

Matthew 20:1-16

Preached by Greg Lundstedt at Vancouver Bible Fellowship Church on 4/15/2012

What is your motive for serving Christ?

Prayer

Father, You are so gracious and so kind to us. We are so thankful for Your mercy and grace, that You sent Your Son Jesus to die for our sins; that while we were helpless, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We are so thankful for Your mercy and Your kindness and Your love demonstrated in Christ. Father we are thankful that You used Your Word, Your powerful Word, the gospel, to bring about the knowledge of the truth concerning Your Son Jesus to convict us of sin, to reveal Your Son. We are so thankful for salvation in Him. Father we are also thankful that You continue to feed us with Your holy Word. You take Your Word and You use it in our lives; You convict us and You correct us and train us for every good work that You have ordained from the foundation of the earth. We are so thankful. Father we thank You for Your word today; we thank You for what we have recorded concerning Your Son. And I pray as we look into this passage today that You would give us wisdom and insight, that we would not rely on ourselves, we would not rely on our own understanding. That not one true believer here would have sin in their lives, that we would confess it and receive Your Word implanted. And that those who don't know You here today would be pierced by Your Word; they would see their sin and Your gracious lovingkindness and Your Son, and they would cry out for salvation. Lord we ask You to bless Your word as it goes out and may it bring You great glory and honor today. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sermon

Well Scripture reveals that those who are truly saved, those who have trusted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, those who have responded to the Word of God, those who have repented of sins, turning to the living God— that if you are a true believer, you were saved to serve the living God. You see, before Christ, we served ourselves. We served ourselves in every way, shape and form; we served our own will, our own desires, our own plans. And when you come to Jesus Christ He shows us our sinfulness in His Word, and He reveals His will in His Word.

We are finishing up the book of 1 Thessalonians on Wednesday night, and in the beginning of that book there is a wonderful passage which describes what happened to these Thessalonians when they received the Word of God, not as man's word, but the Word of God for what it really is. Paul says that they turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. You see, if you have truly been saved, you were saved to serve the living God. And you could actually identify whether someone is a follower of Jesus Christ or not, based on whether they serve the living God, Malachi 3:18.

¹⁸ So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him. [Malachi 3:18]

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Now certainly there are those who are not in Christ, who are of Satan, those who disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. I'm not talking about that. But apart from these fakers, these deceitful false brethren, true believers have been saved to serve the living God.

Now some of you men have been with us on Saturday morning, and I hope that if you have not been there that you will pray about being there. We have been going through the book of Job; it has been a wonderful, wonderful study— convicting study. And you will be familiar if you have been there, that Satan accused Job before God, and thus accused God. Remember that Satan spoke evil against God, accusing Job of serving God only for what he could get out of it. Turn with me to Job chapter 1 for a moment, I want to read this portion, Job 1:1. Job, Psalms, Proverbs. Job was most likely around the time of Abraham, the patriarchs. We have in verse one:

¹ ***There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job, (and that's not 'job', that's 'Job') and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil.*** (That is God's description of Job. And if you go down to verse six, He says,) ⁶ ***Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.*** (These are angels presenting themselves before the Lord, and evidentially there were probably fallen angels and elect angels. And Satan came with them.) ⁷ ***And the LORD said to Satan, "From where do you come?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it."*** ⁸ ***And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? (You see, Satan is the accuser of the brethren, so he has been roaming around, he is going to accuse somebody, so God says have you considered my servant Job?) For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil."*** ⁹ ***Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing?"*** ¹⁰ ***"Hast Thou not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land."*** ¹¹ ***"But put forth Thy hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse Thee to Thy face." [Job 1:1, 6-11]***

You see, Satan's accusation was that God is a liar, that Job was not upright and blameless. Satan was accusing Job, basically saying that if God took away everything, that Job would curse Him to His face, that basically Job was serving God for the stuff that He gave him on this earth. And praise the Lord, we see very clearly that Job was a true servant of the Lord, that he served and he endured. And we see in James chapter five, that ***"...you have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful" [James 5:11b]***. That God was compassionate in the end, that He was using the situation that Satan brought about, that God allowed to purify Job, to educate him, to discipline him in a way that he would even be walking closer, and he endured by faith.

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Now why do I bring this up? Because every true believer is a servant of the living God. Yet sometimes our old motives can creep in, and wickedness can creep into our lives. And God is faithful to weed those things out, that we might serve Him without guile or wickedness. We might start to serve Him for what He could do for us now, and God is faithful to weed that out. We might start seeing ourselves as something more important than others, as God blesses the service that He does through us. And God is faithful to weed that out. And why bring this up today? I believe we are going to see this right away with the apostles. That the Lord Jesus is going to weed out of them pride; He is going to weed out of them an attitude that is detrimental and deadly to any true servant of the living God.

