

## The Good Employer (Matthew 20:1-16)

Harvest time. The late summer sun burned just below the hillside and backlit the ancient vines rising up from the even more ancient earth. The ground was parched and packed. Only the grapes held the promise of moisture, the pulp near bursting their skins. A slight breeze rustled through the leaves and nudged a single plump grape from its stem. The grape tumbled through the brambles and split open as it hit the ground, gentle as an easy death.

The owner of the vineyard rose from his bed, threw on his mantle and sandals and stepped out of his house into the early dawn. He lived in a country manor, a large two story building with room enough for his family and 20 house servants. The owner walked across the courtyard to check the stone wine press, which had been cleaned and was ready for the tons of grapes that would soon pass through it. He inspected the micveh next to the press, which held the sacred living waters fed from the earth in which he would soon purify himself. He walked briskly to the watchtower and shouted up to his servants, sharp-eyed men who had spent all night on the alert for thieves who might steal the grapes growing on the far side of the estate. Although awake all night, these servants greeted the owner cheerfully and reported no trouble.

The owner was a diminutive man with a quick mind, who was wise enough to enjoy his good fortune and compassionate enough to share it. His ancestors had come to Galilee as Jewish colonists from Judea over 100 years ago during the time of the Hasmonean kings. They had conquered the place and had taken over this very old vineyard, which dated to a time before the arrival of the Jews, before the Philistines, before even the Persians, its origins lost somewhere back in the second Iron Age. The men in the tower and their forefathers had worked for the family for many generations and had helped to build the vineyard into a vast estate that now covered 2 square miles. The current owner was seen as a good proprietor, one who fairly balanced the interests of the family and the community, and they liked him for it. They had seen other patriarchs who were a lot worse. For his part, the owner clearly understood that he owed his prosperity to the heroics of his ancestors and the ongoing efforts of his workers.

Satisfied that all was well, the owner stepped outside the walls of the compound where he viewed with pleasure his terraced vineyard, heavy with grapes as far as he could see. He walked into a nearby row, examined the vines closely and taking up a handful of dirt, let it run through his fingers. He pulled a few grapes from a bunch, easily 2 feet in length and seven pounds in weight, and tasted them. Today the grapes had more sugar than yesterday, making for better wine. Tomorrow they would begin to split and rot. So this morning he must go into town, find workers, and start the crush.

The town was a one mile walk from his manor, most of it through his vineyard which rose up on both sides of the road. The earth and the vines were covered with a dew that burned off in the morning sun and released a heady fragrance into the air. He breathed it in deeply, gratefully. It was quite still this early in the morning and the leaves hung motionless on their stems. The weather had been ideal throughout the entire growing season and this year's vintage promised to be the very best in years. Even better, the crop had been abundant - no one in living memory had seen the like of it - and the entire community buzzed over the amount and size of the grapes. In this arid land that suffered so frequently from drought, wine was life and a good crop was the difference between subsistence and bounty. A harvest of this size would bring its own problems - labor issues, shortages of supplies, inexplicable delays, spoilage. As soon as the grapes were picked from their vines, they began to die and would soon rot in the late summer sun, leaving only a short time to process them. But once the grapes were crushed and safely stored in jars, the wine could be preserved for years, nurturing the community with key nutrients, a certain protection against malnutrition and disease.

During harvest week, the workers and their families lived in the fields in tents provided by the owner, who also supplied the food and wine. Each day ended with a celebration of the harvest, filled with eating, drinking, singing and dancing in a week-long party hosted and underwritten by the owner. With the size and quality of this year's harvest, there was much to celebrate and a pleasant air of expectation hung over the entire community like the white clouds that brushed the rolling hills.

A well-managed harvest had implications far beyond this local community. Kosher wine produced in compliance with the Jewish purity laws could be used to pay the tithe owed to the Temple in Jerusalem. Unsanctified wine could not. Likewise, fine wine grown in Judea and blessed by the rabbis was

highly prized in affluent corners of the diaspora, such as Rome and Alexandria, where it commanded premium prices. This provided a very profitable market for surplus wine and a source of much-needed coinage for the local community. The great yield of this year's crop promised an once-in-a-lifetime financial windfall that would trickle through the homes and businesses of the people for many years to come, financing houses, farms, artisans and a surprising variety of business ventures. But first the owner would have to comply with the purity laws overseen by several local rabbis and they could be sticklers.

