The Mystery of Divine Predilection and the Preferential Option for the Poor in Matthew 20:1–16

Joenel B. Buencibello

Abstract: This study explores the theological convergence between St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of divine predilection and Liberation Theology's preferential option for the poor in Matthew 20:1–16. Through a comparative analysis, it examines how these seemingly divergent traditions, one rooted in scholastic metaphysics and the other in historical praxis, can be harmonized to illuminate the mystery of divine generosity and justice. The parable of the workers in the vineyard serves as a theological bridge, revealing a God who acts freely and lovingly, beyond human calculations of merit. Drawing from the *Summa Theologiae,* Church Fathers, and modern biblical scholarship, the paper argues that divine predilection and preferential love for the poor are not contradictory but complementary expressions of God. This synthesis offers a renewed understanding of divine love that is both metaphysical and historical, transcendent and immanent, and invites a deeper engagement with Scripture in the context of contemporary poverty and injustice.

Keywords: Divine Predilection • Liberation Theology • Matthew 20:1–16 • Preferential Option for the Poor • Scholastic Theology • *Summa Theologiae*

Introduction

God provides equal attention to all individuals,[1] not due to an equal distribution of blessings, but rather because God manages all aspects of existence with equal intelligence and benevolence.[2] Following that same intelligence and benevolence, God can distribute blessings

I dedicate this article to all the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), Missionary Sisters of Mary (MSM), and Notre Dame de Sion (NDS) sisters in the Philippines and around the world.

[1] Wisdom 6:8.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 20, a. 3.

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unequally. This claim will be clarified through a study of the *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* (Mt. 20:1–16) via the theological and philosophical perspectives of St. Thomas Aquinas' mystery of *predilection* and liberation theology's *preferential option for the poor*.

The parable describes the Kingdom of Heaven as follows:

> For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now, when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last. (Matthew 20:1-16; NRSV Catholic Edition)

Matthew 20:1–16 has generated diverse interpretations of justice, merit, and the nature of the kingdom of heaven. This study is undertaken to clarify the seemingly polarized understanding of the Love of God, whether conceived primarily as immanent, manifesting in historical solidarity with the poor, or as transcendent, rooted in metaphysical divine predilection. The parable is employed not primarily as exegetical evidence, but as an illustrative example of the emergence of God's glory and mercy, revealing both the immanence and transcendence of divine love through the willful and free act of loving the poor.

Gaining insight into the divine manifestation of preferential love is a means to appreciate God, not through attributing human characteristics to the divine, but by recognizing and valuing God's fundamental nature—love. It seeks to shed light on an anthropological conundrum regarding the comprehension of God's benevolence and compassion within the framework of the contrasting lived experiences of the wealthy and the impoverished.

Methodology

Through a comparative theological analysis, this study looks at how the scholastic theology of divine predilection and liberation theology's preferential option for the poor harmonize together and serve as hermeneutic lenses to making sense of Matthew 20:1-16. However, it is recognizable that there are areas in Thomistic theology and liberation theology that can be identified as unique and may not actually share the same appreciation of realities.[3] Nevertheless, the intersection

[3] For example, the *Summa* says that the public authority may lawfully execute criminals if their continued life is dangerous to the community. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 64, a.

of these two theological schools of thought centers on Sacred Scripture. Both the *Summa* and liberation theology have the Sacred Scriptures as their wellspring of meaning and object of interpretation.

It is undeniable that, although they articulate some aspects of faith such as God's transcendence (ontological) in Thomistic theology and God's immanence (historical) in liberation theology, they both share the same faith expressions found in Tradition and Sacred Scriptures. To clarify this argument, liberation theology has often been affirmed as an orthodox theology rooted in the orthopraxis of the Church,[4] however, it is important to recognize that the Magisterium has raised the issue of differences between the various strands of liberation theologies.[5] Certain expressions, influenced by Marxist analysis and class struggle, were critiqued in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Libertatis*

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2. On the contrary, liberation theology is generally opposed to the death penalty due to its commitment to critique of structural violence and solidarity with victims. See Vincent W. Lloyd, "Political Theology of Abolitionism: Beyond the Death Penalty," *Political Theology* 19, no. 2 (2018): 120-136, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2018.1440161.

[4] Segundo Galilea rightly affirms that liberation theology is "an orthodox theology whose critical reflection rests on the orthopraxis of the Church and of Christians." Yet this affirmation must be nuanced. Kindly refer to Segundo Galilea, "The Theology of Liberation, A General Survey," in *Liberation Theology and the Vatican Document*, ed. Alberto Rossa (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1984), 36.

[5] The Church's Magisterium, particularly through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *Libertatis nuntius* (1984) and *Libertatis conscientia* (1986), [see complete citation in proceeding footnotes] distinguished between two strands of liberation theologies. One strand, represented by figures such as Ernesto Cardenal, Hugo Assmann, and partially Jon Sobrino, incorporated elements of Marxist analysis, class struggle, and even revolutionary violence.

nuntius[6] and *Libertatis conscientia*,[7] as they show tendencies that allegedly risked orthodoxy.[8]

By contrast, the strand that evolved into the

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[6] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation" (Libertatis nuntius)*, August 6, 1984, Vatican, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html

[7] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation (Libertatis conscientia)*, March 22, 1986, Vatican, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html

[8] In his work *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 4 vols. (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1975–1977), Ernesto Cardenal made Gospel reflections with Nicaraguan peasants, explicitly linking Christian faith to revolutionary struggle. He even made *In Cuba* (New York: New Directions, 1972), a sympathetic account of Cuba's socialist revolution, blending Christian and Marxist ideals. Additionally, Hugo Assmann frames theology as inseparable from revolutionary praxis, heavily influenced by Marxist analysis. See *Teología desde la praxis de liberación* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1973). And the early articulation of liberation theology, emphasizing class struggle and structural critique of capitalism is found in *Teología de la liberación* (Montevideo: Centro de Documentación, 1970). Furthermore, Jon Sobrino's works, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978) and *Jesús el Liberador: Lectura histórico-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1991) were also partially criticized by the Vatican by presenting Christology in dialogue with Latin American revolutionary context that emphasized Jesus as liberator of the oppressed, for downplaying Christ's divinity. However, in the later part of this article, I will be utilizing his work entitled, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), to discuss God (as Love) and his work (loving) in action as embodied by the Heart of Christ who loved with a human heart. The human Jesus, himself poor and belonging to the marginalized sector of his time (cf. Luke 4:18; Philippians 2:7), offers a concrete and exemplary model in which divine predilection and the preferential option for the poor converge into a unified reality, embodied in the lived experience of the oppressed.

