

On the whole, then, I do not think we need any longer regard the doom of the children of Bethel as a mysterious problem before which we can only stand perplexed and shocked, seeing no glimpse of meaning in it, no touch of mercy. Interpreted *thus*, it is no exceptional case; it falls into the same category with most of the judgments recorded in Holy Writ, and presents the same divine characteristic, "mercy rejoicing against" and over "judgment."

S. COX.

THE PARABLE OF
THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD.

ST. MATTHEW XX. 1-16.

I HAVE read with much interest Mr. Sanday's valuable exposition of this parable, which appeared in THE EXPOSITOR for February.¹ But many years ago I was led to adopt a somewhat different line of interpretation. I say "adopt," because I lay no claim to originality in the view which I propose to offer, a view, however, which differs from that of most of the Commentators. I propose to shew *that the time spent in labour represents the amount of labour; and that the amount of labour represents the amount of sacrifice.* This I take to be the key to the Parable.²

One thing is quite certain,—that the Parable is intended to illustrate the principle laid down in the

¹ Pages 81-101 of the present Volume.

² As Mr. Hill appears to me to have lit on a valuable expository thought, which many of us have overlooked, mainly, I believe, from its very simplicity and obviousness, I am happy to offer his brief Paper to the readers of THE EXPOSITOR, as a supplement to the still more valuable Essay of Mr. Sanday—with Mr. Sanday's entire concurrence. At the same time I doubt whether he, or any of us, have as yet found the sole and true key to the parable. Many keys are in our hands

last verse of the previous Chapter (St. Matt. xix. 30), viz., that "many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first." And the question for us to solve is, What do these words mean?

Now if we consider them in their connection with the preceding context, their meaning would seem to be this: That many who are first—that is, greatest—in the amount of worldly sacrifice they make for Christ's sake, will be the last—that is, the lowest—in the amount of reward they receive. Why? Simply because, not the amount only, but also the character, the quality, of the sacrifice has to be taken into account. In the Judgment, at the last day, the Lord will consider not only the outward works a man has done and the sacrifices he has made, but also the inward motives which have impelled him, the spirit by which he has been animated.

This I take to be the principle which the Parable was designed to illustrate. Let us see whether it does not spring naturally from the occurrence related in the previous Chapter and the conversation to which it gave rise. A rich young Ruler had gone sorrowfully away from the presence and service of Christ because, though he loved truth and righteousness and was set on life eternal, he could not bring himself to part with his great possessions. On which the Lord Jesus—beginning to make excuse for one who could make no excuse for him—

which give entrance to parts of the parable; but no such master-key, I think, as will open all its doors. For myself I know of none which lets us so far into it as this: *In the service of God our labour is its own best reward; so that those who have most of the work may well be content with least of the wage*: unless indeed our wage, or reward, be a larger and finer capacity for service; in that case we might well each of us seek to be the most ambitious soul alive.—ED.

self—sighed, and said to his amazed disciples, that it was very difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven, since it was very difficult for the rich not to trust in riches. Peter asked, “Behold, we have forsaken all and followed thee: what shall we have therefore?” And our Lord replied that Peter and his brethren should have a very high and special reward; and, further, that whosoever made any sacrifice for his sake should receive a hundredfold.

Now had our Lord stopped there, had He left this great saying without any qualification, it might have been fruitful in errors and evil consequences. He might have been understood to sanction the radical mistake that the Divine Judgment will turn on mere outward acts, and not on the inward disposition and motive which prompted them. A hireling spirit might have been engendered. Men might have deemed that the rewards of the future were to be bought—so much sacrifice, so much reward; and that God would not regard the motives from which their works were done. Whereas St. Paul assures us that, even though we should bestow all our goods upon the poor and give our bodies to be burned, it will profit us nothing, if we have not charity. In his wisdom, therefore, our Lord added to his promise of reward the grave caution, “*But* many that are first shall be last, and the last first:” that is to say, many who have made the largest sacrifices, and on that account stand first and foremost in the eyes of men, will receive the lesser reward and stand lowest in the estimation of God. Why? Because the Righteous and Omniscient Judge will have respect to the whole character of men, and not

merely to the overt acts in which that character is but partially and imperfectly expressed.