The owner saw the village just ahead and stopped. He turned around and took one last look at his vines which twisted across the hillsides like open nerves. In a few hours the hills would come alive as day laborers swarmed to pick the grapes and children led the pack animals down to the wine press at the manor. The sun had heaved itself over the horizon, a gigantic red disc that beat down upon the dying grapes. The owner listened to vineyard with his heart and heard the sound of soft grapes dropping fruitlessly into the dirt. Had he waited too long to begin the harvest? No, he was sure that his timing had been right. But at this late date, everything had to be done just right. He had one week, certainly no more, to bring in a crop of this size or face the prospect of his grapes perishing in the field. As proprietor of the land, head of his family, manager of the harvest, host of the festival, guarantor of ritual purity, and supplier to the far flung diaspora, the owner played many roles and had to balance the diverse and often conflicting needs of the community. Difficult in a normal harvest, this year promised to be especially stressful because the stakes had never been higher. Everything simply had to be managed properly, especially the rabbis who stood between him and the lucrative export market.

The rabbis. The owner had mixed feelings about them. He deeply respected their devotion to the law and their learning, but he was no scholar and dreaded their hair-splitting arguments about the steps that must be taken to ensure that the wine was ritually pure, arguments he only dimly understood. But the blessing of the rabbis was essential and he was determined to obtain it. He prayed quietly to himself a prayer of his own making, one that he had devised after the finer points of Mosaic Law had passed through his youthful head without leaving a trace. God knows me and loves me, he prayed silently, and I thank Him every day for my life. Fortified by this simple act of piety, the owner's mood lifted. He would deal with it all, including the rabbis, as his family had always done – fairly and in compliance with the law.

The center of town was busy with vintners, traders, rabbis and day laborers running about in different directions, all bent to the single purpose of the harvest. The owner was joined by his steward who updated him on market conditions. Some traders, panicked at the size of the crop and the resulting decline in local prices, had been trying to unload their contracts with little success. These unlucky entrepreneurs avoided the owner knowing full well that it would be impossible to get him to take the wrong end of losing trade. Others were buying heavily, seeking to fulfill commitments made in distant markets. Several of these buyers spotted the owner and quickly encircled him. After giving him the honorable greeting due to a man of his high social standing, they got down to business and began to pepper him with offers. He had calculated that his great surplus would leave him with quite a few unsold jars and so he picked off some of the better bids, which were documented by his steward. The bright eyes of the owner lit up as he negotiated with the traders, playing them off each other to obtain the best terms. He was on firm footing with the traders, sure of his inventory, sure of the market, enjoying himself as only a man with leverage can. The trading done, he moved through the crowd in search of day laborers when he came upon several rabbis seeking an engagement to oversee the purification ritual on his estate. The owner's wine was worth considerably more with the blessing than without it, a point that had not been lost on the good rabbis and they solemnly discussed the appropriate prayers and rituals that would avoid a shameful breach in religious observance and at the same time guarantee a happy commercial outcome. Here the owner found himself on softer ground. He listened to various proposals, and in the end retained the three rabbis who had the best reputation for learning among the people.

Somewhat relieved, the owner resumed his search for the hands he needed to save the grapes. He had an urgent need for labor, especially strong pickers who could move quickly up and down the hillsides with heavy baskets on their backs for 12 hours in the high sun. There was money to be made by such workers and they bargained hard with the owners. A group of ten men, all from the same extended family and led by a tall man, approached the owner and greeted him formally. The two men sized each other up, the tall man determined to extract the highest value for his family, the short man equally determined not to overpay. The tall man and his tribe were known to the owner. They had a reputation as very good, if not the best workers, a tight family clan that would work well together with little need of supervision. The

men were well aware of their own reputation and they were up early to defend it and capitalize on it. The tall man also knew of the owner, who had a reputation for fairness with his workers and generosity to the guests who attended his festival, two very good things for his tribe. The two men drew closer to each other as they discussed terms, their heads leaning in. The tall man shook his head and looked around for another vintner, but with the sun falling hard on his ripened grapes and these very good workers at hand, the owner badly needed to make a deal and so re-engaged him with a higher offer. The owner's foreman watched the negotiations closely, secretly rooting for the tall man and his excellent team who would make his job that much easier. At last, the tall man straightened himself. They agreed to a price of one denarius per worker per 12 hour day to be paid at the end of each day for the entire week. The owner and tall man smiled broadly at each other, relieved that they had come to terms, like two gamblers who had both been bluffing but still managed to split the pot. The tall man had negotiated a very favorable contract for his family, one which locked in a fixed wage to be paid regardless of the quantity of grapes they pulled, regardless of any other problems the owner might encounter with the harvest, in effect a guaranteed contract. The bargain was documented by the ever-present steward and the whole family headed off to the fields with the foreman, comfortable in the knowledge that they had made a good deal at the top of the market.

