

The Grapes of Irritation

Richard Alderman of the University of Houston Law Center writes a syndicated legal advice column. A man wrote in recently and complained that he was the only one of four co-workers who braved an ice storm to show up for work, but that management had decided to pay his colleagues for the lost time. The quartet manages an apartment complex and this hero battled the blizzard to insure that the residents survived. He felt he should at least be given a day off with pay as compensation. The brass replied that a warm feeling of self-approval would have to do. Alderman told him he has no case. "It may not be what I consider fair, but as long as an employer does not illegally discriminate . . . he can do whatever he wants."

Jesus told a similar story in Matthew 20. Peter had just finished a spot of collective bargaining on behalf of the Disciples Union and it appears the Lord wanted to make clear the kind of currency that Kingdom work pays. Seems this crazy farmer had been sniffing his own pesticide and decided to give all his hands the same wage regardless of when they clocked in. In language that echoes Alderman's, the patron declares, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I want with my own?"

The real shock in this story should not be that the jefe overpaid someone, but that he fully paid anyone. Migrant workers, then as now, tended to be shorted, stiffed, or stalled. Levitical law designated the Lord as negotiator in the hired hand's collective bargaining (Lev 19.13, Deut 24.14-15) but the problem persisted right up to the captivity (Jer 22.13) and on through the end of the Old Testament (Mal 3.5).

Things haven't gotten all that much better. A few years back, Wall Street Journal reporter Michael Ybarra wrote of the "wino crews" of the deep South, gangs of junkies scooped off the streets and kept strung-out enough to work without being able to demand their pay. Around the same time, the Journal reported that farm laborers in Israel were mostly Arabs who milled about local "slave markets" hoping to be hired on by the day.

Jesus' yarn invites the question whether God owes us anything for work not particularly well-done, or whether anything in the way of "wages" should not be seen as simply the startling coinage of grace. Ultimately, relationship is the currency of the Kingdom, a payoff with no exchange rate in the banknotes of worldly wealth. The loyal apartment manager in Texas received the reward of caring for his clients, of being a hero instead of a hireling, a shepherd instead of a schlep. The daylight-to-dusk men in Matthew 20 had twelve hours to synchronize their souls to the heartbeat of a Godly man. Long after their minimum wage was maxim spent, that Christ-capital would continue generating interest.

Today, as we slog the sleet-sodden streets of seemingly thankless ministry, may we remember that for citizens of the Kingdom everyday is payday because we work for a reward that resides in the work itself, and in increasing closeness and conformity to the One with whom and through whom we find the strength to serve.

Clocking In,
Doug