"Theology of the People," represented by Lucio Gera,[9] Juan Carlos Scannone,[10] and Pope Francis,[11] was affirmed as orthodox and continues to inspire a path of holiness through solidarity with the poor.[12] This theological project follows this particular line of tradition.

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[9] Lucio Gera, an Argentine Catholic priest and theologian, in his work, *La teología de la liberación y la teología del pueblo* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Criterio, 1973), emphasized the "pueblo" (people) as the locus of God's action, highlighting culture, faith, and history rather than Marxist class struggle. His writings shaped the Argentine strand of liberation theology. And in *El pueblo de Dios y la historia* (1970s, collected essays), Gera insists that liberation must be rooted in ecclesial life and tradition.

[10] Juan Carlos Scannone, a Jesuit priest and Argentine theologian, in *Evangelización, cultura y teología* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Guadalupe, 1990), examines the relationship between evangelization and culture, grounding liberation theology in pastoral praxis. Furthermore, in *La teología del pueblo: Raíces teológicas del Papa Francisco* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sal Terrae, 2014), Scannone systematizes the Theology of the People, showing how it influenced Pope Francis. He stresses inculturation, solidarity, and holiness rather than ideological struggle.

[11] Pope Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio), in *Evangelii gaudium* (Apostolic Exhortation, 2013), outlines the Church's mission of joy-filled evangelization, with strong emphasis on the poor, social justice, and mercy. Seen as the mature fruit of Theology of the People. And in *Fratelli tutti* (Encyclical, 2020), he develops themes of fraternity, solidarity, and social friendship, continuing the trajectory of liberation theology in a pastoral key.

[12] This strand is fully orthodox, deeply rooted in Tradition, and offers a path to holiness by emphasizing God's preferential love for the poor in a way that harmonizes with the Church's teaching. The *Teología del Pueblo* (Theology of the People) is an Argentine strand of Liberation Theology that emphasizes the faith, culture, and lived experience of ordinary people as the privileged place where God acts. It roots liberation in popular religiosity, solidarity, and pastoral praxis.

Status Quaestionis

Can the scholastic theology of Divine Predilection be used alongside Liberation Theology's preferential option for the poor to better understand Matthew 20:1-16 in relation to our context today?

On Scholastic and Liberation Theology

The stereotyping of theological disciplines into rigid categories, perceived as irreconcilable with contemporary ones, often plagues scholastic theology. The *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, is frequently dismissed as an outdated and overly theocentric resource, detached from human suffering and incapable of providing a critical framework for addressing social miseries.[13] On the other hand, liberation theology is stereotypically reduced to an anthropocentric option for the poor, grounded in a low Christology that risks postponing the recognition of Christ's divinity in favor of a politicized Jesus. These stereotypes foster the assumption that scholastic theology, with its supposedly apolitical orientation, and liberation theology, with its radically political stance, exist in absolute methodological opposition.[14]

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[13] Michael J. Dodds, "Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering, and the Unchanging God of Love," *Theological Studies* 52, no. 2 (1991): 330–44; Michael J. DeValve, "A Theory of Suffering and Healing: Toward a Loving Justice," *Critical Criminology* 31 (2023): 35–60, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-022-09667-4; Also in Marika Rose, "The Body and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*," *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1053 (September 2013; online 2024): 540–551, https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12016.

[14] The intellectual articulation of faith was a pastoral demand in St. Thomas Aquinas' time. See in Bernard McGinn, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Biography* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 7-9, 16-17. On the other hand, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff said, *"Liberation theology was born when faith*

The persistence of such dichotomization into theocentrism and anthropocentrism raises the question of whether these stances are methodological absolutes. Is it not possible, however, to place scholastic theology and liberation theology in dialogue in order to maximize their respective strengths for interpreting the faith, especially the Sacred Scripture's testimonies/narratives, and to allow the Word of God to speak meaningfully in today's context of poverty and injustice? This theological inquiry aims to investigate how the resources of the *Summa Theologiae* and liberation theology can be integrated to enhance our understanding of both God and humanity in relation to love, specifically focusing on divine predilection and the preferential option for the poor as experienced in the lived realities.

On theological appropriations of divine predilection and preferential option arguments

The *preferential option for the poor* emerged in Latin American liberation theology throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, as theologians sought to articulate God's concern for the impoverished as fundamental to the Christian faith. Gustavo Gutiérrez articulated the concept as a theological commitment grounded in Scripture and in Jesus' ministry: God's saving love is revealed through solidarity with the marginalized, making the option for the poor an essential dimension of discipleship, not a sociological add-on.[15]

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confronted the injustice done to the poor." Read Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* trans. Paul Burns (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1987), 3. Here we can sense the polarity of the two theological school of thought.

[15] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2009).

The idea was officially accepted by the Latin American bishops at Medellín in 1968, and Puebla in 1979, and it was slowly added to Catholic social doctrine. Later writers, such as Daniel G. Groody and Charles M. A. Clark, expanded its implications for global justice, development policy, and economics.[16] Recent research, notably Stephen J. McKinney's investigations into Catholic education, use the choice as a framework for institutional practice and ethical contemplation.[17] Modern study has expanded the notion to encompass globalization, ecology, and decolonial issues, while preserving its theological essence: an imperative to perceive the world through the lens of the impoverished. The preferential option for the poor thus continues to act as both a theological concept and a moral necessity defining Christian ethics and social involvement.

The relative absence of academic studies connecting St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of divine predilection with Liberation Theology can be attributed to several theological and methodological factors. First, the two traditions begin from different starting points. Aquinas' discussion of divine predilection is rooted in scholastic metaphysics, emphasizing God's eternal will and causality. For Aquinas, God's love is the cause of all goodness in creatures; God loves some more than others not because of merit, but because love itself gives being

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[16] Daniel G. Groody, ed., *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Charles M. A. Clark, "Development Policy and the Poor, Part 2: Preferential Option for the Poor," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 80, no. 4 (2021): 1131–1154, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12425.

[17] Stephen J. McKinney, "Applied Catholic Social Teaching: Preferential Option for the Poor and Catholic Schools," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 23, no. 1 (2023): 31–47. https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/290919/1/290919.pdf.

and grace.[18] Liberation Theology, on the other hand, arises from historical praxis and a concern for social justice, focusing on God's preferential option for the poor as a concrete expression of divine love in history.[19] Consequently, while Aquinas' notion of divine predilection is ontological and eternal, Liberation Theology's emphasis is historical and socio-ethical, creating a conceptual gap between metaphysical causality and historical liberation.

