

Pentecost 16 / September 20, 2020

Matthew 20:1

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early to hire labourers for his vineyard.”

A question. In this parable do you identify with the workers hired last who received a full day's wage, or with the workers hired at dawn who bore the burden of the day and the heat and who received the same as those hired last? A word of reminder! A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. The earthly is the starting point from which Jesus gives us a heavenly perspective on God's ways in the world and in our lives. As we seek to understand the meaning of the parable, we must bear in mind God's words to Isaiah written in the 55th chapter, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Jesus wasn't teaching a business management course, and if you don't want to encourage your workers to show up at the end of the day, you might not want to make a practice of paying the last the same as the first.

This parable is not about managing a vineyard. It's a parable about God's gracious reign, breaking into the world in Christ Jesus. In the world we work at an occupation to earn a living. We must earn our keep! In the world, work is an honourable activity and workers are deserving of their pay. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “the worker is worthy of his wage.” In his letter, James warns the employers against withholding the wages of their workers, for the cries of the workers will reach the ears of the Lord and He will do justice. In the world we earn our keep, but in the kingdom of heaven we receive our keep as a gracious gift of God, who in Christ earned our salvation by bearing the burden of the cross and the heat of God's wrath at human sin. This is a parable about God, who is rich in mercy and generous in grace!

The greatest gift of grace is to be called into God's kingdom. Even as the parable begins with a man calling people into the vineyard in the morning at noon and throughout the day until the last hour of light, God calls us into His kingdom by the gospel of Christ. We enter His kingdom through faith and the washing of baptism. God is generous to call us into His kingdom through faith in Christ. We serve in God's kingdom not as workers seeking reward, but as children of God and heirs of Jesus Christ. We await not a wage for our service, but rather an inheritance to everlasting life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is as Paul wrote in Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Even the works we do in God's kingdom are a gift of grace. Paul continues saying, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them.” When God rewards us for our works, He is rewarding what He has done through us, for by grace we are saved through faith in Christ Jesus! We are His workmanship in Christ Jesus! God is rich in mercy and generous in grace!

This parable is set within the context of a struggle between the disciples for position in the kingdom of heaven, which they felt Jesus was going to inaugurate in short order. They thought Jesus was bringing an earthly kingdom that would eclipse the kingdoms of the world in glory and power. They wanted to make sure they had good cabinet positions. They were wrong about the nature of the kingdom of heaven and about what it meant to be a citizen of God's kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is God's righteous reign that begins in the human heart with the grace of forgiveness; given for the sake Jesus and received through faith in His name. In Romans chapter fourteen St. Paul wrote, “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.” Righteousness is the gift of God that covers our sins in forgiveness. Joy, peace and service are the fruits and the effect of the righteousness we receive from God through faith in Jesus.

The disciples were under the false impression that they were working for Jesus. As such, they expected to be properly compensated for their labour. At the end of the previous chapter, Peter expressed concern that they may not get a sufficient return on their investment. He told Jesus, “Behold, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” They certainly would receive a reward. Jesus assured them, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundred-fold and will inherit eternal life.” They weren't working for Jesus. Jesus was working for them. They would not receive a wage as hired workers. They would receive an inheritance as children of the heavenly Father.

Jesus calls us to be children of the heavenly Father through faith in Him as our Saviour. We receive adoption as children of the heavenly Father, by baptism into His death and resurrection. We live as children of the heavenly Father by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. The heavenly Father invites us to share in the work of His kingdom, not to earn something, but because we are His children and His kingdom is our inheritance. Jesus worked to bring us into the kingdom through His sinless life and sacrificial death. He blesses us to share in the work of the kingdom, but the work is His. The inheritance is His gift to us and to all believers. God is rich in mercy and generous in grace.

When we think of wages and rewards for our service, we are not thinking the thoughts of God; we are thinking the thoughts of humans. If we expect to be compensated for our service in the kingdom of heaven, we are not thinking the thoughts of heaven, but according to the mindset of the world, which passes away with time. Consider the apostles and how poorly they were recompensed in earthly terms for their labours in the kingdom of heaven. Centuries after their deaths they are famous the world over, but in their life-times they were treated as the “the scum of the earth,” as Paul says in 1 Corinthians. In every habitable continent Churches are named after them. St. Peter’s basilica in Rome is the most beautiful church in the world. More cities are named after St. Paul than any other person in history. But neither received a penny in naming rights!

We receive the fruits of their labours in the words of the New Testament, but they didn’t get a single royalty payment for the words they wrote. They don’t even get the credit for the words, because it wasn’t their words, but God’s word, which they wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians Paul wrote, “I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as men sentenced to death.” What did they get for their labours? Their recompense were the gifts we all share in common; forgiveness and eternal life for the sake of Jesus our Saviour! But no recompense is of greater value than knowing Christ as Saviour. In the letter to the Philippians Paul said, “I count everything as rubbish compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

There is no greater blessing than being called into the kingdom of heaven through faith in Jesus and baptism into His death and resurrection. Like the man in the parable, God calls continuously through the gospel. Some are called early in life and in human terms, labor many years before they are called from this life to receive the prize Christ has earned for them. Moses was 120 years old when he departed this life to heaven’s peace. Others are taken out of this life, almost as soon as they are called. Consider the thief who repented on the cross and asked Jesus to remember him when he came into His kingdom. Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” He was an ‘eleventh hour man,’ but He received the same reward as Moses. In both, the law giver and the law breaker, salvation was the work of Christ and gift of God. Some are called in mid-life, like Paul and the eleven. Some live until old age, before they are called to life in Christ. All are called by grace. All receive Christ as Saviour, by the gift of God’s grace. All are His workmanship, walking in the labours He has prepared for us and empowers us to fulfill. All receive the same wages, the wages of eternal life Christ earned for us on the cross.

God doesn’t pay wages. He gives gifts. Wages are for time. Gifts are for eternity. Wages are works that lead to death. Gifts are blessings that give eternal life! Would we rather receive wages or God’s gift? In the letter to the Romans Paul wrote, “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life for the sake of Christ Jesus.” In the kingdom of heaven all receive the same reward, the crown of life won for us by Christ, as the prize of His resurrection. The last will be first and the first will be last, because all receive the same gifts as a priceless treasure; forgiveness in time and life in eternity, for the sake of Jesus our dear Saviour and Lord. In Christ we all receive better than we deserve and more than we could ever earn with our labours. God is rich in mercy and generous in grace! Bless His holy name. Amen