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SUNDAY READING.

THE
PARABLE
OF THE

Laborers in the Vineyard.



SOLD BY HOWARD AND EVANS,

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Laborers in the Vineyard.

THE Kingdom of Heaven is compared by our Savior to *An householder which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. And again he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the market-place, and said unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, becauss no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right that shall ye receive.*

By the *Householder* here spoken of our Savior himself is intended, and by the *Laborers hired into*

the vineyard those persons are meant who enter into his service. These laborers are said to be found *standing idle in the market place*; for the gospel finds men idle, that is, not employed in God's service: they are working busily enough perhaps for themselves; for men will rise up early and go to bed late for the sake of getting money, or following pleasure, but then their diligence is of a wrong kind; they are not diligent in the way of duty to their Maker; they may be likened to a certain kind of servants, who though they may seem buisy, and may get from ignorant persons some credit for being so, are nevertheless merely running on their own errands and doing their own work, so that they are no better than idle in respect to the work which they ought to be doing for their Householder or Master. But when they become true Christians, they are no longer like those idle fellows who are always sauntering about, with their arms folded, in the market-place, pretending that they are in want of employment, no man having as yet hired them; but they may be now compared to a set of laborers in a vineyard, or garden, who, whenever you look at them, are sure to be seen either digging, or planting, or watering, or doing, in short, whatever is most wanted in the place where they are working; and they have always an eye moreover to the honor and interests of the great Householder their Master.

We come now to another important point in the parable. The Householder is said to go out at *different hours of the day* to hire these servants. This signifies that the light of Revelation was sent at different periods of the world to the different people

in it, and in particular to the Jews at one period, and the Gentile Nations at another. The Jews had been much offended at seeing Christ address himself to the Gentiles, who, as they thought, not having been called into the church, or vineyard, of God, at an early period of the world, ought not to be received at a later hour. Our Savior therefore makes use of this Parable, or Story, as a convenient means of shewing how unreasonable these Jewish prejudices were.

I mean here, however, to accommodate the parable to the purpose of shewing in what manner the gospel often addresses itself to men in different periods of life, calling one at an early age, and one at a much later into the same vineyard of Christ. We are in no danger of erring exactly as the Jews did, by raising objections to Christ's calling the great body of the Gentile Nations into his church. We may be in great danger, however, of acting much in the same spirit with the Jews, and if we do so, that spirit is most likely to shew itself in our objecting to extend the privileges of the gospel to some poor outcasts, or aged sinners among ourselves.

Let us then here describe the case of several persons whom we will suppose to engage in the service of Christ, some at an earlier, and some at a much later hour of life; and since there are many, no doubt, who put off their repentance because they judge that it is always time enough to repent, let us take special care to shew how much more melancholy their case will become through every year's delay; not to mention, as we might largely do, how uncertain their very continuance in life is,

and how doubtful also it may be, whether if they go on hardening themselves more and more, God will give them hereafter that necessary help of his grace, without which, even if they live ever so long they will have no heart to repent.

First then I will put the case of one who is brought to obey the gospel in the morning of life, and is one of the youngest of the laborers in our Lord's vineyard. He sets out well, as I will suppose, and he goes on well through all the following stages of his life; even his most early prayers are not a mere matter of form, but they spring out of a persuasion already rising up in his mind that he entirely depends on God, and needs the help of his Holy Spirit. It pleases God, in answer to his infant prayers, to strengthen this child against his early temptations, so that he does as Christ commands, and not as wicked children may require or expect of him. Such a child as this will also be diligent in learning his book and improving his time, for he will be like the laboring men in the vineyard spoken of in the parable, and not like the idle ones in the market-place.