So with that in mind I think we are going to see the question— or we are going to have the question answered of us— “Why do you serve God; what is the motive for serving the Lord Jesus Christ?” Some of you are going, “Well I’m not really even serving Him...” Well I would say, “Are you really saved?” But for those of you who are truly serving Christ, why do you serve Him? Let’s turn in our Bibles to Matthew chapter 20, verses 1-16, the passage we are going to look at today. And this is a really difficult passage. There are a zillion different interpretations. It is a parable that Jesus gives, and it is a very simple parable, but the interpretations are very difficult. But I believe if we study it, we will be able to gather from this passage what God wants us to know, whether we understand all the details or not.

Remember the context of the book of Matthew. We have seen that Jesus is King. He is King Jesus, the King of the Jews. He has come to earth; the Christ has taken on human flesh. “...**You shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins**” [Mat 1:21]. He has come to His own people, the Jews, they are sitting in darkness and they saw a great light, but yet they had rejected Him. They did not outright reject Him; they wanted the miracles and stuff from Jesus, but they had rejected Him. We saw the Lord Jesus condemning the generation as an evil and adulterous generation— evil in their hearts and minds, spiritually adulterous. We saw the Pharisees and the leaders who wanted to kill Jesus, who wanted to destroy Him. We saw very clearly the Lord Jesus had been teaching and preaching, and that He had affirmed His person and the Word of truth with the miraculous. We saw as they had hardened their hearts and closed their ears and closed their eyes that Jesus began to speak to them in parables, to turn away from the multitudes, to focus on His disciples as He set His heart toward the cross. We saw very clearly that He must go to Jerusalem, that He must suffer under the hands of the leaders and be killed and buried and be raised on the third day. It is within this context that Jesus has been giving the disciples (and us) many wonderful lessons.

We saw very clearly how we are to address a sinning brother, as the disciples were trying to see who was the greatest, “Who is the greatest?” And Jesus declares who the greatest is, and He brings an infant, one who is totally dependent, in Matthew 18, one who is totally unable to do anything. Unless we are like this child, believing and trusting in Jesus alone, we are not going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

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And we saw very clearly the value of His sheep, that they are very valuable. And that Jesus goes personally after those sheep who stray. That He addresses sin in the body of Christ through the body of Christ. We saw that we are to respond rightly to those who are repentant, to those who ask for forgiveness.

In the context of the Pharisees' accusations in chapter 19, we saw what God has to say about marriage, about divorce and about singleness. And we saw very clearly, as Nick read the portion from another passage, how Jesus evangelized someone who appeared to be seeking Him, who appeared to be interested, this rich, young, synagogue ruler, but was unwilling to humble himself to give up his self-righteousness based on his unwillingness to give up his riches to follow Jesus. And we saw Jesus as He shared with His disciples in their amazement as they said "Who could be saved then?" If this guy could not make it, who could be saved? He said, "**with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible**" [Matthew 19:26]. Salvation is of the living God and not of man.

And then we saw Peter's question which really keys off of what we are going to see today. To really gain an understanding into our passage in chapter 20, we need to understand what we looked at two weeks ago. So I am going to read that portion and move into this passage. So let's take a look now at Matthew chapter 19, and we are going to look back at verse 27. This is Peter responding after Jesus has said that it is harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom; it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle— it is impossible. And Peter recognizes that Jesus had said earlier that if this rich man humbled himself, gave it all up to follow Christ, if he truly turned and repented, he would have treasure in Heaven. And now Peter has this question, verse 27:

²⁷ Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; ("We are not like that guy who did not leave his stuff and follow you, who walked away grieving. We have left it all!") what then will there be for us?" ²⁸ (This is important here. "What then will there be for us?") And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, (and the other versions say "for the gospel's sake" too) shall receive many times as much, (and also in Mark we see "in this life" is added in there) and shall inherit eternal life. ³⁰ "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first. (And then our passage). ¹"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² "And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; ⁴ and to those he said, 'You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. ⁵ "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. ⁶ "And about the eleventh hour he went out, and

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found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' ⁷ "They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You too go into the vineyard.'⁸ "And when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.'⁹ "And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.¹⁰ "And when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius.¹¹ "And when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner,¹² saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.'¹³ "But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?' ¹⁴ 'Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.¹⁵ 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ "Thus the last shall be first, and the first last." [Matthew 19:27-20:16]

Now as I shared before, this is not an easy parable to interpret; there are all kinds of different possibilities to whom Jesus is directing this to. And I believe we need to understand that we need not get caught up in the minutia, that God has intended this for a certain reason in its context, and I believe we can know that, without understanding all the elements of the parable. There are some pastors and teachers who will say that the parable is about salvation. Some will say it is about the Jews and the Gentiles. Some will say it is about eternal rewards, some will say it is about temporal rewards. Some say it is simply about serving. This is not an easy parable to interpret. And indeed over the past few weeks I have been struggling in the Lord over this.