Furthermore, the historical development and disciplinary separation of Thomism and Liberation Theology have contributed to this divide. Neo-Thomism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was often associated with ecclesial authority and speculative theology, while Liberation Theology emerged as a movement of critique against social and institutional injustice within both Church and society.[20] Because of this, liberation theologians rarely engaged Aquinas directly, preferring sources from Scripture, critical theory, and social analysis over scholastic metaphysics. When Aquinas is referenced, it is typically in relation to ethics, creation, or grace, rather than divine predilection. The doctrine's speculative character makes it less immediately useful for the praxis-oriented concerns of Liberation Theology.

Recent theologians such as Levering and Torrell suggest that Aquinas' understanding of divine love could still offer valuable insights for liberationist thought. Aquinas' teaching that God's love actively brings creatures into participation with divine goodness could serve as a metaphysical foundation for the Liberationist

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18 *Summa Theologiae* I, 20, 3.

19 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

20 Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978).

claim that God acts preferentially for the oppressed—not as exclusion, but as a manifestation of divine generosity and justice.[21] However, this possible synthesis remains largely unexplored, leaving a significant opportunity for future theological dialogue between scholastic metaphysics and liberation praxis.

A theological reading of Matthew 20:1-16 according to some Church Fathers

The Church Fathers approached Matthew 20:1–16 with allegorical and pastoral emphases. John Chrysostom and Origen interpreted the parable as salvation history, reading the hours as successive ages of the world and the denarius as the gift of eternal life.[22]

> The landowner desires, therefore, to give the denarius—that is, salvation—even to those who are last as also to the first, since it is appropriate for him to do what he desires with those who are his own, and he reproves the person who has an evil eye because the landowner is good. Many of the last, therefore, will be first, and certain of those called first will be last, for "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14).[23]

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[21] Matthew Levering, *Predestination: Biblical and Theological Paths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

[22] Justin M. Gohl, *Origen of Alexandria's Commentary on Matthew, Book 15: An English Translation (Revised 2023)*, 45-57. https://www.academia.edu/31581897/Origen_of_Alexandrias_Commentary_on_Matthew_Book_15_An_English_Translation_Revised_2023. Hereafter: *Origen of Alexandria's Commentary on Matthew,* followed by page numbers.

[23] *Origen of Alexandria's Commentary on Matthew*, 56.

Furthermore, Chrysostom emphasized the pastoral dimension, applying the parable to late converts and warning against envy among the faithful.[24]

> But the question is this, whether the first having gloriously approved themselves, and having pleased God, and having throughout the whole day shone by their labors, are possessed by the basest feeling of vice, jealousy and envy. For when they had seen them enjoying the same rewards, they say, "These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, that have borne the burden and heat of the day." And in these words, when they are to receive no hurt, neither to suffer diminution as to their own hire, they were indignant, and much displeased at the good of others, which was proof of envy and jealousy. And what is yet more, the good man of the house in justifying himself with respect to them, and in making his defense to him that had said these things, convicts him of wickedness and the basest jealousy, saying, "Didst thou not agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way; I will give unto the last even as unto thee. Is thine eye evil, because I am good?"[25]

Augustine drew the same pastoral lesson but mapped the hours onto stages of human life, showing that even latecomers to faith can receive the same eternal reward.[26]

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[24] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew,* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* Series I, vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1888), https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.html. Hereafter cited as *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, followed by page numbers.*

[25] *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, 682.

[26] Augustine, *Sermons 51–94*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1992), 410-411. https://wesleyscholar.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Augustine-Sermons-51-94.pdf. Hereafter: *Sermons 51–94,* followed by page numbers.

This reflection is evident in his famous quote from the *Confessions*, 'late have I loved you, Lord.'

> Those who begin to be Christians almost as soon as they emerge from the womb are called, you could say, first thing in the morning; children, at nine o'clock; young people at noon; at three o'clock the middle aged; at five o'clock broken down old crocks; and yet they are all going to receive the same ten dollars of eternal life.[27]

Across the Fathers, allegorical, pastoral interpretation, and a focus on God's generosity are central. The Scholastic tradition integrated Patristic insights into systematic theology. Thomas Aquinas employed the parable in his account of eternal reward: the denarius signifies the beatific vision, which is equally shared by all the blessed, while differing degrees of accidental glory reflect distinctions of merit.[28] His *Catena Aurea* further demonstrates his use of patristic authorities in harmonizing diverse interpretations into a coherent theological synthesis.[29] Scholastic readings thus preserved the Fathers' pastoral concerns while refining them through precise theological categories.

Modern scholarship departs from allegory to focus on historical, literary, and socio-economic dimensions. France highlights the parable's role within Matthew's narrative, stressing God's generosity over human

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[27] *Sermons 51–94,* 411.

[28] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 109, a. 3; II–II, q. 129, a. 4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), https://www.newadvent.org/summa/.

[29] Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, trans. John Henry Newman (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 664–668. Also accessible through digital version in, Catena Aurea by Thomas Aquinas, Chap. 20 (20:1–16), accessed October 4, 2025, https://www.ecatholic2000.com/catena/untitled-27.shtml.

calculation of reward.[30] Davies and Allison give detailed exegesis, identifying the last-first reversal as the central theme.[31] Luz emphasizes the parable's rhetorical function within Matthew's community, which challenges expectations about divine recompense.[32] Keener interprets the landowner's actions against the backdrop of first-century wage practices, noting how they disrupt social norms.[33] Van Eck sharpens this socio-historical angle by presenting the landowner as an unconventional patron who violates Mediterranean honor-shame expectations.[34] Eubank reassesses the theological dimension of recompense, arguing that the parable maintains both God's justice and generosity.[35]

The contrast between traditions is clear. Patristic and Scholastic readings move quickly from the parable's details to allegorical and theological meaning, while modern interpreters emphasize Matthew's narrative design and the historical context of labor relations.[36] Yet, as we argue in this paper, all traditions converge on the

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[30] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

[31] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, Vol. 3 (19–28)*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

[32] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

[33] Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

[34] Ernest van Eck, "An Unexpected Patron: A Social-Scientific and Realistic Reading of the Parable of the Vineyard Labourers (Mt 20:1–15)," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (2015): 1–15.