Now what a vast quantity of good may such a person be the means of doing in the course of a long life on earth. First of all he is a blessing to his young connections and school-fellows, for he will often reprove vice and irreligion in them, even though it should be much against the modesty of his own natural inclinations; then he grows up to be a bold witness for God in the face of all the gay and unthinking young men or women among whom he is thrown in early life; next he proceeds to do good about the village or town where he is settled;

after this perhaps he marries, in consequence of which his wife, and all her connections, and his own offspring also have the advantage of observing him; they remark his humble, candid, pious, and affectionate spirit, and his diligent and self denying life, and they profit both by his kind services and his example. Now too his income very probably increases through his good character and industry, and hence he is able to assist the poor, the fatherless, and widow, and to pay for the instruction of the ignorant—for he spends little on himself, having no vices he has few wants, and his family being trained to religious habits, and preserved from the gay and expensive customs of the world, have few wants also. Thus is happiness of all kinds spread abroad. He explains also, as he has an opportunity, those Christian Doctrines which have led him into this life of usefulness, and is a great promoter of the gospel, so that a little world of Christians is continually gathering together all around him, and even a new generation is coming forward which shall by-and-by, rise up and call him blessed. In the midst of all this usefulness, however, he is very modest and lowly, he gives God the praise of every good thing he does, and he is sincerely pained when flattering and inconsiderate people load him with their extravagant commendations, for he sees a thousand faults in himself, which he is much engaged in overcoming, though others perceive them not; he is conscious of neglecting many an opportunity of doing good, and of failing to suppress sufficiently many an evil thought, and though some irreligious people may fancy that he already carries things too far, as they absurdly term it, yet

there is nothing of which he is himself more sure than that he falls short in every duty, and especially in those things of which they least see the importance, I mean in zeal for religion, in the duties of prayer and praise, and in all the feelings and expressions of gratitude to his Creator and Redeemer. But while we are thus describing the amiable character of a Christian, let it be remarked also, that he meets with various difficulties, and is exposed to not a few misrepresentations. His virtuous singularity, for instance, is considered by some, who do not understand his principles, to be unnecessary preciseness, and is thought to arise from a conceited or disobliging spirit; his courage in reproving vice, if unsuccessful, is called by those whom he reproves impertinence; his activity in doing good is not seldom ascribed to forwardness, and even his extraordinary liberality is accounted for, by those who do not care to follow his example, by saying, that it is mere vanity, or lavish imprudence; and, above all, his piety is apt to be thought by the impious and irreligious, to be mere hypocrisy, or at best a poor pitiable sort of weakness. Thus then, while the Christian has many peculiar hopes, and joys, and consolations on the one hand, he experiences many trials and hardships on the other. Nevertheless he bears up under them all; many of them, indeed, appear light to him in comparison of what they seem to other men, and grow more and more light as he becomes used to them. He goes on therefore cheerful and contented; he labors much, he suffers much, he renounces much, he contends much in the cause of Christ, and he does this in every place to which he moves, in every

changing situation and circumstance and in every season of life through which he passes. And now at last after a long life, death closes in upon him; he looks with thankfulness back to what is past, and with composure to the important and decisive hour that is approaching: he trusts indeed not in him himself, but in his Savior, for after all he is but *an unprofitable servant, having done no more than it was his duty to do*, but he has much comfortable proof that his christian faith has not been a mere name, and he is able to take up the same language with the Apostle, and to say with a measure of the same confidence, *I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge shall give me in the great day.* This then is one of those, who, to borrow the phrase in the parable, may be said to have borne *the whole burthen and heat of the day.*

There is another class of persons who may now be spoken of as entering into the vineyard of Christ at a somewhat later hour; at the age we will suppose of five-and-twenty or thirty. These have lost an hour indeed; they have idled away one precious season of life. Alas! also it is to be feared that during the heat and self-confidence of youth, they have done much evil, as well as neglected to do good. Perhaps it has also happened that they have already formed some rash connection, and established themselves on some irreligious plan; but now they repent; they break through all difficulties; they turn out of the path in which they had been setting off in life, and they turn into the vineyard of Christ: they become humble, diligent,

and useful Christians ; for even these also give a good part at least of their health and strength to the cause of their Savior, and with grief and shame at having been thus far idle, they become fellow-laborers with those happier persons already spoken of.