Now folks, for those of you who know me, when Scripture is clear, I am very dogmatic. In this case I am not totally sure so I am not going to be dogmatic, but I am going to give you my opinion. But with that opinion, I believe the results that we gather from it are absolutely what we need to know, regardless of whether we understand this parable completely or not. So we may not come out with a full understanding of the parable, but my hope is we will come out with the exact understanding of what Jesus wanted us to know— first His disciples and then the body of Christ.

Now I need to share a couple things concerning parables just to review and remind us; it has been a little while since we have seen some parables. The term “parable”—“*parabole*”—“*para*” means “alongside” “*bole*” means “to throw”. It speaks of throwing something alongside; it speaks of giving an illustration or an example alongside something to help illumine the meaning. And we have seen that parables, you cannot understand them apart from an explanation. That the Lord God used parables to actually veil His truth as we saw back in chapter 13, and then He explained it to those that the Father had determined could hear and understand.

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Now in our parable here we do have an explanation. We have a summary statement that explains what He is talking about. And hopefully we will be able to understand what this parable says. Now again I want to warn you, in any type of parable, we do not want to go down to every little piece and try and attach different Biblical truths to every area—it won't work. It is a parable. If you try to find every little detail in the story and try to attach a Biblical truth to it, you are going to err in your interpretation. It is a story that the Lord God gave to shed light on a truth, and that is what we need to understand. So we need to see it in its context and then gather what the Spirit of God inspired Matthew to share here.

Now first of all, I think to understand this parable we have to be reminded of the occasion of this parable. As I have shared earlier, the rich, young synagogue ruler who loved money came to Jesus asking how he might inherit eternal life, and Jesus Christ confronted him with His Word, and then He confronted his sin. And we saw very clearly that this man was unwilling to give up everything he trusted in, which was his riches. And he turned away and walked away from Christ rather than following Christ. And we saw, as I have shared earlier, the impossibility of men on their own effort entering the Kingdom. It is impossible. If you are trying to do “the Christian thing” to be saved, it will not work. Even everything we share here, when we share from the pulpit it is to those who are saved, who have the Spirit of God enabling them to obey. If you do not know Christ you should be frustrated and on your knees, “I can't do this!” You should be crying out for salvation. Then we saw the question—this is really important—back to chapter 19, verse 27: “Then Peter answered and said to Him, ‘Behold, we have left everything and followed You.’” Lord, we left it all. There is nothing wrong with what he says. But there is a seed as we will see into an area of temptation, and as we will see, pride, and a lack of humility in his question at this point. “What then will there be for us?” This is the occasion of the parable: “what then will there be for us?”

Now last time we really did not address the motive behind this question because Jesus did not initially address the motive; He actually answers Peter's question, and He shares the wonderful, glorious truth for those who have followed Him. Specifically the apostles, that in the regeneration in the Kingdom, that they would be over the twelve tribes of Israel, and then for everyone who has left father, mother, houses, whatever it might be, will receive a hundred times as much, as Mark says, “in this life, and eternal life.” When you come to faith, yes, you may lose relationships, but you gain all those wonderful relationships in the body of Christ. You may lose your house, you may lose your stuff, but you have treasure in Heaven. You have a God who is preparing a place for you right now that where He is, you may be with Him. We gain immense blessings in light of the losses that happen when we follow Christ—immense blessings.

But at this point coming into chapter 20, we see that Jesus is going to address an attitude that Peter has. Look at the end of chapter 19, verse 30: “But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.” And in our parable Jesus begins, “for”—He is going to explain what He just said in that statement. Now this is a maxim that we see in Scripture. And it can be applied Biblically to many different levels we see in

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Scripture, and that is why this parable is so hard to interpret. In general, like with the rich, young ruler, he appeared to be prominent and first, and he will be last, and not in salvation, but last. As scripture says in Matthew 16:26, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" So on that level it applies, but it also applies in the context of followers of Jesus Christ. Those who are greatest in the Kingdom, remember? Matthew 18:4, those who are humble like a child, those who are totally dependent. There are those who trust Christ that are totally dependent, and they will be greater in the kingdom than those who are prideful and exalted. The first will be last, and the last, first.

But now this moves into our parable in which Jesus, I believe, will address the issue that arises and has arisen in Peter's heart, and may have arisen in your hearts. You see, some of us have served the Lord for a long time. By God's grace we have been faithful, but we can be tempted in the midst of this to see those who have not served Christ for a long time experiencing the very blessings that we were blessed with in the body of Christ. We might be tempted to actually believe that we deserve more because we have served longer— thus our parable.

Chapter 20, verse 1: "For the Kingdom of Heaven is like..." He is going to give a parable, He is going to say "The Kingdom of Heaven is like this." Notice the "for," He connects, "the first will be last and the last first," then look at it, verse 16 of chapter 20, notice His summary: "Thus the last shall be first; and the first, last." This parable is an explanation of what Jesus says concerning the last, first and the first, last. And we see here Peter's question, "what will there be for us?" We gave up everything. Don't we deserve a lot? Don't we deserve more? We will see. Verse 1, chapter 20: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." This parable is actually very simple; we are going to roll through it, it is actually not complicated to understand. We are going to roll through it; we are going to look at it and try to gain understanding into it as we go along. But the basic story in the parable is very, very easy to understand. "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." Jesus is illustrating what He said, "the last will be first, and the first last," and He is speaking of the kingdom of heaven.

