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THE NEW SHOFAR

When a man's pride is subdued it's like the sides of Mount Aetna. It was terrible during the eruption, but when that is over and the lava is turned into soil, there are vineyards and olive trees which grow up to the top.

You go into the vineyard, too, and I will give you what is just.

Jesus' insistence on the paradox *but many that are first will be last, and the last first* (**19:30**) shows the inseparability between the theme of discipleship and that of the Kingdom. "Discipleship" is not an alternative vocation within the general Christian calling. Rather, ***all*** are called to the Kingdom, ***and*** discipleship is the way we find ourselves caught up in Kingdom living and the way we remain within it.

We are disciples or we are not of the kingdom

The believer becomes a disciple or is constituted as a disciple by the very act of believing, since faith at its root is nothing other than (1) the human response, (2) prompted by grace, (3) to the call of God in Christ. Although discipleship may be lived in widely differing ways and growth in discipleship is a never-ending affair, every person without exception is called to be a disciple of Jesus, and the Kingdom belongs to none but his disciples.

The nature, growth, and consummation of the Kingdom of God are clearly the central concern of Jesus' preaching in the Gospel of Matthew. Great is the love of this "householder" for his vineyard. The text calls the man the "***master of the house***", thus associating the central character in the parable with the image of God as Lord of the household of the Church and of the cosmos itself. Indeed, the whole of creation is God's personal domain over which he exercises authority by rights of both ownership and love. Isaiah exclaimed that "*the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his cherished plant"* (Is 5:7), and this strong image of God's preferential love and care for his people surely forms the background for Jesus' parable.

Jesus is the ***always going out*** kind of God

The word "vineyard" occurs no less than five times in the first eight verses, as if it were the landowner's obsessive and exclusive concern. His passion for his vineyard emerges in an ironical way. Even though the master of the vineyard is represented as being fully in control of the situation and as making all the decisions about hiring and determining wage rates, he is also the character in the parable who does the most work!

Five times the text refers to the owner of the vineyard as "going out" to search for workers. He "goes out" at the first, third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours of the day. He exhausts himself in making sure that no person who is looking for work will be excluded from the enterprise of his vineyard and, therefore, from a relationship with himself as its owner.

This passion not to overlook anyone *searching for work* is so all-determining that, from a realistic viewpoint, we could well question his judgment as a businessman. By the time we reach the end of the parable, we are forced to ask with some puzzlement what exactly is the central concern of this "householder".

The situation is an odd one, indeed, because we have before us a man who not only takes a vital interest at once in the interior life of his employees but who actually seems to "go out"

in the first place using his vineyard and its needs as an alibi or even a set-up to provoke a crisis in the spiritual perceptions of these anonymous men hanging around the marketplace. He is even eager to *lose money* to teach a spiritual lesson.

Who is this man?

Who is this man who so exerts himself? A major clue is to be found in this word ***to go out***. The verb plays an especially crucial role in the Gospel of John, where it often refers to the Lord's Incarnation. Becoming man as Jesus of Nazareth, Christ leaves his place with God in Heaven and says of himself to his apostles: "*The Father himself loves you, because you have loved me, and have believed that I* ***came forth*** *from the Father*. Again we read: "*Knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had* ***come forth from*** *God, and was going back to God, [Jesus] rose from supper and laid aside his garments; and taking a towel, he girded himself about*".

Such passages from John reveal for us a parable only superficially having to do with a transaction between landowner and hired workers. In particular, John's use of the verb ***to go out*** reveals the landowner's intention in searching for workers: he is Christ, who has come forth into our world from the realm of eternal glory with the Father in order to involve as many of us as possible in the great ministry of redemption through offering service in the Kingdom. And Christ does not only "engage" us as workers. Before all else he comes out in search of our hearts, to transform them by joining them with his own. He is seeking not to be lord over others, but rather to involve them in the hard task that is primarily his own.

Jesus becomes the servant of each and concerns himself vitally with the destiny of each precisely because he knows that "*the Father had given all things into his hands."* Only Jesus' intention as one on a mission of universal salvation explains the oddity of the landowner's immediate and persistent attention to each worker's *interior* disposition. *The incarnate Word and the landowner are one and the same, and this identity will be corroborated by several other aspects of the parable*. In this context, let us not forget that home maker, the original word designating the owner of the vineyard, means "*master of the house*" and obviously applies both literally to the protagonist of the parable and allegorically to the eternal Word as Lord of the "household" of the universe.

The last thing he has been discussing with his disciples just before telling them this parable is his own coming in glory at the end of time, when he will enthrone with himself in his Kingdom all those who have left all things to follow him. And so, the parable serves the purpose of further specifying conditions for discipleship laid down by Jesus-Wisdom. He first thrills the disciples by making them an extraordinary promise that only a divine king could make and keep; but then, holding out a new challenge beyond that of total renunciation, he immediately broaches a problematic subject: absolute equality within the Kingdom, reflecting the absolute freedom and goodness of its King to dispose all things as he sees fit. Given the die-hard competitiveness of the human ego, and the calculating nature of our ungenerous sense of "justice", Jesus' teaching here is sure to stir up discomfort and resentment in his listeners.