But let us come to a class of persons who repent somewhat later still ; I mean the age of about forty or fifty How effecting is the condition of such persons when it is well considered ! they now discover that they have been all their lives living, as it were, to no purpose ; that the whole of these forty or fifty years has been idly thrown away, or if spent in labor, that it has been mere labor in vain, for even though they may have been diligent, yet they have been merely diligent in doing their own will and not the will of God ; they have been working in their own vineyard and not in the vineyard of Christ ; they have been year after year pushing their own fortune, building up their own credit, exalting their own consequence, indulging their own ease, following their own pleasure, caring about their own interest or family interest, while the great interest of the kingdom of Christ have been entirely out of the question, and now therefore they have to repent perhaps, of the very things they had been the most proud of ; they have also to resist many sinful habits which are become, as it were, a second nature ; they have to disentangle themselves from a multitude of irreligious connections whose opinions have hitherto ruled over them ; they have to unteach even their own children many a false principle which they had taught them ; with many a weary and painful step they have to measure back the whole ground which

they have been treading, and they have to undo as it were, every thing which for fifty years they have been doing. When more than half of life is over, they have to enter upon the work which they were sent into the world to do: but at length they hire themselves into the vineyard of Christ, and he receives them though it is at the ninth hour; and now they husband well their time, and begin to be fruitful in every good work; and whatever they do, they do all the glory of God: they perform what he commands, and simply because he commands it: they become a part of the church of Christ, and are numbered among the laborers in his vineyard.

But if the case of such as were last spoken of is affecting, what shall be said of those aged persons whom it still remains for us to describe! Some there are (but, alas! it is to be feared that it is the case of very few) who even at seventy, or more than seventy years old, repent and become the servants of Christ. When scarcely an hour of life remains, when the evening is closing in and *the night cometh when no man can work*, then it pleases God to send his grace possibly to a few of these also, and they go for the short hour that remains into the same vineyard of Christ.

How mournful is the view which we have now to take of such an aged sinner's condition. Here is a person the whole term of whose earthly existence (one poor uncertain hour excepted) has been spent in a sinful course. Where are then the merits which he will have to plead before God? Where are his works of faith, his acts of worship, or labors of love? Instead of these, methinks I see a thousand sins rising up, each of which is sufficient

to condemn him. Let us run over the woeful tale of his wicked life, and as before we thought fit to describe an eminent and distinguished Christian, so now by way of making the difference more particularly striking, let us draw the picture of one, who though no thief or murderer, and therefore not accounted one of the most abandoned of mankind, yet is lying under a load of much more than ordinary guilt.— Those persons indeed who feel themselves guilty of any part of the crimes we shall enumerate, should take their share of the reproof and if they have not repented, so as to enter into the vineyard of Christ, they should remember, that though they may be criminals of a smaller size, yet they are still remaining under condemnation.

To a perverse and disobedient childhood has succeeded (as we will suppose in the case of the person we are speaking of) a wild and vicious youth, and then a proud and ambitious manhood and after this a fretful or covetous old age. In the course of his long life many temptations have broken in upon him, and by turns he has yielded to them all. Many different situations have been filled by him, and in each, as he now sees, he has either neglected or betrayed his trust. He has been a negligent and bad father, and unreasonable, nay, secretly also an unfaithful husband, a careless inattentive brother, a hollow, flattering and designing friend; perhaps also, a mean time-serving elector, and even a mischievous common acquaintance. Do you ask what has been the turn of his common conversation? Instead of being pious, useful, benevolent, candid and sincere, it has at one time been proud and passionate, at another vain and flourishing, at another

