthy servant."

4. Mk. 4:3–8 (Mt. 13:4–8; Lk. 8:5–8)

This parable introduces the theme that will carry us through the last three. At least one thing I understand this story to say (I make no claim that this is its sole or even primary meaning) but one thing it says is that the farmworker (the sower) can strew the seed but that his responsibility ends there. He can't guarantee the results. He has no control over the results. He has no say as to which seeds will grow and which will not. He can neither determine nor predict what the yield will be. He can (and should) sow in faith — but the harvest, the outcome, rests in hands other than his (hands much better and more effective than his).

Jesus' lesson, I think, is aimed at our human propensity always to want to do more than we are actually competent of doing (like getting the government straightened out, establishing world peace, or some little chore of that sort). We are not content to stop with our assigned task (of sowing the seed or whatever). We like to think we're smart enough to see the project all the way through.

And thus we crowd God out of what, realistically, just has to be his part in the matter. But otherwise, if we could be content just to sow the seed — well, you know, I really do believe God would prove competent to take over from there.

5. Mk. 4:26–29

Here is perhaps the same idea put differently. The farmworker, this time, scatters the seed. But then he can go spend his time sleeping or waking — it makes no difference. Either way, he will find that the seed is somehow fending for itself, sprouting, growing — producing of itself from blade, to ear, to full grain in the ear. When the time is right, the crop is there for him to harvest. He doesn't understand how it happened (and doesn't need to); all he knows is that he didn't do it. Yet, from seedtime to harvest, things happened precisely as they should have.

Again, I think Jesus' lesson is that the farmworkers can't run the whole show — and shouldn't even expect to. We need to learn to trust God and know that he is quite competent to bring his world to the harvest he has in mind for it. That way, when he calls upon us to sow or to harvest for him, we can obey gladly — yet without getting the goofy idea that he has called us in as the experts who can take over and save his operation.

6. Mt. 13:24–30

To my mind, this final parable sums up and climaxes the sequence of all six. In this instance, the farmworkers have obeyed their orders and sown the field with good wheat; everything is as it should be. Then, one night, an enemy comes and sows tares, darnel, a noxious weed, right in with the good wheat.

Yet, once the treachery is discovered, the workers are out in force: "Hey, boss, you want us to go in there and pull out all that bad stuff for you? We could do that for you as easy as pie."

I just bet you could. You'd only tromp down two stalks of wheat for every tare you pulled. You'd soon have the field in such a quagmire that we'd get no crop at all. But knowing you, you'd get the tares pulled sure enough. So thanks but no thanks. I'll do the thinking around here, if you don't mind. You just leave things be; I'll tell you what to do when the time is right."

Notice that this story actually wants things two ways and resists our jumping to either of the conclusions that, on its own, is false:

1. In the first place, it does not at all say that God does not want as farmworkers, that his will is that we stay clear out of it and let him handle things on his own. (Undoubtedly things would go better that way; but we wouldn't get the upbringing God wants us to have.) Yet the story does not end with the owner firing all his no-good workers. In fact, his last words are: "At harvest time I will tell the reapers (i.e., workers) [what they are to do]." The assumption is that workers are and will continue to be wanted — even if they aren't the smartest people around. We are called to be God's farmworkers even so.
2. Yet what, in the second place, is just as important is that we are not called to be God's farm managers (no matter how much we might covet such a position). That is the job for which we simply are not competent — the difference between them being this: With the farm manager, all the owner has to do set out his long-range, end-state goals. "This year I think we should shoot for fifteen tons of wheat and eight tons of barley. You decide when and where you're going to plant and what you're going to do to get us that crop." In much the same way, we tend to assume that God has said he'd like a peaceful world and then turned us loose to figure out how that is to be brought off. Even so, it is just such would-be managers who get chewed out when they come up with a cockamamie scheme for eliminating the tares while tromping down the wheat. The lesson is that those whose level of competency is as good farm workers shouldn't try to overreach themselves as farm managers. No, God will be his own manager, thank you. What he wants and is advertising for is simply farm workers — people who know their limitations; who are quite ready to confess themselves unworthy servants; and who, consequently, each morning are willing to look to the boss for orders and do no more and no less than what he asks them to. This much they can manage — even if they don't see what the overall plan is or understand why it is important for them to do no more than today's assignment.

So for our benediction, I am advising against the poem, the sentiments of which are the cause of so much of our trouble:

God has no hands but our hands
To do his work today.

My preference is that we stick with Cardinal Newman:

Keep Thou my feet;
I do not ask to see
The distant scene —
One step enough for me.

That, I suggest, should be the prayer of each of us farmworkers of the Lord — which, by the way, is the most glorious calling to which any of us can aspire.

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