New day laborers continued to stream into the center of town, not prepared to put in a 12 hour day, but still willing to work. These were average workers who could not or would not bear a full day in the fields. At 9:00 am, the owner spotted ten such men standing around and told them to go into his vineyard. As for wages, he said, 'I will pay you a fair wage.' No contract was offered, no fixed amount defined, no guarantee of more work for the rest of the week, just a fair wage to be determined at the end of the day - fair as the owner saw it. The amount payable would depend upon many things: the number of grapes gathered by each worker, the time spent in the field, the supply of other laborers, the time of the season, the heat, the number and condition of grapes left to be gathered, the amount of money left over after all other expenses, including the tall man and his family, had been paid. These workers were at risk for all of these conditions, piece workers who would not know their wages until their production had been added up and its value assessed at end of the day. Because they were not the best workers, they had little leverage over the owner and quickly agreed to his terms. At 12:00 pm, the owner hired ten more workers, who were even less enthusiastic about a full day in the

fields. Finally, the owner hired 10 more at 3:00 pm. All of these workers agreed to the same conditions and all were entirely dependent upon the owner to pay them a fair wage at the end of the day. Although working without a contract, all of these workers shared in the very reasonable expectation that the 9:00 am workers would make more than the 12:00 pm workers who would make more than the 3:00 pm workers.

The hiring done for the day, the owner walked back out to his manor. The fields had been transformed from this morning's still life mosaic into living-breathing-reaping-singing theater that spilled over the hillsides. As promised by the dawn, it had been fiery day in the fields and most of the workers were moving more slowly now, their arms heavy, backs bent and sore, skin burnt to a reddish brown, minds dull from exhaustion. Some were not moving at all. The tall man stood out at the top of a high hill against the clear blue sky working at a rapid pace that never slackened, still going strong while the other workers fell away from dehydration and heat stroke. The tall man and his tribe would be paid the same amount whether they worked hard or not, but they were determined to maintain their reputation as the best workers in the field, men who would always get picked first and command the highest wage, men who would find work even when things got tough, and so they redoubled their efforts as if thriving on the very difficulties of their long day.

Entering the courtyard of his manor, the owner walked over to several rabbis who had gathered around the wine press and the micveh. The rabbis were checking the micveh to ensure that it had been filled with "living water" fed from natural springs and not transported by hand, a very important condition in obtaining their blessing. Satisfied, the rabbis asked the owner to purify himself in the sacred waters. The owner took off his clothes and donned an apron specifically designed for this purpose, walked down the steps and stayed in the bath until the rabbis signaled that he could come out. He was followed by several stompers, young men who had been selected to tread the grapes with their feet, a great honor, but one which required them to first purify themselves. When the rabbis were satisfied all of the right people had been purified, several jars earmarked for the diaspora were brought to the micveh. It was common knowledge that the blessing of the rabbis diminished during long voyage of the wine across the Mediterranean and that the best preventative was to immerse the jars in the waters of the micveh. This would seal in the blessing so that it might not leak out of the jars and into the sea. A sharp but predictable argument broke out between the older rabbis who

insisted on the jars being held in the micveh for a longer time and the younger rabbis in favor of a shorter immersion. The owner stepped well out of the way while the rabbis disputed the relevant points of law. When the various arguments had finally run their course, the rabbis reached a compromise and the jars were lowered one by one into the micveh for the requisite time. When the jars had been purified, the workers loaded the grapes into the top of press. The stompers began their work and a thin purple line of juice flowed from the treading floor down a series of cascading pools until it reached the bottom pool where it was scooped into the cleansed and waiting jars.

Things were going well. Despite the terrible heat, the workers had moved a large quantity of grapes out of the fields and into the courtyard without incident. The rabbis were satisfied and the juice was flowing faster through the press. The owner left the manor and headed up to the fields to check on the tents, the food and the wine he must provide for the festival. From the gates of his manor he could see that the women had put up the tents in a hollow between two hillsides and were preparing the tables for the feast. When he arrived at the hollow, he saw that everything was in good order on this most busy and crucial first day of the harvest. At 5:00 with the sun mercifully dropping from the sky, the owner spotted 10 young men sitting in a tent eating raisins and rolling dice while they waited for the festival to begin. He approached them and said, 'Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?' They answered, 'No one hired us'. The owner was annoyed at these able-bodied men with their clean white mantles sitting idle at such a critical time and said, 'Well, then, you go and work in the vineyard.'