[35] Nicholas Eubank, "What Does Matthew Say about Divine Recompense? On the Misuse of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (20:1–16)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35, no. 3 (2013): 242–262.

[36] Other studies were used to corroborate the points of this paper in the discussions, along with contemporary and patristic writings.

conviction that the parable demonstrates divine predilection, generosity, giving equal opportunity to all, and undermines envy, even as their methods and emphases differ.

The 'Kingdom' of 'God'

In chapter 20:1–16, Matthew employs the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" (*basileia tōn ouranōn*) rather than "Kingdom of God" (*basileía toû theoû*), a distinctive feature of his Gospel. Most scholars agree that this preference reflects Matthew's sensitivity to his primarily Jewish-Christian audience. Within Jewish tradition, the divine name was treated with profound reverence, and circumlocutions such as "Heaven" were commonly used as substitutes for "God." By using "Kingdom of Heaven," Matthew thus demonstrates respect for Jewish piety while referring to the same reality that Mark and Luke describe as the "Kingdom of God." As Richard Thomas France notes, Matthew's usage is "best explained by Jewish sensitivities about using the divine name," though it conveys no difference in meaning from "Kingdom of God."[37] Ulrich Luz similarly argues that the term underscores both Jewish reverential practice and the transcendent origin of the kingdom, which "comes from heaven and breaks into history through Jesus' ministry."[38] Donald Hagner concurs, emphasizing that in Matthew 20:1–16 the phrase is functionally identical to "Kingdom of God" but shaped by Matthew's awareness of his audience's religious sensibilities.[39] Thus, Matthew's

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[37] Richard Thomas France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 750.

[38] Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 540.

[39] Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 562.

distinctive terminology serves both theological and cultural purposes: it preserves reverence for God's name while simultaneously highlighting the kingdom's divine source. In this paper, the terms "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" will be treated as synonyms.

When analyzed systematically, the concept of the *Kingdom of God* may be understood through three interrelated dimensions: the reality of God, the nature of the kingdom as governance or reign, and the identity of its subjects or citizens. These elements are not merely components but constitutive aspects of the whole. The Kingdom presupposes the existence of God as its source and sovereign; without God, the very foundation of the Kingdom disintegrates. Likewise, "kingdom" entails an active reign or governance that reflects God's will manifested in history, rather than simply a static realm or territory. Finally, the subjects or citizens are indispensable, for the Kingdom is realized in a community that participates in and embodies divine justice, peace, and love.[40] If any of these dimensions is absent, the integrity of the concept collapses, reducing it to either an abstract ideal or an incomplete theological construct. Some liberation theologians echo this three-part structure in their works. Gustavo Gutiérrez argues that the coming Kingdom involves divine sovereignty, social governance, and active human participation, particularly of the poor.[41] Similarly, Jürgen Moltmann

[40] In Mitzi Minor's article, he argued that in the gospel of Mark, "Jesus did more than proclaim the arrival of God's Kingdom; he lived it. He practiced his spirituality." This presupposes that Jesus is not only a messenger of the Kingdom of God that is "at hand," but he too is a citizen of that same kingdom he is describing. See Mitzi Minor, "Living the Kingdom of God: The Communal and Renewing Spirituality of Jesus in Mark," *Religions* 14, no. 9 (2023): 1096, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091096.

[41] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 37; 122-123.

underscores that the doctrine of God (or the reality of God), the reign of Christ, and the eschatological community are inseparable in understanding what "Kingdom of God" means.[42]

Furthermore, speaking about the notion of "God" in the "kingdom of God," liberation theology presents God not primarily in metaphysical terms, but as the God of life, justice, and liberation. According to Gustavo Gutiérrez, God's very nature is revealed in historical action, especially in siding with the poor and oppressed. This is expressed through the "preferential option for the poor," meaning God shows partiality toward the marginalized to restore justice.[43] Rather than seeing God as distant or neutral, liberation theology insists that God is intimately involved in human struggles, embodying love in action.[44] Christ is understood as the liberator who identifies with the suffering, and thus the meaning of God becomes inseparable from the call to praxis: faith must lead to transforming unjust structures. As Michael Minch notes, the image of God in liberation theology is intrinsically tied to the pursuit of justice, freedom, and

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[42] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 112-128.

[43] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973; rev. ed., 1988). This foundational text introduces liberation theology and emphasizes God's historical involvement in human liberation. Gutiérrez frames God as the one who hears the cry of the oppressed and calls for praxis [action rooted in faith] to transform unjust structures. This positions God's nature as inseparable from the struggle for justice and freedom.

[44] In *The God of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 25-70, Gutiérrez directly addresses the question of God's nature. He presents God as the "God of life," whose being is revealed through solidarity with the poor and whose meaning is understood in the fight against death-dealing forces such as poverty, injustice, and violence. God is portrayed as the source and sustainer of life, acting in history to liberate.

the affirmation of human dignity.[45] Yet St. Irenaeus of Lyons famously stated: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God" (or similar phrasing like "man's life is the vision of God"),[46] emphasizing that God's glory is revealed as humans flourish in Christ, fully embracing their created potential and experiencing God's presence. This core teaching highlights that humanity's fulfillment, not its diminished state, brings glory to God, a key idea in his defense of the Incarnation against Gnostic views that downplayed the physical.

God is portrayed as the God of life, justice, and liberation, whose preferential option for the poor underscores divine solidarity with the oppressed.[47] Yet when this theological portrait is placed in dialogue with Matthew 20:1–16, certain limitations emerge. In this parable, God is symbolized by the landowner who distributes wages equally, regardless of hours worked. From a liberationist perspective, this imagery may appear problematic, since the landowner's actions provoke dissatisfaction among those who labored longer, raising questions about fairness and consideration for effort. Whereas liberation theology emphasizes God's restorative justice aimed at uplifting the marginalized, Matthew's parable shifts the focus to divine generosity and the overturning of human expectations of merit. As R. T. France observes, the parable critiques "human

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[45] Michael Minch, "Liberation Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Global Justice*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 634–37.

[46] "*Gloria Dei vivens homo; vita autem hominis visio Dei",* Ireneaus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies), Book IV, Chapter 20, Paragraph 7 (AH 4, 20, 7).