Well, what is the kingdom of heaven? We see in the book of Luke and other synonymous passages that it is the kingdom of God. We see very clearly the kingdom of heaven has to do with the reality of a King. We saw back in chapter 3, John the Baptist saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," and he was pointing ultimately to Christ. We saw the Lord Jesus Himself preach in Matthew 4:17, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And if you will remember that kingdoms are associated with kings. Kingdoms are the sphere in which a king reigns. And we saw that Jesus is the King, He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the One who reigns over heaven, He is the One who reigns over the hearts of the redeemed; He is the One who will reign on this earth, He is the One who will reign forever and ever and ever. He is the One who will reign; He will bring forth His judgment. And folks, because of sin, we are separated from the King. Because of sin we are separated from King Jesus. We are in rebellion towards God because of sin, we have rebelled against Him. And it is only when our sins are forgiven that we are delivered into the kingdom of God, Colossians chapter 1—turn there for a minute. Colossians 1:13. Speaking to believers, the apostle Paul writes to the Colossian church, he says, "**For He**

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delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” [Colossians 1:13]. You see, when you repent of your sins and trust in Christ, you are transferred into the sphere and reign of King Jesus, a good, wonderful King who came and gave Himself for us— a gracious, kind, merciful God, a loving God. And so we have here, “the kingdom is like—” the sphere in which Jesus reigns is like this. And He’s going to give an illustration; He’s going to give a parable.

He says here, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” Simple parable: The landowner, the guy who owns a plot of land, he has got a vineyard on it, he goes out early in the morning to hire laborers—that would be day laborers—he is going to hire day laborers to work in his vineyard. And notice, you know, just a side note here, it is the landowner that does the seeking of the laborers, by the way, he is the one that goes out.

Notice in verse 2 what happens: “And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.” This first group that he goes to early in the morning, he makes an agreement with them for a denarius, or a dinar, what it is is basically a day’s wage. It was a coin that was a day’s wage represented. And he made a deal with them, he made an agreement, and they agreed, and he sent them into his vineyard. Remember this parable is about the kingdom. The landowner obviously represents God, and the laborers in the parable as we will see appear to be kingdom citizens serving the vineyard. Now remember it is a parable—don’t get caught up into it that we get paid to go serve—this is a parable.

So what happens next, verse 3: “And he went out about the third hour...” and basically what you have got here is the Jews, they ordered their day in terms of hours. You have, you know, the third hour would be 9am, the sixth hour would be 12 noon, the ninth hour would be 3pm and the twelfth hour, that would be 6:00, right? That makes sense, right? So he says here, at “...about the third hour and (he) saw others standing idle in the market place; (verse 3) ⁴ and to those he said, ‘You too go into the vineyard (and notice what he says here,) whatever is right I will give you.’” You see he didn’t start at the beginning of the day. He is saying instead of a denarius, he did not make an agreement, he says, “whatever is right I will give you.” And so they went. It is about 9am. And here again it is the landowner seeking out servants. They are his laborers, he is seeking them out.

Now, a lot have made issues about this; this is where we need to be careful not to get into this, but a lot have said these third hour guys must have been lazy because Scripture says they were standing idle at the end of verse 3. They say they were lazy workers, that is why they were standing idle. And I do not believe that; look at the context. Notice the end of verse 3, they were actually in the marketplace. That is the place that someone would come to hire you—they wanted work. And obviously they went out when hired and did work. I do not believe they were lazy at all. It is just a parable. And on a side note, brothers and sisters, this caused me to think about those out of work. I hope you are not spending your time goofing around at your house. I hope you are diligently getting up early and getting out and going to look for work. I hope you are being diligent in your job search, otherwise it is sin. I hope you are

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spending your time seeking to work, making your job search your job. Enough of that, you know Scripture, if you do not work, you do not eat. You see these laborers, they wanted to work, they were out there ready for work, they were day laborers ready to work.

Now notice the next group and the rest that are hired, they do not make agreements. Again, verse 3:

³And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; ⁴ and to those he said, 'You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. ⁵Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. (And then we have at the end, it is about 5pm, verse 6) ⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You too go into the vineyard.' [Matthew 20:3-7]

Hey, they were willing to work but no one hired them, and they got hired at this last hour.

So then, you have a landowner who goes out looking for laborers for his vineyard. You see him, and some start early, some start a little later, some start a little later, and some start *really* late, at the end of the day almost. Now notice here at this point, the laborers are summoned to receive their wages, verse 8. "And when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.'" So again, it is a parable. The landowner has called the foreman, he says "Gather up the laborers and pay them their wages." He gives them an instruction: beginning with the last group to the first.