These last workers, the weakest and least motivated of all, had spent the day successfully avoiding any form of work. Thinking themselves safe at this time of day they had gone to the festival so that they might get a good place at the table. They had not counted on the running into anyone, let alone an owner who was determined that they should earn their way into his festival. But with only an hour left in the day, they shrugged it off and headed out to the fields. The owner promised them nothing, not a wage nor a contract, and they did not expect more than a free meal. The foreman was not happy to see them, knowing they would be more trouble than they were worth and gave them the children's task of feeding the pack animals.

The foreman left the fields and met the steward at the compound to assess the day. Together, they climbed the watchtower and got a good view of the many

workers who covered the hillsides, the steady trail of pack animals laboring under their heavy baskets as they made their way into the compound, the large mound of grapes building in front of the press, a mound so great that the stompers would be kept busy until the early hours of the morning, the warehouse slowly filling up with jars of sanctified wine. They agreed that it had been a great day, one that was equal to the challenge of so large a crop and they congratulated themselves. The two men began to calculate the wages owed to the workers. At the top of the wage scale stood the tall man and his 12 hour workers. These workers were competent, tireless, proud of their work ethic and entirely self-managed. There was no question that each had earned his denarius. Indeed, it was doubtful that so much could have been accomplished without them. The three, six and nine hour workers made up the vast majority and their performance was much harder to judge. As piece workers, they were paid for each basket loaded onto the animals. It had been a busy day and there were sure to be disagreements over the number of baskets delivered and their value. In the end the decision would be made by the foreman and the steward who had spent all day in the fields. But these workers were not without recourse. If the wages were considered too low, these workers could leave and find work at another more hospitable vineyard. This was a real threat, especially so early in the harvest and with so many grapes still left in the field, and the two paymasters considered it closely. Mindful of this quite visible hand of the market, they eventually settled on a range of 20 – 50 asses per worker, 100 asses making up a single denarius, with the three hour workers at the bottom of the wage scale and the nine hour workers at the top. They did not bother to compute a wage for the one hour workers who were considered a liability, in sole possession of the lowest rung of the labor market.

As quitting time approached, all eyes were on the owner, who would give the signal to end the day. He stood in the hollow and looked up at his fields and down at the long train of carters hauling grapes to his manor. It was clear that he had wildly underestimated the size of the crop which he could now see was truly epic. Being a wise man, the owner considered the impact such a largess would have on the town and the surrounding countryside, the number of lives that might be preserved and extended, the wealth that would run through the homes for years to come, the impact upon the far flung diaspora. Being a good man he thought about the obligations that came with this great surplus. He was for a moment uncharacteristically overwhelmed: by the responsibility he bore for this abundance, by affection for his community, by the need to do the



right thing. A light evening breeze stirred the vines and blew through the tents, gently tossing the clothes of the women. It brushed his shoulder before moving down the valley. As he watched the departing wind, he listened again with his heart, this time to his beloved community and received his answer. He would be generous, generous in a way that was worthy of the great bounty that God had given him, generous in a way that would touch all classes – family, workers, rabbis and even generations to come. He would be generous with his money and with his experience, bold beyond the natural limits of his practical self. He would give until it hurt and he smiled at the thought of it. At 6:00, the owner told the women to go out into the fields and gather the men to receive their wages.

The exhausted field hands trudged out of the vineyard toward the tents. The foreman and steward saw the workers leaving the fields and they too headed for the tents. When they arrived, they were surprised to find the owner seated at a table set up to pay the workers, a large bag of coins in front of him. This was unusual. Normally, the foreman, who had spent all day in the fields supervising the work, was responsible for paying the laborers. This was the main source of his authority without which it would be difficult for him to manage his workforce. The steward, representing the interests of the owner, would oversee the process, acting as witness and scribe. But the owner, who had spent little time in the fields and had no idea what to pay the workers, nevertheless waved both of them off and told the foreman to assemble all of the workers in a line in front of the table, starting with one hour workers and ending with the 12 hour workers.