[47] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973; rev. ed., 1988), xx; Michael Minch, "Liberation Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Global Justice*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 635.

notions of fairness" by presenting God's rule as radically generous rather than calculative.[48] Ulrich Luz similarly explains that the landowner's action demonstrates God's sovereignty and freedom to dispense grace apart from human standards of justice.[49] Donald Hagner notes that the parable's tension lies precisely in this reversal, where the "equality" established is not about distributive fairness but an eschatological sign of God's unmerited favor.[50] Thus, the limitation of liberation theology in relation to this passage lies in its potential to under-emphasize the parable's radical teaching on divine sovereignty and unmerited grace, which cannot be reduced to categories of socio-political justice.

On the other hand, if we try to understand the notion of God in the scholastic tradition, we will find a strong emphasis on transcendence. God is beyond change, passion, or temporal process.[51] This notion somehow will aid us in understanding the attitude of the landowner in the parable given to us by Jesus, according to Matthew (20:1-16).

On Divine Predilection: "I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you."[52]

Predilection is usually construed as special preference or favor. For instance, when it comes to apparel, we may already have particular preferences about style,

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[48] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 750.

[49] Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 540.

[50] Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28, Word Biblical Commentary,* vol. 33B (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 562.

[51] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1, *Prima Pars*, q.3–q.11, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), 27–50.

[52] Matthew 20:14 (NRSV Catholic Edition).

color, fit, and linen types. Therefore, entering a store would include actively seeking out these items rather than engaging in random browsing and wasting time. On the other hand, favoritism is defined as treating some individuals or things more favorably than others, thus relating to bias, prejudice, and nonobjectivity in contrast with fairness, prudence, and objectivity.[53] Favoritism can be admiration and amiable feelings or inclination towards others caused by some filial or amorous relations (such as in the case of nepotism), benefits (such as in the case of bribery), and passion (such as in the case of infatuation). In simple words, favoritism is a phenomenon between the object of favor and the favoring subject, where the object directly or indirectly influences the subject to favor it. Therefore, the term "favoritism" will not be used as an alternative for "predilection" throughout this paper. In St. Thomas Aquinas, the mystery of predilection is about God exhibiting a particular predilection or favor to some creatures according to God's will. God's attitude toward these people is not based on any trait that makes them deserving of divine affection; instead, God's decisions result from volition or free will.[54] God's predilection is fair, prudent, and objective simply because the act of favoring is based on God's own will, independent of any qualifications from the receiver of the favor, in contrast with the qualifications of the other potential receiver of the favor (as in a competition). God wills the good, not because the object of favor deserves it, but because God is good.

> God is the *summum bonum*, possessor and possessed in one act; all that is desirable he has and is in an infinite degree. Being in want of nothing, he has fruition of

[53] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "Favoritism," accessed January 8, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/favoritism.

[54] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 20, a. 3.

> himself and desires nothing out of selfishness. If he diffuses good (*bonum est diffusivum sui*) then that good redounds to the credit of finite beings and makes for finite excellence; it cannot add anything to what is already personified goodness.[55]

In his argument on God's goodness, St. Thomas Aquinas mentioned an objection, saying that goodness seems unsuitable for God because mode, species, and order are good. However, God is vast and unordered, so these do not belong to God. Thus, God is not good.[56] St. Thomas answered this objection by saying that to have mode, species, and order is the essence of created-good (or caused good), yet good is in God as in its cause; therefore, God can impose these on others.[57] For instance, Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah, remarkably conceived a son despite having passed the prime of her reproductive years and being childless. Her child was named John, the "baptizer," eventually heralding Christ's coming. Elizabeth was not a supernatural being or a prerequisite for human salvation; instead, she was an ordinary elderly woman who had never given birth and was the wife of a devout priest. Figuratively, nothing exceptional about her could have persuaded the divine mind to elect her as deserving of the favor she received. One could argue that God chose Elizabeth to receive such favor because Zechariah was a priest. But why would God make Zechariah mute if God's favor to him was what brought about Elizabeth's favor? God chose her not because she deserved it or had good character to merit that favor, but because God willed it. Following the words of Elizabeth we can appreciate that the act of favoring is to exercise

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[55] Martin Cyril D'Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1954), 103-104.

[56] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q. 6, Art. 1, arg. 1.

[57] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q.6, Art. 1, ad. 1.

God's compassion with her; *"This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."*[58]

Deus Caritas est (God is love). Love motivates and activates God's will as a single act. Furthermore, according to St. Thomas, God's love is not a passion but an act, and God loves everything equally through a single act of will. Yet, similar to how we may love certain individuals more when we desire greater good for them, so too with God. Everything has inherent goodness because of God's love, so nothing would be more valuable than anything else unless God loved it more.[59] This gives us room to understand the mystery of predilection. In Question 20 of *Summa Theologiae*, Article 4, *Whether God loves more better things?* St. Thomas cited an objection, saying that angels are superior to humankind, yet God favored mortals above angels. Thus, God does not always love more the better things.[60] But St. Thomas insisted that "God loves more the better things."[61] He answered the objection by saying,

> God loves the human nature assumed by the Word of God in the person of Christ more than He loves all the angels; for that nature is better… But speaking of human nature in general, and comparing it with the angelic, the two are found equal, in the order of grace and of glory… But as to natural condition, an angel is better than a man. God therefore did not assume human nature because He loved man, absolutely speaking, more; *but because the needs of man were greater*; just as the master of a house may give some

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[58] Luke 1:25 (New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

[59] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, edited by Timothy McDermott (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1989), 54.

[60] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q.20, Art. 4, arg. 2.

[61] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q.20, Art. 4, co.

> costly delicacy to a sick servant, that he does not give to his own son in sound health.[62]

From the answer of St. Thomas, we learned that God made both angels and human beings equal "in the order of grace and glory." However, in the natural order, angels are better than men. Regardless, God showed his predilection for human beings through *mercy*, which is a greater good. This corresponds with what Pope Francis said during the Angelus of July 14, 2019, as he addressed the pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square about the parable of the Good Samaritan, a parable he described as a *treasure*. He said, *"Mercy towards a human life in a state of need is the true face of love."* Pope Francis stated that becoming a true disciple of Jesus involves loving others, and that through this love, the face of God is shown. St. Thomas Aquinas and Pope Francis, in some sense, give us a context of what it means to be "merciful, just as your Father is merciful,"[63] and that mercy is a manifestation of love mediated as an act of will. Mercy is the fruition of God's will according to his wisdom and love. In St. Thomas, it is good of God to give perfections, fair that they are spread out evenly, generous that they are given out of kindness rather than to get something in return, and *merciful* that they are used to relieve needs. According to St. Thomas, if someone owed you one pound and you gave them two pounds out of your own pocket, you were not being unfair; you were being kind and generous instead. If you forgive someone for a crime or forgive a loan, that is also a form of giving. St. Thomas

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[62] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q.20, Art. 4, ad. 2. Emphasis added.