Having laid down this principle, the Lord Jesus proceeds to illustrate it by a Parable. The Parable marks diversity of character in the Labourers called to work in the Vineyard. The first-called *made a bargain* with the Householder; they would not go in till their wages were fixed. They may have been skilful and industrious workmen; but they were lacking in inward quality, deficient in character; they were wanting in generosity and trustfulness, and would not stir a step till the bargain was struck. The other Labourers were men of a different stamp: *they* made no bargain; with native and simple generosity they committed themselves to the promise of the Householder, "Go ye into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you." They relied on the justice and honour of their Employer, and so shewed that they themselves were not destitute of honour and justice. Accordingly, they were remunerated, not in exact proportion to their actual work, but rather in the measure of the character they had displayed. For although all the Labourers received the same sum, they were nevertheless—nay, therefore—very differently paid, since they were engaged at different hours of the day. In point of fact those who had done the most work got the least pay, while those who had done the least work got the most pay. These last, therefore, stood first in the estimation of the Householder; and that, apparently, because of the less mercenary, the more generous and trustful, spirit they had shewn.

If, then, in interpreting the Parable, we take the

time spent in labour as standing for the amount of labour, and the amount of labour as standing for the sacrifices which a man makes in order that he may serve Christ, we shall find that it most clearly and admirably illustrates the principle laid down in Chapter xix. verse 30, viz., that many who have left much, made many sacrifices, for Christ's sake and the Gospel's may receive the lower reward, whilst many who have left little, and made but few sacrifices, may receive the greater reward. And it was of grave moment that this principle should be clearly and emphatically set forth. Peter had just said, "Behold, we have forsaken all to follow thee: what shall we get for it?" as if the measure of the final reward were to be determined solely by the quantity of toil and sacrifice. To warn him against that error, to warn us through him, our Lord shews that men are not to be rewarded solely according to their outward acts of service, that the quality of their spirit and motives is to be taken into account no less than the quantity or amount of their service.

And mark how important it is that this principle should be recognized. Otherwise, what hope would there be for the poor, for those who have little or nothing that they can give up—not even a boat and nets? Were it in their power, they might be as ready as any to part with wealth or worldly goods. But though that is not in their power, it is in their power to shew, like the later-called Labourers, a more generous confidence in the Master, a more loving faith. To them, therefore,—that is, to the vast majority of men—this Parable is full of welcome instruction and consolation. On the other hand,

if this principle were not recognized, rich men might be led to think that heaven was to be purchased. The amount of their alms-deeds, their gifts, and sacrifices would engross their attention; the formation of a noble and refined character would be neglected, the possession of it count for little: and thus a fanatical spirit of voluntary poverty would be engendered which, while it has a show of piety, tends in reality to self-righteousness and spiritual pride.

There are many humble and generous, pure and loving, servants of Christ in high station and possessed of great wealth, who rightly continue to hold their station and both to use and to enjoy their wealth to the end of their days. They have received no command to give them up: in the secrecy of their own spirit they may have received the command to serve Christ, not by abandoning them, but by using them for Him and enjoying them as his gift. And these, too, are assured by this Parable that they shall in nowise lose their reward. To use our gifts and possessions for Christ is far harder than to give them up to Him, whether our gifts be many or few, whether our possessions be small or great. Those who do thus use them may seem to the world, and, alas, even to the Church, to be "standing idle"—to be immeasurably inferior to those who give much and renounce much. Nevertheless they may be shewing a simpler faith, a nobler integrity, a warmer love, a more disinterested and arduous devotion to their Master; and so, though counted last and least by men, they may stand among the first and foremost when Christ shall come to be glorified in his saints and to be admired in all them that believe on Him.