Now there are a lot of different people, again, who try to attach all sorts of things to this parable. Certainly the landowner represents God, but they say the foreman represents Christ, and I do not see that in this. I just see a parable where it's a foreman who is over the laborers. It is just a parable. Either way, we see he begins to pay them from the last to the first. And notice he is very clearly the owner of the vineyard. Notice that in the middle of verse 8, "the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman." And at this point we have a surprise as the last are paid first. Verse 9: "And when those hired about the eleventh hour (now that's 5pm, and 6pm would be quitting time) came, each one received a denarius."¹⁰ "And when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius." So you get the scene. You have the landowner who pays those who came last a day's wage, even though they had not worked a day. Remember he had made an agreement with them, "I will pay you what is just." And we see very clearly they received a day's wage.

And so we see Jesus now in this parable is getting at the core of the issue of the motive of the heart, as we will see. He is going to unveil the motives of the heart of Peter and maybe some of us. Here in this parable they were focused on what they would get in comparison to others. Look at the middle of verse 10: "they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius." That first group, the landowner had agreed with them as Jesus shares in the story, to one denarius, and this last

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group got paid a denarius, and this first group is thinking, “Hey, we worked all day, we are going to get more than a denarius.” But what happens? That does not happen. In verse 11, what happens? “And when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner,¹² saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’”

Folks, this is not good. God hates grumbling. We see very clearly in 1 Corinthians 10 relating to the Old Testament, those who grumbled were destroyed by the destroyer. God hates grumbling. The word speaks of mumbling under your breath, it speaks of discontent. And here it is verbalized at the landowner. It says, “...they grumbled at the landowner,¹² saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’”

Now this little portion here has caused people to say, “Maybe these guys are not saved,” and I am not sure, but I have a hard time with that interpretation. I think we are going to see clearly he in this context, they would be saved, and I believe Jesus is preemptively addressing the attitudes that arise and would arise in the apostles who were the first. The attitudes that would arise among those who had done so much for Christ among so many who would come in so much later. The attitudes that maybe you and I might be tempted to have if you serve Christ, that you have done so much for Christ. And yet those who have come to Christ late in life have done nothing for Him; they have spurned Him all their lives and are receiving the same blessing. We could be tempted to grumble at God because we believe that sometimes maybe it is not fair. Notice the way they are talking: “¹²...These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.” They are basically saying, “We do not think you are fair” in this parable. They do not believe the landowner is fair.

Yet notice in contrast the owner’s gracious explanation. And we will see he is a fair and sovereign and good landowner; and ultimately God is fair, just, good and sovereign. Verse 13: “¹³ “But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ ‘Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. ¹⁵ ‘Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’”

The landowner calls this first set of laborers and goes to one and says, “friend.” This word is not the normal word for friend that we would see in Scripture, it speaks of a casual acquaintance. It is used almost exclusively in Scripture in a negative context, although I do not believe it is negative in and of itself—it just speaks of a casual acquaintance. We see Jesus shared this same thing with Judas: “Friend, are you betraying me?” basically. We see in the parable of the wedding feast in chapter 22 of Matthew that the one who did not have wedding clothes, “friend,” the one says to him in the parable. I do not think it is a negative context; this has caused some to believe this word actually means “false friend” and I do not think that is what it means—it is just a casual acquaintance. “Friend.” “‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ ‘Take what is yours and go your way...’ ¹⁴ ‘Take

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what is yours and go your way..." (Take what is yours and go your way) ¹⁵ "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? (It is his own.) Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" The landowner is just and right, it is his money, it is his own land, he is sovereign over it, he can do as he pleases. He made an agreement with them for a denarius and he gave them a denarius, but he points out the real root problem, which is the root problem for you and I at times, and would be, as we see, a root problem for the apostles and disciples also. "Or is your eye envious because I am generous?"

The word "envious," the Greek word *poneros*, speaks of that which is evil. Is your eye evil; do you have an evil eye? And the term "generous" actually is the word that is translated good. Are you evil because I am good? Is your eye evil because I am good? Are you envious in that context? So then it is a very simple parable. But yet, you are saying, "What does it mean?" What does the first mean, what does the last mean, what does it mean in its context? Notice the summary, verse 16: "Thus the last shall be first, and the first last." That is the summary, the word *houtos*: "thus." In light of what I have just said, "the last shall be first, and the first last." And the King James adds the phrase, "many are called, but few are chosen." And the King James comes from a different set of manuscripts; they come from a majority text manuscript, those that had a majority of manuscripts, but they are very late and there are lots of copies and all the monks and scribes kept copying, copying, copying; so we have tons of copies but yet within those copies there are some additions, like this, I believe. The earlier manuscripts which are few, but very accurate, we see it says, "the last shall be first, and the first last." Here the Lord Jesus ties this parable together with what He taught in chapter 19.