slandering and revengeful; now again it has been selfish crafty and dissembling, often also daringly impious and profane, and not seldom exceedingly polluting and impure. Do you ask what has been the sinful deeds he has done? O what a dreadful variety has there been in them! At one time he has been trying to over-reach his fellow-trader, at another he has been endeavouring to seduce some unhappy maiden: at one time he is seen quarrelling with his neighbour; at another he falls out with one of his own family, after which he grows mad with every one around him, and at last equally mad and out of humour with himself. At one time he is buying smuggled goods, or he is craftily under-rating his house in order that he may avoid paying his just proportion of taxes, at another he is opposing some plan of instruction for the ignorant, or of necessary relief for the poor. He has been selfish, griping and avaricious on all occasions, and what he had saved or gained by oppression and fraud he has spent on his profligacy. He has got drunk with the money which he acquired by dishonesty, and he has paid for his debauchery at night by the sum which he has contrived in the morning to keep back from the poor. At the same time he has been turbulent, factious and complaining, always talking of what is amiss in others, and very sudden and severe in judging them, but very proud and confident of himself, disdaining even the smallest blame. Would you get into favor with him you must flatter him at every word: and you will please him best by doing it grossly and to his face, for he is quite used to praise; he has long lived among those who look up to him as their patron, or gape

at him as their principle wit, or glory in him as their chief songster, possibly has the chairman of their drinking club, and as their merry leader in debauchery.

To all these sins he adds that of being the decided enemy of every religious man. Is the gospel preached at is very door? He stands in the front rank of his enemies: He denies its efficacy, makes a joke of its doctrines, reviles its followers, and is the avowed hinderer of its progress. Christianity indeed is against him, and therefore it is no wonder that he is against Christianity. Hence it is that the religion of every man around him, however pure and excellent, if it is but zealous and fervent, is declared without distinction to be mere hypocrisy, enthusiasm, bigotry and cant.

But let us look a little also to the various consequences of this life of sin: here however we are again in danger of being lost in the vastness of the subject. Who can trace a thousandth part of the miseries which have arisen even from one single source, I mean from the levity and consideration which have made one leading feature in his character? Who can calculate the effects of all those evil principles which he has scattered at random, reaching even to distant places and generations? Who can calculate the mischief which he may have caused even in one of his light convivial hours? View the inscription on that grave stone which is now almost overgrown with thorns. Ah! 'tis the name of an old companion, an alehouse friend, who once was used to sing with him in one joyful chorus, *the praises of the flowing-bowl*, and who thus was encouraged in those habits of intemperance

which led to that untimely grave. Let us open one other source of no less painful reflection. Behold that miserable female, once the gay partner of his guilty pleasures, whom if he has not been the first to seduce, he has at least carried on and confirmed in a life of sin, and whom he has left afterwards to sink in want, to grow loathsome through disease, and to become a nuisance to the village or the town; he has helped to ruin but not to deliver her; he has soon left her to the tender mercies of some of her own sex as hardened as herself, among whom she has sunk, and groaned and died. Which way then, I say, shall this aged sinner turn his eyes? Every scene, every place, every month and day of his life which he can call back to remembrance reminds him of some sin. — Shall he look to some of his more reputable actions? Alas! even when his conduct has been most creditable, his motives have been unchristian and impure. *True, I have had some character,* he now says to himself, *but I have had no title to it. Men have not known me, or if a few have known me and yet praised me, they have praised me because they have wanted to carry some point of their own by pleasing me; nay, my companions have even praised me for what was evil, for the same people seem now methinks to blame me in proportion as they discern any thing in me that is good.* Thus the recollection of the applauses he used to receive from these wicked men is become one aggravation of his pain.