[63] Linda Bordoni, "Pope Francis: 'Mercy Is the True Face of Love,'" Vatican News, July 14, 2019, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-07/pope-angelus-catechesis-good-samaritan-mercy.html.

said that *charity* does not go against justice, but rather completes it. God is fair because God is merciful, for nothing a creature owes is due to something it already is or will be because of God's goodness.[64] God's goodness is the cause of everything a person has, is, and will be.

The parable's historical significance lies in its placement within the framework of Jesus' conversation with the Scribes and Pharisees in chapter 19 of the gospel of Matthew. It explains Jesus' connection with the outcast and symbolizes the unrestricted bestowal of God's mercy.[65] Now, there are three hermeneutical keys to understanding the parable. First, the landowner keeps looking for laborers for the field. The landowner went out early in the morning, at midmorning, noontime, and mid-afternoon, and before the sunset. The second key is that the ones who had been hired first expected to be paid more than the ones who had been hired after them. The third key will be that of the ones who were hired last and worked for fewer hours yet received the same remuneration as the first ones.

Exegetical scholarship confirms that the themes of labor justice, divine predilection, and the preferential option for the poor are valid hermeneutical keys for interpreting Matthew 20:1–16. The parable unfolds in three episodes that together reveal the mystery of God's predilection. First, the hiring of laborers throughout the day (verses 1–7) underscores God's initiative in seeking out those left idle and excluded, a sign of divine love that does not abandon the marginalized.[66] Second, the equal

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[64] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, Edited by Timothy McDermott (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1989), 55.

[65] Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, "Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1-16," *Journal of Early Christian History* 4, no. 1 (2014), 123.

[66] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper One, 1996), 95–97.

payment of all workers (verses 8–10) manifests God's justice as generosity, affirming the dignity of each laborer regardless of human calculations of merit or productivity.[67] Finally, the complaint of the first laborers and the master's response (verses. 11–16) discloses the mystery of predilection: God's freedom to love and bless the poor in ways that overturn human expectations of fairness.[68] In this way, the parable becomes a theological icon of the preferential option for the poor, showing that God's kingdom is not built on strict equivalence but on gratuitous love that privileges the marginalized.[69]

Landowner: Greedy or generous?

Upon initial examination, the landowner appeared to exhibit a sense of urgency in recruiting additional laborers to expedite the process of harvesting. His desperation caused him to go out for almost the entire day. A scholar questions the rationale behind the landowner's decision to hire people in fragmented increments rather than employing the entire workforce simultaneously. The workers who were hired at noon and in the late afternoon probably spent the entire day at the marketplace pleading with any landowners who showed up. The varying hiring hours may also indicate that the decision to hire or not was within the control of the landowner, as boss, given his authority over the financial affairs. The landowner views the workers as a means of achieving the production goals rather than as being

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[67] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 37–39.

[68] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 178–80.

[69] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 32–35.

inherently significant.[70] Certain scholars provide an alternative approach to interpreting the passage, advocating for an economic perspective and specifically focusing on the analysis of the equitable remuneration provided to all workers.[71] If we look at the activity of the landowner alone, outside of his intentions, we will see the landowner's desperation to expand his labor force to triple production and his imprudent financial practices as greed.

On the other hand, the Church Fathers associated the landowner with God and Christ, who worked to establish a new system of justice. [72] The words of the landowner in Matthew 20:14–15 support this interpretation: *"Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"* Here, the landowner intends to give generously what he has and not merely find workers to advance his gains. St. Cyril of Alexandria believed that when the Master generously rewarded the last workers while treating them equally to those who arrived first, God's justice displayed His glory.[73] While St. John

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[70] Lilly Phiri, "God's World Is Not an 'Animal Farm', or Is It?: Re-Reading Matthew 20:1–16in the Face of Workplace Economic Injustices," essay, in *Bible and Theology from the Underside of Empire*, ed. Vuyani Vellem, Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth, and Philip Vinod Peacock (African Sun Media, 2017), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nzg057, 165–166.

[71] Shinji Takagi, "The Rich Young Man and the Boundary of Distributive Justice: An Economics Reading of Matthew 20:1–16," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 50, no. 4 (November 3, 2020): 207–15, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107920958999.

[72] Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, "Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1–16," *Journal of Early Christian History,* Vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 122.

[73] Cyril of Alexandria, 'Fragmenta in Matthaeum,' in Matthäus-Kommentare aus der griechischen Kirche (ed. J. Reuss; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), 226,229; and Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole,

Chrysostom emphasized the concept of God's free will in distributing justice, as highlighted in Matthew 20:14, *"I choose to give to these last as I give to you."*[74] It is why St. Gregory the Great can confidently assert that we should all be extremely joyful, even if we are the last in the kingdom of God.[75] For instance, the repentant thief who was crucified beside Jesus, despite leading an immoral life, received the same reward promised by Jesus to the apostles: eternal life in paradise. We may also consider the reward given by Jesus to the repentant thief as parallel to that of the landowner calling some workers at the last hours to receive the same price promised to those who were elected to work earlier in the field.

The first workers and the last

It is said that Jesus' teachings explicitly emphasize the priority of the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" over all others. Let us consider the *Beatitudes* as evidence from the sermon on the mount. It appears that Jesus primarily focuses on what is referred to as the "humanitarian" dimension of the law. Realizing

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"Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1–16," *Journal of Early Christian History*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 122.

[74] John Chrysostom, 'Homiliae in Matthaeum 64.3,' in *PG 58* (ed. J.P. Migne; Paris: Brepols, 1862), 613; and in Loba-Mkole, "Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1-16," *Journal of Early Christian History*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 123.

[75] Gregory the Great, 'XL Homiliarum in Evangelica,' in *PL 76* (ed. J.P. Migne; Paris: Brepols, 1857), 1156–1157; Cyril of Alexandria, 'Fragmenta in Matthaeum,' 226, 229; Gregory the Great, 'XL Homiliarum in Evangelica,' 613; M. Simonetti, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament. Matthew 14–28 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 106–112; and in Loba-Mkole, "Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1–16," *Journal of Early Christian History*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 123.

this entails embodying holiness, perfection, and mercy.[76] The personal good and interests of the first workers clouded their minds to comprehend the will (both intention and action) of their master, resulting in demanding more benefits than the last workers. They seemed to lack compassion, which is a key element in loving the neighbor. Putting themselves at the forefront of 'desiring the good' obstructed their eyes from seeing others as their neighbors.