So then what is this parable about? It is pretty apparent that the landowner represents God and the workers are those in the Kingdom: "The Kingdom is like a landowner who did this," right? It is pretty apparent that some are called early and some are called late. Some are called early and some are called late. There are those who are saved early in life, who serve the Lord for much of their lives, right? Some of you were called as children and you have trusted Christ; you have continued throughout your whole life— this is really geared toward you. Some of you have followed Christ, you have served Him faithfully, but you might be tempted to be jealous. Some have squandered their lives and God has called them late in life, and they have been saved—truly saved. Truly saved.

I believe this parable is directed first of all to the apostles who were first to follow Christ—they were the first. And it is a warning for them. And I believe they would be tempted to act just like the people in the parable, to become envious of those who received the same blessings and benefits, quite possibly the gentiles also coming in later.

I do not believe this parable is about eternal life, like some say. I do not believe it is speaking of reward after we die; I believe it is speaking of right in this life now, the blessings that one receives now for following Christ, those blessings which He talked about at the end of chapter 19, those blessings in the body of Christ that every believer receives if they are redeemed, which includes eternal life right now. And it appears that Jesus is addressing an attitude that would be only present in those who are not glorified yet, right? When we are glorified, are we going to have an evil eye? Absolutely not. Are we

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going to be envious when this body of sin has been converted into a glorious, glorified body? Right? We are not going to have sin at that time. So I believe the example is geared toward those in this life now. I believe it speaks of right now.

He is apparently addressing the attitude that could arise in believers, and believe me, have you ever been jealous or envious? Have you ever been envious of how God might bless one believer in this life and not bless you? Situations that appear to be totally different in their life even though they are following Christ, they are not sinning, but you are in such hardship and they might not be in that hardship? Have you ever been tempted to look at other people's lives who are Christians, and compare?

These apostles were about to try to determine who is the greatest. They had clearly been doing that, hadn't they? They had been clearly doing that earlier. Look at Matthew 18, go back a little bit. They were tempted at this point to elevate themselves, and whenever you elevate yourself, you have to elevate yourself compared to someone else, right? Matthew chapter 18, verse 1: ***"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" [Matthew 18:1]*** See, that is the problem. Go to Matthew 20, a little farther past our passage, to verse 20, and we see the same issue arising in a different shade. You see, these apostles were following Christ, they had given up everything, but they were also looking to be great. They were looking for something that maybe God was not wanting to give them. Maybe they had a slight evil eye as we can have at times also. Matthew 20:20:

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him (nothing like having your mother do your bidding for an adult, grown man, right?) with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him. ²¹ And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left." (That is a pretty serious request!) ²² But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" (That's going to die, right? That is the cup He was going to drink.) They said to Him, "We are able." (Uh oh.) ²³ He said to them, "My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father." ²⁴ And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. [Matthew 20:20-24]

They were upset that the brothers were trying to get a better position in the Kingdom. So these people, 11 saved, 1 the son of perdition, these apostles, they were tempted like you and I are tempted. And I believe the Lord Jesus is cutting off at the pass this evil eye that compares with other Christians in the body. And when we have that evil eye it is a sign of pride. It is a sign that we are going to be last, not first. We see later on in Matthew, very clearly, that the last will be first, and the first will be last.

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So then, you have these disciples vying for positions. You have Peter saying, “What will there be for me?” and Jesus shares this parable. And He is warning Peter, and He is warning you and I. “Thus the last shall be first and the first, last.” Now, I am not going to be dogmatic in my interpretation, but I think that is the point that is being made here. I think He is addressing the disciples’ attitudes and our attitudes. And I believe there are some important lessons that derive and come out of this passage that we can all learn. Let me share a couple of these principles.

First of all, we should never see serving Christ as a job deserving of a wage. Don’t you ever think it is a due to get something from Christ, brothers and sisters. If you are not saved— that is an evidence you are not saved, if you are trying to do something to get salvation. But we believers can slowly go back into this mode. It is a glorious privilege, granted by our gracious God, to serve the living God. Peter says, “What then will there be for us?” I think Jesus was cutting off at the pass this sinful attitude. Remember what Satan accused Job, and thus God? “Job serves You for something he gets from You.” Do you serve Christ for the appreciation you get? Do you serve Christ for what people see? Don’t ever do that. The first will be last and the last, first. Don’t ever do that. Humble yourself, humble yourself. You see, if you are a true believer, you will have turned to serve Christ for the right reasons. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 we saw that they turned to serve the living God, they turned from idols. But yes, we can be corrupted over time by our sinfulness. We can start having the opinion, “Who is the greatest, what will there be for me?” And that is the wrong attitude.