But shall he look to his more innocent and early years? Alas! the review of his infancy only serves to remind him how naturally and how soon he went astray; how soon he forsook the guide of his youth

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and forgot the covenant of his God, chusing a way of his own devising, a way which seemed right in his own eyes, but the end thereof, as he now sees, would have been destruction. Thus if he looks backward all is misery, and horror, and despair. Shall he then look forward and comfort himself by thinking how effectually he will repair all the evil he has done? But how shall he now repair it? Of those whom he has corrupted many are dead, and of the survivors very few can now be found. Go then and bring these few back to God! Alas! one will mock, another will dissemble, a third will despise. Go try to reclaim even the children of thine own loins, who are all trained through thy means in an evil course. Nay, even these also will scoff at thy rebuke, and say, *Our old father is grown troublesome and peevish through age, he is turned religious only because he has just done with this life, and has got one foot in the grave.*

What then, I say, can this aged sinner do to remedy the evils he has caused? he can only abhor himself for what is passed, and repent sincerely of all that he has done. See him then at length abhorring himself and *repenting in dust and ashes.* See him retiring to his chamber, and, for the first time, communing seriously with his own heart. See him reviewing the whole of his past life, from the first dawn of reason to the present hour, endeavouring to survey with exactness his thoughts, words and actions, and all his most secret practices, intentions, and inclinations. See him meditating also on his numberless omissions, taking the law of God for his rule, and beginning now, for the first time, to discover what manner of person he has

been: How does he stand amazed at his own former stupidity and blindness, and hardness of heart, and how astonished also at the patience of God which has so long born with him! And now his heart relents, the tears of penitential sorrow begin to flow, the lion is also changed into a lamb, and the same person who before might have been compared to the woman in the gospel, *out of whom there went seven devils*, or, to *Saul when breathing fury and slaughter*, may now be likened to the Magdalen weeping at the feet of Jesus, or to Paul trembling and astonished, and crying out as he lay on the ground, *Lord what woulds thou have me to do*; or to the same Paul when it was afterwards said of him *behold he prayeth*! With trembling limbs, and with a body worn down with age, behold then this repenting sinner walking to that public worship which he had so long neglected; with weak and failing eyes he opens the scripture; at the age of seventy he begins to enquire with child-like simplicity into the nature of the gospel; and knowing how short his time is, he makes haste to obey it. And now perhaps his old companions deride him, for as he once sneered at others who were religious, and called them all hypocrites, so he is now sneered at, and called a hypocrite in his turn: he becomes the scoff of the drunkards, and the merry jest of the profane; and they that *sit in the gate make songs of him*, Now also the very sins of his youth, which had been scarcely mentioned before, are brought forward by his former favorites and friends as present evidence against him; his crimes are even aggravated, and are all blazed abroad; but it is one proof of his sincerity, that even these cutting re-

proaches do not shake him from his purpose, nor induce him to turn back to his former companions. No; they may laugh; they may smile at what they call is pretended sanctity; but in truth he is no hypocrite. *The tear that drops upon his Bible is sincere.*

He is disposed to doubt indeed for a time his own sincerity, for his guilt is so great, and the blessings of the gospel including, as they do, the gift of eternal life, appear so large in his eyes, that he cannot at once raise his hopes so high. His sincerity is proved however by his proceeding to repair, as far as he has opportunity, each evil that he has done; by his mourning over what he cannot cure, and by the determination of his mind through the help of divine grace, to walk for the future in newness of life. In short, he feels that if his life were prolonged a thousand years, and youth and health were restored to him, he should chuse to spend his strength and the utmost length of his days in the service of the same master, and to be a laborer in the same vineyard.

But here methinks some objector rises up and says, *What then shall this man be accepted of God like him who has been moral and orderly all his days, or like the first person you mentioned?* We shall now answer this objection by proceeding with the parable.

