

INCOME INEQUALITY

We've been hearing a lot these days about income inequality, and how the rich should be taxed more heavily so that the poor can have more. So it was with interest that I read my Scripture passage for the day, Matthew 20, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. My intent is not to make a political statement, but only to record my observations (which obviously are colored by my political bent) from the parable.

The story goes like this: A vineyard owner went out early in the morning to hire workers, agreeing to pay them a denarius for their day's work. A little later, he hired more workers and still later he hired yet more. Finally, an hour before quitting time he went to the square and found some men still loitering there, so he hired them as well. When the day was over, he instructed his foreman to pay each man a denarius, beginning with those who were hired last. Understandably, when those who were hired first received the same wage, they were upset at being made equal to the others.

In the past I viewed this parable as dealing only with salvation and time. The very last soul to receive Christ before the judgment will receive the same forgiveness, imputed righteousness, and place in heaven as the first. In chapter 19 we see Peter responding somewhat pridefully to Jesus' statement that it is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Peter says, in effect, "We gave up everything to follow You. What's in it for us?" After assuring Peter that he will receive back much more than he gave up, Jesus presents this parable.

My first observation is that everyone who received a denarius worked. The vineyard owner did not just take his money to the square and hand it out to people who were standing around. Second, if the vineyard owner had not had unequal income, compared to the workers, he would not have had the resources to hire anyone, let alone more and more people throughout the day. And third, he paid them out of his own money, not money he'd taken from others. Some might argue that he probably overcharged for his produce, thus oppressing his customers, but no one was compelled to buy from him. It is clear that the parable portrays God as the land owner, so I would be reluctant to impute any injustice to him. And finally, in answering the grumbling workers, the vineyard owner says, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?" (V.15). Personally I find the principle of private property rights more convincing than the argument for income equality.

While it is true that we are commanded multiple times in Scripture to care for the poor, a friend recently pointed out that nowhere does the Scripture command us to eradicate poverty. On the contrary, Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you and you can help them any time you want" (Mark 14:7). The call is for each of us to use our personal resources to meet the needs within our personal sphere of influence (and beyond), to the best of our ability. We are also called to "be imitators of God" (Eph. 5:1) who, as this parable demonstrates, is extravagantly generous. I hope to follow Him in this way.