This too was unusual and caused a stir among the large crowd which sat on the hillside waiting for the festival to commence. The payment of the workers marked the beginning of the feast when the workers were pleasantly flush with their wages and the wine and food of the owner began to flow. Typically, the best workers would be at the front of the line where they received their guaranteed wage, followed by the piece workers. No one expected the one hour workers to receive anything, but the owner appeared to have something different in mind. The crowd was on its feet and gathered around the table many rows deep. The children of the workers pushed to the front and eyed the large bag of coins. The workers too were surprised, none more than the one hour workers in their spotless mantles who stepped up to the table. The 12 hour workers, sticky from the juice of the grapes and covered in layers of dirt, shuffled to the back of the line grumbling among themselves, more than a little

miffed at the unusual arrangement that caused them to wait for their money. They looked to the tall man for an explanation and he assured his family that they still had a deal and they would each receive a full denarius regardless of their place in line. It had all been written down by the steward.

The owner reached into his money bag, took out a handful of coins and gave each one hour worker a full denarius! A gasp went up from the crowd. The eyebrows of the foreman rose high on his forehead and vanished under his hat. This was well beyond generous, well beyond even reason and everyone in the crowd looked at his neighbor to confirm what he had seen. The one hour workers took their coins and walked away laughing at their great and wholly undeserved good fortune. The sight of these rogues enjoying their windfall was infectious and a genial air of anticipation ran through the crowd as everyone wondered whether the generosity of the owner might extend to themselves.

Next came the three, six and nine hour workers, their eyes wide as they stepped to the table. The 12 hours workers behind them stood on their toes and strained to watch the proceedings. The owner reached into his money bag, took out a handful of coins and gave each worker a full denarius! The owner did not bother to question these workers about the quantity of grapes they had gathered nor their time spent in the field. All they had to do was open their hand and the owner dropped a coin into it. This was by far the largest class of workers and it took some time to pay them all. One by one the piece workers took their coins and joined the one hour workers, congratulating each other on their good luck. The 12 hour workers inched forward, looking around and over each other to see how this peculiar turn of events might affect them. They tried to figure out how much their day was worth, using as a baseline the large and unwarranted sums paid to these lesser workers. Some said two denarii, others three or even four denarii, an outrageous amount for a day's work, no matter how good a worker might be.

Hopes were high as the tall man and his clan finally stepped up to the table. The owner reached into his money bag, took out a handful of coins and gave the tall man a single denarius! The tall man looked at the coin in his hand, disbelieving, then looked to the owner, searching for an explanation. But the owner said nothing. When it became clear that no more coins would be given to him, the tall man stiffened, clenched the coin in his fist and glared at the owner. He and his family had worked all day, harder and faster than anyone

had any right to expect. And yet at the end of the day they had been played for fools. They did not have to work as hard as they did to get paid a top wage - no one did. Under this capricious owner, no one had to work at all. The tall man felt the eyes of his family upon his back. He leaned over the table, pointed his long arm at the one hour workers and shouted at the owner, 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour, while we put up with a whole day's work in the hot sun - yet you paid them the same as you paid us.' The tall man was so angry, so outraged, that he neglected to use the honorific title of the owner, a serious breach in etiquette and the crowd stepped back, as if afraid to catch a fatal disease. But the tall man stood over the short owner seated at the table, defiant and unrepentant.

The very identity of the tall man and his tribe was defined by the quality of their work. They were the best. They knew it and so did the community, who openly envied them for it. Their strong work ethic had placed them at the top of the labor market upon which this agricultural society was based, an unassailable position confirmed by the top wages they commanded. The perverse actions of the owner had brought into question the value of their labor and by extension their self-worth and indeed the natural order of things. In this, the owner had outrageously blundered. He needed to pay them more and thus restore their identity as the best workers at the top of the heap, and more importantly, to return the one hour workers to their inferior position at the bottom and so bring the world back to its natural state. The loss of their privileged position and the unmerited rise of the one hour workers had left the 12 hour workers feeling in turn, confused, fearful and angry. The rabbis, too, were uncomfortable with the owner whose inexplicable actions were sure to alienate this important class and possibly threaten the harvest. If the 12 hour workers became angry enough, they might take their wages, quit the owner's estate, and leave the grapes to perish in the dirt. Instead of reaping the great promise of the harvest bestowed upon them by God, the community would face malnutrition, perhaps even hunger in the midst of plenty. The rabbis, who saw farther and deeper than the crowd, were also troubled by the implications of the owner's actions. The owner had not just upended the social order: he had ignored it.

