

The Parables of Jesus

- The Workers in the Vineyard

-Matthew 20:1-16

This parable is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. In context, this parable is given after the "Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge" which is found in Luke 18:2-8. In Matthew 19:1, it tells us that, "...he departed from Galilee, and came into the coasts of Judea beyond Jordan;"

This actually lines up with same time frame as found in Luke 17:11, "And it came to pass, as he went to Jerusalem, that he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee."

Jesus was continuing to teach based on questions he was asked concerning forsaking all that you have and realizing that your true riches are in heaven. In Matthew, Jesus just concludes his discussion with "the rich young ruler." In both Matthew and Luke we see that the response of this young man to Jesus telling him to leave it all to follow him was not a good one. He did not care for the answer Jesus gave him so he simply walked away.

In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus then speaks these same words:

- Matthew 19:23-24 - "...Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."
- Luke 18:24, 25 - "...How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."
- In both, Matthew 19:25 and Luke 18:26 the disciples cry out: "...Who then can be saved?"

The disciples responded this way because of Jewish "tradition." There was a "traditional religious view" that a rich person, because they were rich, would ultimately have to be "blessed by God." Being "blessed by God," they therefore, must be a "righteous son of Abraham" in the eyes of God. In being a righteous son of Abraham, that person's eternal salvation would be assured. Jesus was showing them that that was not the truth - just "tradition."

Throughout His ministry, Jesus was always bringing forth the message that salvation had nothing to do with being from the "seed of Abraham." It had everything to do with believing and walking in God's ways, which He came to exhibit in His lifestyle. Believing in Jesus and who He is, as well as choosing to follow and live the lifestyle He exemplified, was the way to eternal salvation.

Within that context, Peter blurts out, "Lo, we have left all, and followed thee." (Luke 18:28) "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?" (Matthew 19:27) Peter's statement was not really a question but rather, to be honest, it was more of a boast.

He was inferring that all of the disciples left much behind. Peter, as well as Andrew, James and John had left a "profitable fishing business." Matthew did very well as a tax collector. We can be pretty much certain that the rest of the disciples were doing well when they "left everything" to follow Jesus. Therefore, this would be a natural thought that would cross all of their minds and hearts when Jesus said what He said to the "rich young ruler." Peter was under a prideful impression of thinking that because they had "forsaken all" to follow Jesus, then therefore, how great their reward should be - at least according to him.

In Matthew's account, Jesus leads into this next parable by stating in Matthew 19:28-30, "Verily I say unto you, that ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. **But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.**" Jesus then proceeds in Matthew 20:1, to give the "Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard."

The Parable of the "Workers in the Vineyard" - Matthew 20:1-16 - *"For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the **last shall be first, and the first last**: for many be called, but few chosen."*

Let's review the main "characters of this parable:

1. The "householder" or we can say the owner of the vineyard - This is clearly representative of God, the Father
2. The "steward" - The steward in this parable was the one who would ultimately give the day's wages to the laborers. This is representative of Jesus, the ultimate faithful Servant, who is the "steward" of God's Kingdom in which all the laborers of the "vineyard" would be working with and receiving their job functions of what to do within the vineyard.
3. The "vineyard" - The term "vineyard" is always used in reference to God's field, Israel as well as all that are upon the earth.
4. The "laborers" - These "laborers" refer to all the believers. They represent all the disciples of Jesus who are called to bring forth God's Kingdom throughout the earth. They represent disciples from the time of the first twelve and every other disciple throughout the ages until Jesus returns.
5. The "evening" - This is representative of the end of this age.

The planting, maintaining and harvesting of vineyards was hard work requiring hard physical labor. It was not unusual for additional laborers to be hired to get all the work done. The owner of this particular vineyard went early in the morning and hired laborers at a certain wage.

The wage was a "penny" which, in the monetary system of that time, would have been referred to as a "denarius." A "denarius" is thought by some to be what the daily wage to a Roman soldier would be. This meaning that it was a fairly generous wage to begin with. The workers in this first group were more than happy to work for such a generous wage.

As the day progressed and more workers were hired, the specific wage to be paid to these additional workers was never mentioned. However, the landowner promised to *pay "whatever is right."* Altogether, four groups of workers were hired, the last group just one hour before the end of the day.

When "evening" came and the wages were to be paid, the landowner paid the last group first. The first group of workers watched as each one of the last group of workers were paid one denarius each. Therefore, they were naturally thinking they would be paid more since they had worked the longest.

Their "anger" against the landowner began to rise up when they saw that they were being paid the same amount as those in the last group of laborers. After all, they had worked possibly 10-12 hours and the last ones only worked one hour. However, they originally agreed to work for the "one denarius" which was the landowner's most generous offer (they thought at the time) when they were hired. The landowner was then forced to defend his actions to the first group, even though he had dealt with them in perfect fairness according to their agreement when they began.

So what was Jesus teaching His disciples in this parable? This parable does seem to be a complicated one. Jesus mentions in His teaching just prior to this parable, the phrase in Matthew 20:30, "*But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.*" He then gives this parable to explain what that concept truly is to be within the hearts of his disciples. It is one that all of Jesus' disciples, including us today, need to "own." It is a vital aspect of having the correct attitude of heart of a disciple of Jesus.

He concludes the parable with the same phrase but he also adds another phrase to it that gives this parable a greater impact concerning the attitude of heart of a disciple of Jesus. Matthew 20:16 - "***So the last shall be first and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.***" Let's discuss the first part of Matthew 20:16 - "*So the last shall be first, and the first last...*"

When Jesus first used this phrase in Matthew 19:30, He did so at the conclusion of His lesson to the disciples through the encounter with the "rich young ruler." In that context, He used this phrase to let them know that they would be greatly rewarded in heaven for what they had given up on earth (Matthew 19:27-29). He was using it to bring a contrast between the "rich young ruler" who was unwilling to give up much of anything for Christ's sake (verses 16-22) to those that were willing to give it all up to follow after Jesus.

