

Blaming the Victims
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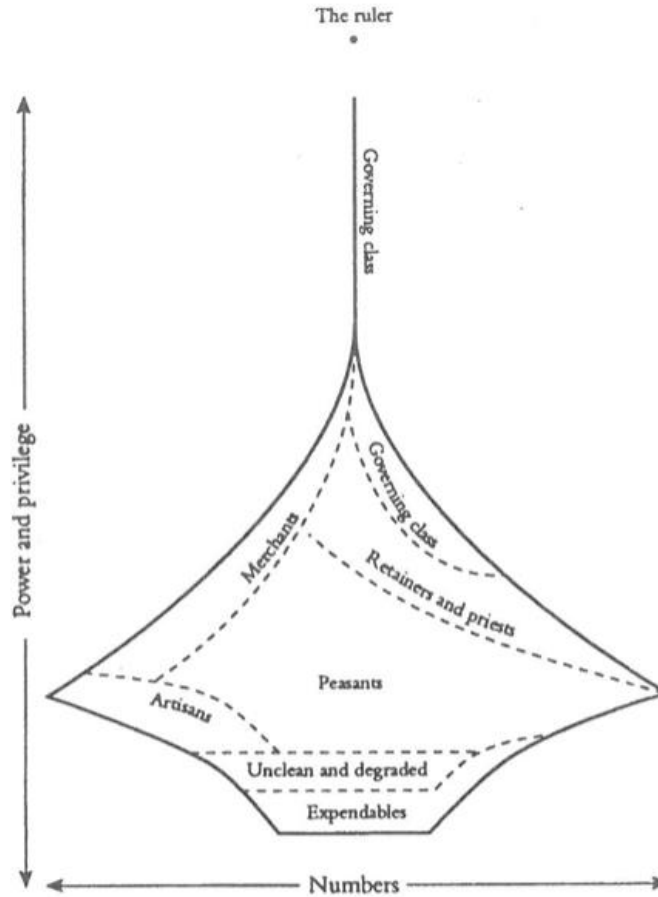


Fig. 1. A graphic representation of the relationship among classes in agrarian societies. From Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 284, Fig. 1. Used with the permission of Gerhard Lenski.

From Wm. R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, (Westminster/John Knox, 1994)

Ancient
Matthew 20:1-

Witness:
15

Jesus used parables as his main way to teach. And the thing about parables is that there is no one right interpretation. They defy any simple understanding. One could say that there are many different ways to view the same parable. Like a Zen koan, parables are meant to have the listeners ponder and wrestle to find wisdom within themselves.

Today's parable has a traditional interpretation that goes something like this: The Householder is a figure that represents God. The vineyard represents the church. The workers that were hired first represent those who were with Jesus from the beginning. Those who were hired later represent recent converts. In this interpretation, the parable is about God's grace; salvation is generously given to all who accept the invitation to the vineyard. It cannot be earned. It doesn't matter if one works all day or doesn't work at all. The "payment" is the same for all, and it comes from God unconditionally.

This is called an allegorical interpretation, and it's a perfectly fine interpretation where the parable corresponds to things that are heavenly, to theological truths. However, I think that there are other ways of looking at this parable.

First, it is important to try to understand the world in which Jesus, the peasant prophet, spoke his parables. It's important to understand the roles that people played at that time. Jesus lived in a highly stratified society. If you look at the cover of the bulletin, you will see a graphic that shows the huge concentration of power and privilege and the enormous gap between the rich and the poor. So in the parable we have:

First, the householder. This man belonged to the wealthy, elite landowner class, in the upper part of the graph.

In the parable he had a steward, which means that he had substantial holdings and many employees. A steward's job was to oversee other servants and slaves. His crop was a vineyard, which initially takes over four years to bear fruit and return money. Therefore, he needed a lot of resources to make this kind of capital investment. The vineyard is also a cash crop, yielding a luxury product, wine. Whenever it was possible, landowners acquired more and more land by foreclosing on loans of peasant farmers, and they converted them to vineyards when they once were planted with crops for mixed grains.

By the way, the continual displacement of peasant farmers from their land and the growing cash crops such as coffee, bananas, and cotton to the exclusion of everything else is often cited as a major cause of world hunger today.

Now, it appears that the landowner bargains with the first group of workers, but it is essentially a "take it or leave it" deal. A denarius is what I'll pay, he says. On the other trips to the marketplace, he simply orders them saying, I'll pay you whatever is right. You can hear the landowner's contempt toward the workers when he addresses them: Why are you standing here idle all day? Why aren't you working? Why are you so lazy?