The owner stood up, two heads shorter than the tall man and answered him in a soft and naturally friendly voice that ignored the social insult given by the tall man. "Friend, I did you no injustice. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go", he said. With these words, the owner

reminded the tall man of their original contract. They had not been cheated or abused. They had received the agreed wages at the agreed time in compensation for an agreed task, a deal they were only too happy to take a mere 12 hours ago. They were still the best workers in the field and would receive the top wage every day for the duration of the harvest – as promised. And with their impressive performance, the reputation of the clan was intact. From a rational viewpoint, these workers had no complaint and should be pleased. But their happiness was ruined by the good fortune of the one hour workers, a matter of no economic consequence to them. In the view of the owner, their anger was unjustified and they should look to the original contract which bound them both. The crowd murmured its assent. If anyone was guilty of breach it was the tall man. The rabbis, intimately familiar with the concept of a written covenant, had to agree.

The owner continued, “I choose to give to this last one as to you. Is it not allowed to me to do what I wish with my own?” No one was prepared to argue this point. The owner and his ancestors had been in control of the estate for many generations. They had always been wise and generous patrons, the abundance of food and wine set out on the tables being one good example, the payment of fair wages being another. The crowd looked to the waiting banquet and grew restive, anxious for this argument to end so that the feast could begin and they too might share in the goodwill of the owner. But the tall man stood firm at the table, angry, menacing, still looking for justice for him and his tribe and determined to delay the feast until he got it.

The bright eyes of the owner suddenly twinkled, and he said, “Or are you jealous because I am generous?” There was a pause while the crowd took in his meaning, followed by a titter of laughter which grew into general mirth, which grew into outright hilarity, breaking the tension of the moment and at last allowing the feast to begin. Of course the owner was generous and his generosity had caused all of this drama with the 12 hour workers, which now appeared ridiculous. It had been a great harvest and thanks to the generosity of the owner there was plenty for everyone. Better to get on with the festival and not let the pique of one man ruin the happiness of everyone. The rabbis were not so sure. They ignored the merriment of the crowd and huddled together, speaking quickly and seriously among themselves. After a few moments, they straightened themselves and approached the owner. They were pleased, quite pleased, with the actions of the owner and they told him so. The owner had been faithful to his written agreement with the 12 hour

workers and supremely generous with rest. Beyond that, the owner had given the 12 hour workers a gift that was far more valuable than any extra wages they might earn, something well worth the risk the owner had taken with the harvest: the owner had given them the power to bestow a mitzvah, a blessing, on the entire community. All the 12 hour workers had to do was accept the generosity shown by the owner to the other workers. By this small action the 12 hour workers would end, at least for a while, the jealousy of the other workers and the perpetual strife between the classes – over money, over status, over self-interest - in favor of a new and more peaceful order that flowed directly from the blessings of their compassionate God. By simply accepting the good fortune of the other workers, the 12 hour workers could multiply the blessing of the already great harvest, a decision that would cost them nothing in material terms but everything in terms of pride. On the other hand, if the 12 hour workers rejected the magnanimity of the owner and abandoned the field, all of the blessings, including that of the harvest itself, might disappear. In the considered opinion of the rabbis, this was a risk worth taking.

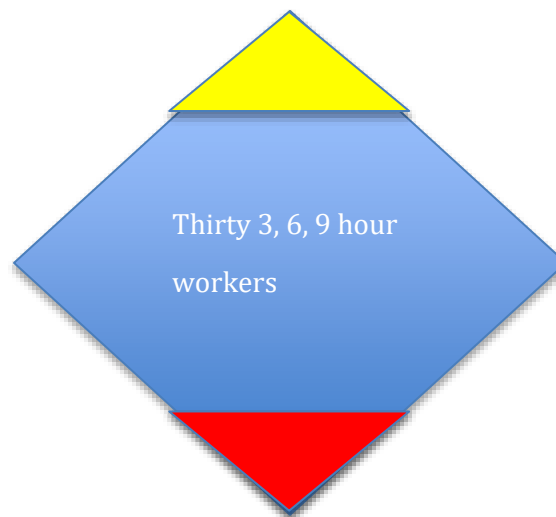
The owner returned to his seat and paid the rest of the 12 hour workers a single denarius each. The 12 hour workers quietly took their wages and gathered around the tall man, all but forgotten amid the growing revelry of the festival. Feeling himself the butt of a cruel joke, the tall man was furious. He demanded that his family leave the fields of this owner and seek employment elsewhere. But his clan was in no hurry to leave the tents, the food, the wine, the songs and dancing that were breaking out everywhere. They wanted to stay for the feast and for the rest of the week, where the work would get easier and their top wages would remain in place. They would not anywhere else get a feast as rich as this nor an owner as open-handed. It was all just too good. But the tall man would not be reconciled and shook off the entreaties of his family. He turned and walked away from the feast and back into town, disappearing into the long shadows of the evening in search of a less generous owner.