And God perfectly designed this parable to confront the sinful mindset that if you are honest, maybe you might have said in some way, shape or form, “I don’t think it was fair what the landowner did.” You may even feel sympathy for the first laborers because they bore the brunt of the burden. They did all the work, and some came in at the very end and got paid the same amount. You may be saying in your heart of hearts, “Actually, that is not fair!” This shows that we can become prideful, that we think we are doing something worthy of reward. That’s serving Christ for what we can get. Apart from Christ we can do nothing. We can do nothing. It is Christ through us as we abide in Him and trust in Him, His word working out of us, that we are able to accomplish, and God gets all the glory, and we get the blessing of walking in a right relationship with the living God. We have the blessing of a new family in that context, the wonderful blessings we have now, here.

But our eyes can be pulled off, we can become prideful. Maybe some of you have been serving Christ for a long time; you have been faithful. You have faithfully served Him. You have born the burden all your life. Maybe you are jealous as you see others come into the kingdom who have not served Christ at all, and yet they have the same blessings in this life. Confess your sin. Confess your sin.

Let me share a passage in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy chapter 10, let’s look there together. Deuteronomy chapter 10. And as you are going backwards in the Old Testament, put your finger in 1 Samuel 12 as you go by there. And you can look on the front of your bulletins too, if you want. As you are going there, there is one pastor who writes (Ray Pritchard): “That’s why Jesus told this story. He knew we would instinctively root for the wrong side! What is the root cause of our grumbling? It is envy

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— a belief that others are getting what they do not deserve and we are not getting what we do deserve. Ladies and gentlemen, the reason we root for the wrong side is because we think we are like that early group that worked so hard. In our own eyes, we work so hard and receive so little in return, while others do so little and receive so much.” Deuteronomy 10:20: ***“You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall (what?) serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name. ²¹ “He is your praise and He is your God, who has done these great and awesome things for you which your eyes have seen” [Deuteronomy 10:20-21].*** These were the Israelites. He was pointing back to their deliverance from the Egyptians, their redemption from bondage; He is saying He has done these great things in your eyes. And we have been delivered from our sin unto Him; He has done great things. 1 Samuel 12:24, as Samuel gives a farewell, he says ²⁴ ***“Only fear the LORD and serve Him in truth with all your heart...”*** (Fear Him, serve Him in truth with ALL your heart, not half-hearted! Do not be double minded. Do not be hot and cold. With all your heart. And then notice why,) ***“...for consider what great things He has done for you” [1 Samuel 12:24].*** Not what great things He is going to give you, what great things He has done for you. What Christ has done should motivate us to serve this wonderful, loving God. We should never be serving Christ as a job deserving of a wage. Serving is a glorious privilege.

What is the second major principle here? It is pretty obvious: so that we do not get tripped up in our own selfishness. Do not compare your life with others, just follow Jesus. Do not compare your life with others, just follow Jesus! It is so easy to look at someone who may have the same gifting and compare, to look at someone, or whatever it might be, and compare. Do not compare, follow Jesus! He is sovereign over your situation, He is just, and He has differing plans for each one of us. Another pastor (Alfred Plummer) writes, “God keeps His promises to those who serve Him, but He remains master in His own world. He is the sole judge of what each servant ought to receive. No one receives less than has been promised but many receive more. And in these uncovenanted awards there are much that, in man’s eyes, seems to be unfair, but God sees not as man sees, and shall not the judge of all the earth do right?” Shall not the judge of the earth do right? God has chosen in the context of believers, some to be wealthy, some not, some to suffer more, some not to suffer as much. God is sovereign over your circumstances. He has chosen the giftings that He has given each one in the body of Christ. There are different giftings. He has differing plans; do not compare. Some people are saved late in life; some people are saved early in life. Do not compare.

Turn with me to John chapter 21 and we will see Peter again. John 21:18. This is after the Lord has restored him, after Jesus has risen from the dead. He restores Peter; He restores him. And then we see this statement, John 21:18. The Lord is speaking to Peter, He says,

¹⁸ ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.”*** (And then John explains it) ¹⁹ ***Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God...”*** (So the Lord Jesus has told Peter, “You know what? You are going to die. And it is not going to be by your own will, you are going to be taken, in that sense. They will

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bring you where you do not wish.” And then it says,) **“And when He had spoken this, He said to him, (look at this) *“Follow Me!”*** (“Follow Me,” that is what Jesus said. Okay? Then) ²⁰ ***Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; (and this is parenthetical) the one who also had leaned back on His breast at the supper, and said, “Lord, who is the one who betrays You?”*** (He is speaking of John, He is reflecting back to that supper, the night He was betrayed. And notice what Peter says as he is looking at John. He sees John and) ²¹ ***Peter therefore seeing him said to Jesus, “Lord, and what about this man?”*** (“Okay, You told me I am going to die; what about John?” Notice the Lord’s answer, verse 22) ²² ***Jesus said to him, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” [John 21:18-22]***

Folks, follow Jesus. Stop comparing your lives with other people. Follow Jesus. It is deadly to compare your life, it is evil. Do not do it. Obey Christ. Follow Jesus, He has differing plans for each one, and they are all spelled out in the Word of God, they manifest differently, but servants are called at different times, and for whatever reason you might be tempted to be jealous. Follow Jesus. What does it matter what God, The Sovereign of the universe, does with another believer? “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow Me.” Does that make sense? Brother and sister, stop trying to compare, to figure out—just follow Jesus. He is Lord, He is sovereign, He is also good and He is just. Just follow Him. And He is generous, as we will see. We should never serve Christ thinking we deserve a wage. We should never compare ourselves with others. We just follow Jesus.