On the other hand, the final workers have no reason to be proud of what they have done because they cannot counter the grievances of the first workers, as they are aware that they are not deserving of such compensation. They felt small. They were silent. Their only source of bravery is the landowner's will to ensure that they receive equal compensation as the first workers. When the landowner asked them, *"Why are you standing here idle all day?"* They said, *"Because no one has hired us."* These last workers were not favored by the other masters and represented those who lacked necessities, such as food, clothing, shelter, basic health care, elementary education, and work—or simply the poor.[77] The landowner's predilection is evident.

On Preferential Option for the Poor: "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first."[78]

If there is one thing we must remember while reading

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[76] Roger Ruston, "A Christian View of Justice," *New Blackfriars* 59, no. 699 (August 1978): 344–58, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43246907, 347.

[77] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* trans. Paul Burns (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1987), 46-47.

[78] Matthew 20:1 (NRSV Catholic Edition).

Matthew 20:1–16, it is the *kingdom of heaven*. Upon careful examination of the landowner's mindset, we can sense an arduous predilection to share the benefits of the land with the people outside the field. The landowner's act of reaching out indicates an intense exercise of the will to search for those in need of salvation or liberation from impoverishment. Jesus refers to the landowner as a representation of the kingdom of heaven. However, other factors can divert our attention away from the main subject, such as the suggested titles of the parable, namely "Parable of the Workers" and "Workers of the Eleventh Hour."[79] Both exclude the landowner as the main subject suitable to portray the kingdom of heaven. Jesus used the metaphor of a "landowner" to describe the kingdom of heaven. He said, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first," which establishes the context for the *preferential option for the poor*. The concept of the preferential option for the poor encompasses a framework for understanding societal dynamics, fosters ethical considerations, and advocates for approaches centered on self-determination and empowerment.[80] But, for most liberation theologians, the notion of an option for the poor is firmly grounded in the Bible, which demonstrates that God occasionally exhibits an intentional inclination toward individuals who are impoverished, vulnerable, or marginalized.[81] For instance, the Exodus story tells us

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[79] J. Dupont, 'Les ouvriers de la onzième heure. Mt 20,1-16,' *AS 56* (1974), 16–27; and in Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, "Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1–16," *Journal of Early Christian History* 4, no. 1 (2014), 113.

[80] Kenneth R. Himes, *101 Questions & Answers on Catholic Social Teachings*, 2nd Edition (Makati City, Philippines: St. Pauls, 2014), 42–43.

[81] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 287–306; Elsa Tamez, The Bible of the Oppressed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books,

about the suffering of the Israelites from enslavement in Egypt. Israel's liberator, YHWH, through Moses, led them to the promised land to establish their independence. For the Israelites, this holds a political and religious significance: it represents the encounter with God who rescues and liberates people from the oppression of sin and who honors a promise to establish them as a nation—a chosen people.[82] Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff stated that by appending the adjective "preferential" to the phrase "option for the poor," it is explicitly stated that this option cannot be "exclusively for the poor." They added,

> Christian love is love for the poor, but in the first place rather than exclusively. The church is on the side of the poor (through love of neighbor, *agape*), but not tied only to them (out of excluding, possessive love, *eros*). Its love for the poor is, then, a love of *predilection* and not an exclusive love.[83]

In the New Testament, we can read more about the poor, oppressed, sick, and marginalized and how God liberated them from the shackles of sins (personal, social, and structural)[84] through the person of Christ. Similarly, we construe Matthew 20:1–16 as a piece of revelation to us of the mystery of the predilection of God perfected in

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1982); Benedito Ferraro, *A Significacao Politica e Teologica Da Morte de Jesus a Luz Do Novo Testamento* (Petropolis, Brazil: Vozes, 1977), 92–95; in Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor and for the Earth* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2013), 240.

[82] Segundo Galilea, "The Theology of Liberation, A General Survey," essay, in *Liberation Theology and the Vatican Document*, ed. Alberto Rossa (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1984), 37.

[83] Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff, *The Bible: The Church and the Poor*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Burns & Oates, 1989), 132. Emphasis added.

[84] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* par. 1869.

the mystery of the Incarnation. Through the mystery of the Incarnation, God became sensible in human fashion. The incarnation of the Word did not alter the nature of divinity but perfected its solidarity with humanity.[85] Through Jesus, we could taste and see the Lord's favor. It is also possible to see the phrase "preferential option for the poor" as a manifestation of Christ's messianic mission, which the prophet Isaiah foretold: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."[86]

On preferential option for the poor as God's predilection: "Because no one has hired us."

It may be asserted that the mystery of divine predilection encompasses both an act of glory and an act of mercy. Glory is derived from God's exercise of free will, whereas mercy is the praxis of justice. These two are expressed in the single act of the will, that is, love. I want to answer the question of whether God favors some people more than others. We dare to say yes, as Aquinas and the liberation theologians do in consensus.

If we reread the parable using the lens of the poor, we will see the *modus operandi* of the βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (*basileia ton ouranōn*)[87] enacted by the landowner. The act of searching for more unemployed workers and the experience of being noticed and liberated from unemployment, as per the parable, can also be seen from the missiological perspective. The last workers said in the

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[85] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIIa, Q.1, Art. 1, ad. 1.

[86] Luke 4:18–19 (NRSVCE); and in Isaiah 61:1–11.

[87] Or "Kingdom of heaven." See Matthew 20-1 (SBL Greek New Testament).

parable, *"Because no one has hired us."* Like them, many others are deprived of fundamental rights and temporal goods.[88] It is in a situation like this that the landowner showed his predilection, not because he needed to hire the last workers but because he was compassionate. Compassion means "to suffer with." Many references in the canonical texts tell us about the compassion of God through Christ, which now invites us to imitate it. Jesus exhorts us to be merciful like the Father.[89] Comprehending the mystery of predilection will be very challenging without a minimum level of "suffering with" the widespread misery that impacts the vast majority of the human race.[90] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff said that we align ourselves with the poor *only* when we actively oppose the unjustly imposed poverty they face. For them, engaging in service with the oppressed also entails demonstrating love for the suffering Christ, a *"liturgy that is pleasing to God."*[91] Thanks to the love of God with a human heart in Christ. Dennis Murphy, a member of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, said, "The Heart of God and the human heart meet in the

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[88] Joenel Buencibello, "Ang Mabathalang Pag-Aaral Sa Awiting 'Dakilang Maylikha' Ayon Sa Bersyon Ng 'Ama Namin' Ng *Doctrina Cristiana*," *Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators* 1, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.63130/hijcre.v1i1.113, 134-135.