### Meditations

1. The story is simple. At harvest time the workforce is comprised of a few 12 hour workers at the top of the labor market who receive the best terms while the rest work under conditions that are less and less desirable. Ten 12 hour workers get a fixed wage guaranteed by contract (the best terms). Thirty piece

workers in the middle, get the promise of a just wage as measured by their production and no contract (average terms). Ten one hour workers receive no assurances at all of either wages or conditions (the worst terms). All workers are dispersed throughout the labor market in a normal distribution, with a few at the top and bottom and the majority in the middle. Viewed graphically, the labor market resembles a diamond.

Ten 12 hour workers



Ten 1 hour workers

The diamond is at the center of the story and drives the behavior of all the characters. The 12 hour workers, the foreman and the steward are motivated by their place at the top. They are proud of the status they have earned by their ability and hard work, and they remain disdainful of those below them. The one hour workers reject the hierarchy of the labor market and instead aim to get the most that they can for the least amount of work. They consider all workers to be fools, especially the industrious ones at the top, and they are quite pleased that they can attend the same feast as the rest, but with none of the labor. The piece workers are the middling sorts who are envious of everyone. They envy the high wages of the 12 hour workers above them and the freedom of the one hour workers below them. Each class is either jealous of those who have something or disdainful of those who don't. The payment of a different wage to each class further strengthens this social construct and makes it a reality. For most of the story, everyone is comfortable with his

place within the diamond and no one can imagine his place outside of it. The diamond appears to be the foundation of this agricultural society, a shared belief system based on self-interested class conflict that is both inarguable and inescapable, the ordering principle that pre-determines all thought, action, and hope. At the end of the story, however, the diamond proves to be quite fragile and is destroyed by a single act of kindness on the part of the owner. By simply paying everyone the same wage, the cement that held this society together is washed away and this man-made construct collapses, replaced by a divine order based on the blessings that cascade down from a compassionate God.

**How much time do I spend thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of others, their social position relative to mine, their wealth relative to mine? Am I living too comfortably within a diamond of my own making?**

2. What motivated the owner to create so much turmoil on his estate? The owner could have paid the going wage, even tipped the scales a bit in favor of the middle workers, and everyone including the 12 hour workers would have been happy to return to his fields the next day, thereby ensuring the safety of the harvest. That would have been the smart commercial move. But instead, the owner deliberately chose to alienate his best workers and put the entire community at risk by his benevolent action. Why?

The owner was a practical, clever and naturally cheerful man, an observant Jew who had a clear understanding of his obligations to the community. The great harvest caused him to think hard about his material and spiritual responsibilities to the guests who were living on his estate. In a moment of thanks and prayer, he was moved to act on the bounty he had been given. He took a business risk because the great harvest had given him a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bestow a blessing upon his guests, a unique gift that only he was in a position to give. By paying all of his workers the same wage, the owner shared the material wealth of the harvest with his guests, a blessing in itself. By giving the 12 hour workers an opportunity to be generous in a way that was unique to them and their position, the owner gave them an opportunity to amplify the already great gift of the harvest. God had blessed the owner, who had blessed his workers with generous wages and now the 12 hour workers could bless the rest of the community simply by accepting the good fortune of the other workers, a blessing that would suspend the normal

conflict within their society for the remainder of the harvest and elevate the joy of the festival to new heights. Like any real gift, this one could only be given at a cost, in this case the potential loss of the crop if the 12 hour workers abandoned the fields for another more conventional owner. But to the owner, this is what a good Jew did with a divine blessing, especially one of this magnitude.