And lastly we need to acknowledge that everything He gives is His blessing. Acknowledge it as His blessing. Back to our passage, Matthew 20, verse 15, the Lord says: ¹⁵ **“Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? (You know what, we have been bought with a price—we are His now. Is it not lawful for Him to do whatever He wishes with us?) Or is your eye (evil, or) envious because I am generous?”** Or good—He was good that He paid those men what they did not deserve. They did not deserve a full day’s wage, but He gave it to them because He is generous. And the ones who agreed, they received a full day’s wage too; they did not get shorted, God is generous. The Lord is good. God does not owe you and I anything— it is all His grace. And we have the wonderful privilege to serve Him, and there are blessings associated with that in this life. We saw those blessings: a wonderful new family in Christ, a home in heaven, treasure stored up—we do not deserve it. Be thankful. God is good and gracious and generous. Hebrews 6:9,

“But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. ¹⁰ For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.” [Hebrews 6:9-10]

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Brother and sister, if God were to allow Satan to take away everything, like Job, would you still trust Him? Would you still serve Him? Why do you serve Christ? Why do you serve Him? What is your motive for serving Christ, brother and sister? We have seen clearly today that believers can fall into sin in serving Christ. And not can—we do—don't we? And we have been warned that the first will be the last and the last will be first. If you are not walking in total humility, depending on Christ, you are not going to be first, you are going to be last. What is your motive for serving Christ? Some of you are not saved because you do not serve Christ at all— your life has nothing to do with Christ— it has to do with you. And that is an evidence like God says through Malachi, ¹⁸ ***"So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him" [Malachi 3:18].*** And the reason why you do not serve Him is because you are not redeemed, because your sin is in the way.

God is a gracious God. He sent His son Jesus to die for your sins. He paid the penalty for your sins, and He calls out to you to repent and turn to Him, confessing your sin and believing in Jesus Christ, the God who died and rose from the dead. Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved, as we see in Romans 10:13. And then He will give you a heart and a desire to truly serve Him. To serve Him. Some of you say you serve the Lord but you really don't. I used to be that way. I used to say, "Yeah, I am a Christian, I serve the Lord," and I did not serve Him at all. It was a bunch of bologna, it was fake, it was not true. I knew the truth, but I did not know the Lord. And the Lord convicted me with this passage, Joshua 24:14. Let's turn there as we close, Joshua 24:14. The Lord would rather you be hot or cold. If you are in between you are going to think you are saved, and you are going to go to Hell. If you are cold, at least you know you need Christ. Joshua 24:14:

¹⁴ "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and (look at what it says) serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ "And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, (Joshua says) we will serve the LORD." [Joshua 24:14-15]

Choose this day. Choose this day.

And lastly, some of you have been faithfully serving Christ— not perfectly, I know that. If anyone says that they have no sin, they are liars, right? Some of you have been serving Christ; you have been faithful, you have exerted energy, you have been trusting Christ, you have been obedient, and it has taken a toll. And you see others who have sinned all their lives and now are walking in a blessed relationship, and you are tempted to be jealous. They may not even be going through trials like you are and you are tempted to be jealous. God is sovereign, follow Him. Forget the other people—love them—but forget comparing and follow Christ. When you are tempted to be envious, confess it, it is an evil eye. We see very clearly that the apostles did learn the lesson. They wanted to know who was the greatest, but they eventually understood, as we see Peter, he understood, they understood. They

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learned the lesson. I pray that we learn this lesson. “Only fear the Lord and serve Him in truth with all your heart—for consider what great things He has done for you.” [1 Samuel 12:24]

Prayer

Lord, I thank You for all the opportunities You give us truly to serve You. You commanded us, “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another...” as we see in 1 Peter 4:10. We are commanded to serve You, together. We should be serving our spouses; we should be serving our families, as we trust You. We should be serving in our work. You have given us wonderful things to do in the midst of difficult times. Father, I pray we would not compare. I pray we would not be tempted in any way to serve You for anything other than the fact Your Son Jesus died for our sins. He came and gave Himself for us. He bore our sins in His body on the cross, and He rose from the dead. He loves us. You love us. May we serve because of that. And may we serve out of joy and gratitude and thankfulness with a sincere heart and truth. I pray for those here who have been caught up in looking at other people. I pray they would recognize You are sovereign, they would confess their evil eye and then they would just follow. Father when we are tempted to do this, please remind us of Your Word that we would turn and trust Christ and follow Him alone. Thank you for Your Word now. We praise You, in Jesus’ name, amen.

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