[89] Luke 6:36; Pope Francis, *"General Audience of 21 September 2016: 30. Merciful like the Father (cf. Lk 6:36-38),* The Holy See, 21 September 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160921_udienza-generale.html

[90] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* trans. Paul Burns (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1987), 3–4.

[91] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* trans. Paul Burns (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1987), 4.

Heart of Christ."[92] This meeting of the human heart and the Heart of God in the Heart of Christ gives context to the missiological mandate given by Christ at the institution of the holy Eucharist. In the gospel of John, we read,

> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.[93]

Jesus gave a criterion for loving—it is by loving as he does. A mission is bestowed upon us to meekly endeavor to embody the Heart of Christ in the world and be the Heart of God in making the kingdom of heaven known and loved in the here and now. It necessitates that we consistently demonstrate acts of benevolence and compassion whenever the circumstances warrant them. By proclaiming this to others, we ought to endeavor to amplify and multiply the love of Christ so that they, too, may enter into the Heart of God in the world.[94] But then again, to demonstrate *acts* of benevolence and compassion is dead without love. Actions must be animated by love. In St. Thomas, love is the first movement of the will and appetite.[95] Therefore, to embody the Heart of Christ in the world, one must align their will with God's so that through acts of love, others may witness God's love in action. In other words, the mystery of predilection is about God being God—*Love*. And the kingdom of heaven (βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν) is about God's activity—*loving*. The kingdom of God has two

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[92] Dennis J. Murphy, *The Heart of the Word Made Flesh* (Bangalore, India: Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, 2014), 15.

[93] John 13:34–35 (NRSV Catholic Edition).

[94] Raymundo T. Sabio, *Love Ripples from the Heart* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundations, 2021), 5.

[95] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q.20, Art. 1, co.

fundamental connotations in Jon Sobrino's mind. First, it asserts that "God rules in his acts," and second, it aims to transform an undesirable and oppressive historical-social reality into a more equitable one. Sobrino argued that the word "reign" of God is more suitable than the word "kingdom." Therefore, God's "reign" is the constructive action by which God brings about a transformation in the world, and God's "kingdom" is the realization of that transformation in this world: a history, a society, and a people molded in accordance with God's will.[96]

In the spiritual exercises by St. Ignatius de Loyola, he introduced to us the art of imaginative reading of the gospels. It is done by imagining the scenarios, the motivations, feelings and emotions of the actors and receivers of the acts vividly as possible as if you are present in the story. As a simple recommendation, try to look for the poor in the gospels and listen to them. Also, try to discover that wherever the poor are, there you will see Christ. This reminds us of his very words: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be."[97]

For Leonardo Boff, "to adopt the place of the poor is our first deed of solidarity with them. This act is accomplished by making an effort to view reality from their perspective. And when we view reality from their perspective, that reality simply must be transformed."[98] Along with this, be attentive to the *modus operandi* of God through Jesus for the poor. Contemplate God's gratuitous love. Allow the Spirit of God to show God's ways of loving—God's *predilection*—a preferential option

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[96] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 71.

[97] Matthew 6:21.

[98] Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Harper & Row, 1988), ix.

for the poor. Then, ask, "How can I be of service in the kingdom of heaven?" "How can I love like Christ?" "How can I be God's heart on earth?"

In light of Jesus' criterion for love, "to love as he does," the theology of divine predilection and the praxis of the preferential option for the poor converge not merely as doctrinal affirmations but as invitations to a transformative way of being, of Christian living. The *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, which call the believer to enter contemplatively into the Gospel scenes and to feel with the poor, reveal that authentic love is born of meditative empathy and sustained by deliberate, willful commitment.[99] Leonardo Boff's insistence on solidarity with the poor echoes this movement from contemplation to action, where love is not abstract sentiment but incarnated in concrete gestures of justice, mercy, and presence.[100] Pope Francis, in *Evangelii gaudium*, insists that

> Without the preferential option for the poor, "the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today's society of mass communications".[101]

While Pope Leo XIV in *Dilexi te* affirms that;

> I am convinced that the preferential choice for the poor is a source of extraordinary renewal both for the Church and for society, if we can only set ourselves free

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[99] Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951), §§53–61.

[100] Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 130–35.

[101] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, par. 199; and in John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (6 January 2001), 50; and in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, par. 93 (2001), 303.

> of our self-centeredness and open our ears to their cry.[102]

Thus, predilection is not favoritism but the divine initiative to dwell among the least, and the preferential option is not ideology but the spiritual discipline of choosing, again and again, to love as Christ loves—freely, purposefully, and in communion with the disadvantaged. In this synthesis, theology becomes lived compassion, and spirituality becomes the heartbeat of liberation.

Conclusion

The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) presents a profound theological challenge: reconciling divine generosity with human expectations of fairness. By placing St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of divine predilection in dialogue with Liberation Theology's preferential option for the poor, this study demonstrates that both traditions, despite their methodological differences, converge on the affirmation of God's sovereign love. Aquinas' metaphysical insight into God's unequal yet benevolent distribution of grace complements Liberation Theology's historical emphasis on divine solidarity with the oppressed. Together, they reveal a God who is both just and generous, transcending human merit and embracing all in love. This integrated approach not only deepens our understanding of Matthew's parable but also challenges contemporary theology to move beyond dichotomies and embrace a holistic vision of divine action—one that speaks meaningfully to both eternal truths and historical struggles.

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[102] Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi te*, Apostolic Exhortation, October 4, 2025, Vatican.va, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html

About the Author

Joenel B. Buencibello is a licensed professional teacher and a permanent faculty member of De La Salle University – The Academy, Manila. He has a bachelor's degree in religious education and values education from University of San Carlos and a master's degree in Systematic Theology from St. Vincent School of Theology–Adamson University. He published "Ang Mabathalang Pag-aaral Sa Awiting 'Dakilang Maylikha' Ayon Sa Bersyon Ng 'Ama Namin' Ng *Doctrina Christiana*." *Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators* 1, no. 1 (2024): 128–38. He is actively involved in the academic community through teaching, research, service-learning, and curriculum development. Email: joenel.buencibello@dlsu.edu.ph

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