**What are the unique blessing that have been given to me? What risks will I take to share my blessings?**

3. Before the story begins, Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like this". As with other parables of Jesus, He tells us that the story is a simile for the kingdom of heaven. And what does this simile tell us about that kingdom? There is an owner who has some urgent work to be done in the kingdom, namely the harvest. The owner needs workers to accomplish this and has entered into a covenant with them to do so. The untrustworthy nature of the workers is quite different from the faithful nature of the owner, something the owner points out to the workers to their great discomfort. The power of the owner, while substantial, is not absolute and he must negotiate with the workers because they have choices. The strong and self-reliant workers have more choices than the weak ones and are noticeably harder to deal with. The possibility of rejection by the strong workers leaves the owner with the risk of a weak harvest. Jealousy and self-importance have no place in the kingdom, rather they have an unsettling effect on its operation. Redemption from these evils can be achieved by choosing to honor the covenant with the owner and accept his generosity, something that is harder for those with more options (the 12 hour workers) than those without (the rest of the workers). There is the possibility of growth, as evidenced by the potential for change in the hearts of the 12 hour workers. There is the possibility of stagnation, as evidenced by the decision of the tall man to seek a lesser master. The free choice of the 12 hour workers can have a significant impact on the very structure and viability of the kingdom. The fact that Jesus is not just telling a story about a harvest, but the kingdom of heaven raises even higher the stakes of the decision of the 12 hour workers because their choice will impact the shape of eternity itself. So there is indeed a great deal riding on the decision of the 12 hour workers. The tribe of the tall man chose to share the blessing of the owner and so they helped to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. The tall man held on tightly to his single denarius and all that it represented to him and in so doing diminished the kingdom of heaven. He rejected the



hospitality of the owner and left the field, perversely and laughably, in search of a lesser deal, but one which installed him at the top of a new kingdom, a kingdom of one.

**Placed in the position of the 12 hour workers, do I choose to reject the generosity of the owner or accept his blessings and pass them along? My decision, like that of the 12 hour workers, will change the very fabric of the kingdom of heaven on earth - right here, right now.**

4. Lets turn now to the Jesus' comment after the end of the story, 'So the last will be first, and the first last.' In keeping with the diamond that is at the heart of the story, these words refer to a hierarchy. Except this hierarchy has been flipped: the last are now first and the first are last. I can think of two ways to understand this inversion, both of which are dependent upon the decision of the 12 hour workers.

The first follows a decision by the 12 hour workers to reject the owner and renege on the covenant. In this case, the 12 hour workers are placed at the bottom of a new diamond, with the one hour workers at the top and the rest, as before, in the middle. Unlike the old earthly order where the strongest workers stood at the top due to their own efforts, in this new diamond, dependency on the owner determines one's place in the scheme of things. The one hour workers who cannot or will not work for themselves now enjoy an exalted position at the top which reflects their complete dependence on the owner, the middling workers less so, and the 12 hour workers who rely on their own strength not at all. If the 12 hour workers reject the owner and his covenant, they choose a system of their own making, a decision that assigns them to a minor role in the lower parts of the kingdom, now and perhaps forever. Interestingly, they still inhabit the kingdom even though they reject it. However, with the disengagement of the 12 hour workers, the kingdom is diminished and does not reach its full potential and may even be at risk.

The second possibility follows a decision by the 12 hour workers to accept the generosity of the owner and keep their covenant with him. Here, the last are equal to the first. They are the same in the sense that both classes at the top and the bottom accept a gift from the owner which meets their unique needs. The one hour workers have received an unmerited material benefit which eliminates their disdain for the other workers and their work ethic: they get to keep their freedom and the money. The 12 hour workers have received an

unmerited moral lesson, a much needed insight that can change their view of themselves by eliminating their disdain for the other inferior workers: they get to keep their reputation (and possibly enhance it) and the money.

Likewise, the conflicted middle workers have received a gift that is unique to them and their station, a gift that invalidates their jealousy against the 12 and one hour workers: they have what everyone else has. With the unique needs of all classes satisfied by the good graces of the owner, they are in this sense equal before him. This really means that there is no hierarchy at all and the diamond more closely resembles a circle where all classes accept the gifts of the owner designed specifically for them.

The circle works significantly better than the diamond because the 12 hour workers help to secure the kingdom which now achieves its full potential. In a strange way, a decision by the 12 hour workers to accept and pass on the gifts of the owner makes all classes less dependent upon him. Once the 12 hour workers embrace the new order, there is no need for the owner to enforce a diamond-hard hierarchy directed toward himself. Rather, a virtuous circle is set in motion by the blessing given by the 12 hour workers to the other workers (a gift we can expect to be reciprocated) which ends the discord between all classes. In effect, all workers find themselves less dependent upon the owner for their gifts because they have become more like the owner in their generosity toward each other.

**How do I become less like the tall man and more like the owner?**