Now, let's pause a minute and ask why were all these people standing and waiting for work in the marketplace? There appears to be great unemployment. And because there was a great unemployment, the workers had very low bargaining power. It is not surprising then that they would simply go and work with no agreement on what the wages would be. And the landowners wanted it that way, too. In fact, it was the common strategy of Roman landowners to hire workers only for a day at a time to keep them in the weakest possible position. William Herzog, in his book, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, wrote,

Far from being generous, then, the householder is taking advantage of an unemployed work force to meet his harvesting needs by offering them work without a wage agreement. (p. 86)

And what of these day laborers? These are people whose hunger has driven them to the countryside at harvest time. They are the class which has been termed “the expendables.” (See the bottom of the graphic) Since slaves were seen as an investment, they were treated with more care than the expendables. These people, to use Thomas Hobbes’ famous phrase, were for whom life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”

They were largely composed of the excess children of peasants who could afford to pass on their inheritance to only one child, typically the eldest male. Their holdings were too meager to support more. Some of these people were also former free peasants who were forced from their land. So the best they could hope for was work in the fields at planting and harvest times and charity in between. Sometimes they saw their best option as joining outlaw bands, where they could survive for a time before they were hunted down. People, once they fell into the expendable class, usually lived about 5 to 7 years and were forced to beg on the streets before dying of malnutrition.

This social structure reminds me of a book by Adam Hokesfield called, *King Leopold’s Ghost* (1998). It is about how King Leopold II of Belgium acquired what became to known as the Congo. And much like earlier agrarian societies, he squeezed out as much wealth—in the form of ivory and rubber—as he possibly could at the end of the 19th century.

The workers were barely kept at a subsistence level. It was a delicate balance: too much and the people would die or become useless, too little and he wasn’t maximizing the extraction of wealth. It is estimated that in 20 years 10 million people died under this regime that brought “civilization” and “Christianity.” Often women were held hostage until the men harvested their quota of rubber. To maintain order, sometimes whole villages were killed. There was a practice of the soldiers having to present a severed hand for each rifle cartridge that they shot, so as not to waste bullets.

A young shipping supervisor, Edmund Morrell, noticed that the ships were coming into Antwerp laden with goods, but leaving empty, except some ammunition. He quit his job, and became the greatest British investigative journalist, and organized a human rights campaign. This heartless extraction of wealth by a tiny elite class was the kind of world in which Jesus lived.

There is also the question of the denarius. It has been said that it was the usual day’s wage. This is even written into some of our Bible translations. But was it generous? Several people have written that a denarius was no better than a subsistence wage. It was barely enough to live on for one day. But this would not sustain life because a day laborer worked so infrequently.

And so the day laborers who were hired first complain because they have been shamed. They had “borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat,” it says. But the owner makes them wait while all the others get paid, and then they receive the same wages as those who worked

much less. The owner humiliates them and degrades the value of their daylong effort. So they complain.

The owner denies the charge and picks out their leader and makes an example of him. He said, “Friend, did you not agree to work for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go.” Again we can hear the landowner’s words drip with sarcasm and contempt. So this worker is publicly banned, blackballed. This is a fatal dismissal. What we see is blaming the victim. William Ryan describes this age-old practice:

First, identify a social problem. Second, study those affected by the problem and discover in what ways they are different from the rest of us as a consequence of deprivation and injustice. Third, define the differences as the cause of the social problem itself. (Blaming the Victim, p. 8-9)

This was done to the Native Americans on a massive scale. They were viewed as unintelligent savages who needed to be tamed. And to the African slaves. Also, today we have the scandal of poverty in the wealthiest nation in the world and what dominates our discussion are generalizations of welfare cheating, fraud and dependency. Blame the victims.

The owner then says, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” By the way, this statement would be viewed as blasphemy by those committed to the Torah tradition which says that *God* is the owner, and God gives the land to the people. In fact, the land was to be redistributed every jubilee year and debt canceled every sabbatical year for this reason.

The owner tries to justify his behavior. There are all kinds of justifications. Some of the neo-liberal, free market, laissez-faire economists that I’ve read and spoken to actually say that oppressive, sweatshop labor is doing the people a good thing since it is part of “economic development.”

And years ago, when protestors of the World Trade Organization asked for human provisions for workers to be included into trade agreements, we were opposed by global corporations and their local, puppet elites. There are all kinds of justifications.

In this alternative interpretation of the parable, the hero of the story is the *day laborer* who had the courage to stand up to the landowner. Again, Herzog wrote,

Jesus arranged their meeting at one of the few moments in the economic cycle in which the elites were dependent on the lowliest of laborers. To ensure a timely harvest, the landowner needed their labor. Yet the lack of cohesion so evident among day laborers allowed the landowner to conquer them by dividing them. This is why the owner spoke only to “one of them.” The banishment of that one served to intimidate the others and put them in their place. (p. 95)

And so if Jesus meant the parable this way, if this interpretation is correct, what effect would it have had on the hearers? Well, the primary purpose would be not to communicate some heavenly truth, but to unmask the oppression that exists in *this* world. The parable invites its

hearers to see the problems of our worldly situation and to think about them and discuss them. How would this unjust situation change if God's kingdom were to come on earth? Likewise, how would our situation, our world, need to change? And isn't this, after all, Jesus' prayer, that we help bring God's kingdom of justice and fairness on earth?