The Jews are there represented as murmuring against the good man of the house, on account of his rewarding the more late and early laborers, the ancient Jews and the newly converted Gentiles, by giving each of them a penny, saying, *these last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal to us who have borne the whole burthen and heat of*

the day. But he answered one of them, and said, friend I do thee no wrong, didst thou not agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is and go thy way, I will give unto this last even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own? It was no injury to the Jews that the poor Gentiles were admitted, though at a later hour, into the church, and the Jews had therefore no right to complain, on the contrary they ought to have rejoiced at it. In like manner it can be no injury to those among us, who may have served Christ from our youth, that any poor out-cast should be admitted to the same christian privileges with ourselves, and we also ought to rejoice, as the angels of God are said to do over one sinner that repenteth. Again it may be remarked, that even the first calling of the Jews arose not from any superior merit in them, but from the sovereign goodness of God; and surely therefore it was most unreasonable in those people to complain of God's extending the same mercy to the Gentiles. Much in the same manner it may be remarked, in respect to the present day, that the salvation even of the best of men arises not from any merit of their own, but merely from God's free mercy in Christ, and surely therefore one pardoned sinner among us ought not to complain of the extension of the same pardon to another.

But the parable in the two last verses of it proceeds a step further, for it is there added by our Savior, *Is thine eye evil because mine is good?* which is as if he had said, *What do you take offence at my being so merciful? Does it provoke your envy to see a vile Gentile called at the eleventh hour, and made equal to yourselves who profess to have been the people*

of God from the beginning, and to have borne the whole burthen and heat of the day? Some very awful words are then added, wherein it is implied, that they who were ready to make this objection, brought their own religious character into suspicion, and that these very penitents of the eleventh hour, whom they now presumed to despise, should hereafter even take place above them, for it is said, *So the first shall be last and the last first, for many are called but few chosen.*

There are many persons who bear the christian name, and are called into Christ's visible church on earth, but it is only a few comparatively that are chosen, and shall enter into Heaven. Nay, it may be added, that many even of those who pass for regular Christians from their youth are no more than nominal disciples, while there are others who for a time make no pretence to religion, who at last acknowledge their wickedness and repent of it and are saved.

A certain man, said Christ, on another occasion, *had two sons, and he said to the first, son, go work to-day in my vineyard, and he said I go, sir; that is, he pretended to be one of the laborers in the vineyard from the very first, but he went not, he never went into it at all neither first nor last. And he said to the second likewise, and he answered, I go not, but afterwards he repented and went. Now which of these twain did the will of his father?* Reader, which of the two following persons think you is the true servant of Christ? he who thinks proper to call himself a Christian, is possibly thought such by those around him even from his birth, who has been regularly baptized, who also, like the Jews of

old, has attended stately on the ceremonies of religious worship, and perhaps has even like the Pharisees contrived to wash the outside clean, and to keep clear of gross immoralities, but is no true laborer, nevertheless, in the vineyard of Christ, who is not at all like the religious person whom we so fully described—or he who not even professing for a time any regard to Christ, heartily repents however either at the third, or sixth, or ninth, or eleventh hour, and then goes in the manner that was afterwards spoken of to labor in his vineyard? Which, I say, of these twain does the will of his father?

Many, saith our Savior, *that are first shall be last and the last first.* These words appear to be a prophecy of our Judge which relates to the great day of judgement. Then many a popular but irreligious character many a one who has been praised to the stars in this ignorant and misjudging world, and whose supposed virtues have both deceived himself, and dazzeled all arround him, shall sink at once into everlasting shame and disgrace, while many a poor despised, yet repenting sinner shall come forward and receive his crown of glory. Oh! what a wonderful change in many of the appearances which we now see shall we witness on the day of judgement! Let us not fail to remark that then also many a false though flaming professor of the gospel, many a vain, forward, and cenceited teacher, many a self-confident enthusiast, and many a narrow-minded and fiery bigot, who has spent his life in little else than in judging and condemning others, shall be brought forward in the face of the assembled world, and shall receive *his own* condemnation. Then also

many a diffident and trembling believer, and many a meek and lowly Christian, who has been laboring with little noise in some obscure corner of his Lord's vineyard, and on whom the bigots, not seeing him among their party, have presumptuously dealt damnation, shall take that prize which has been denied to those who set themselves up as judges over him, and shall be bid to enter into the joy of his Lord. *So the first shall be last, and the last first for many are called but few chosen.*



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