In essence, Jesus was telling the disciples that those who would be considered "last" by those in this world would become "first." This was referring to Jesus' disciples (both then and today) who gave up and left "everything behind" (the worldly and carnal desire of the things of this world) to follow Him and His lifestyle. They would be "first" in the things of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Conversely, those who would be considered "first" in this world because of all their worldly riches would be "last" when it came to Kingdom business. These are those that chose and placed the things of this world before Jesus, thinking they were self-sufficient in their own riches and lifestyle. They would be the last to find the Kingdom because the attitude of their heart was incorrect. This led to Peter's statement and "boast" that was implying that, "Yes, we have left all to follow you so therefore, how very "great" will be our reward. Isn't that right Jesus?"

Jesus then tells them the "Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard" to correct Peter's wrong attitude of heart. This incorrect attitude of heart would lead to them having wrong motives for why they were following Jesus. This needed to be corrected immediately.

Being a disciple of Jesus is not about getting greater rewards. We see this in the parable because all of the laborers no matter when they started received the same reward for their labor. So it is and will be with all of the disciples of Jesus.

The hard-working laborers, who toiled from the very beginning, complained that the others, who did not work as long, were paid an amount equal to what they received. In other words, they saw their labor as being "worthy" of greater compensation than the others. They considered the labor of the ones who came on later to be of less value and therefore, less worthy of the same reward that they all received.

Jesus ends the parable with this first part of Matthew 20:16, *"The last will be first, and the first last..."* Based on the context of the parable, the use of this phrase by Jesus was for the purpose of keeping the disciples on track concerning what the correct attitude of their heart should be. The attitude of heart of any disciple of Jesus should never be a "what's in for me" attitude, although there are many blessings to being a disciple of Jesus. Instead, it should be all about bringing forth the Kingdom of God to this earth and bringing glory and honor to our God.

Jesus was teaching His disciples that it does not matter how long or how hard a believer/disciple works in doing Kingdom business during their lifetime. It is the motive, the attitude of heart that is important. We must ask ourselves when serving the Lord, "Why am I doing what I am doing? Am I doing it with the correct attitude of heart as a true servant or am I doing it thinking that the more I do the more I will get."

In reality, the "reward" for all of the disciples of Jesus is **eternal life**. This is the "reward" or "wage" that will be the same "reward" or "wage" given to all of Jesus' disciples no matter when they "came on" as fellow laborers in God's "vineyard." The reward all believers receive equally is **eternal life** in the presence of God, the Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We know that the scripture does teach that there are various "rewards" referred to as "crowns. Those "crowns," when received by the believer, will never be worn by the believer. When we do receive those "crowns," we will toss them at the feet of Jesus as an act of worship unto the One who is truly worthy of it all. However, the ultimate reward for all believers of eternal life will be given, equally.

Jesus was actually saying that the attitude of heart of those first 12 disciples who were with Him from the "beginning of the day," should be that of a **true servant's heart** putting all those that would come after them "first in line." Notice that the laborers that came on in the last hour were paid first by the landowner.

The landowner was not being a respecter of persons to anyone. The last ones hired were the first ones paid. The first ones hired were paid last. However, the wages were equal. In the landowner's mind and heart he looked upon each one as equal. That is the heart and mindset of God. That is how the Kingdom of God operates. That is the heart and lifestyle of a true servant of the Lord. That is the heart of Jesus.

*"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. **Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:** Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."* - Philippians 2:3-8

Let's now discuss the second part of Matthew 20:16 - *"for **many be called, but few chosen.**"* Note before we continue - This phrase is also used by Jesus in Matthew 22:16 at the conclusion to the "Parable of the Wedding Feast." We will discuss its meaning in the context of that parable and teaching when we come to it. For the time being we will discuss its usage within the context of the parable we are discussing.

In the context of this parable, this phrase used here concerns the doing of the works of the Kingdom of God. The scriptures tell us that God desires that no one perish but desires all to come to repentance and ask Jesus to come into their heart and be saved. He literally is "calling" out to everyone. We discussed this in the parable of the "Invitation to a Great Banquet" - Luke 14:16-24

The term "chosen" used here refers to those that heard, received and chose to accept God's invitation and became disciples of Jesus and children of the Most High God. It refers to those whose "attitude of heart" has changed to be as the one that they have chosen to follow - Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

This phrase also refers us back to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His words found in Matthew 7:15-23 as He states, "*Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. **Ye shall know them by their fruits.** Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. **Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.** Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. **Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.**"*

This definitely teaches us that it is **not the works** that reveal who is the true disciple of Jesus but rather **it is the "fruit," the character and attitude of heart**, that truly reveals who is that true disciple of Jesus.

One last thought on this phrase, "*for many be called, but few chosen.*" We see how this principle applied to those who were right there with Jesus. All twelve of the disciples were "called" by Jesus. However, only eleven truly became the "chosen."

One chose to "opt out" and do things his way. This we know was Judas. He did not believe and change the attitude of his heart to that of the heart of Jesus. He walked with Jesus. He actually was sent out with the other disciples and did indeed do the works of the Kingdom (Luke 9:1, 2, 10). However, his "fruit" was not that of one whose heart was changed. Judas had been "called," but was not found to be among the "chosen."

Jesus was trying to teach His disciples, as well as His disciples today through this parable, that we must have the correct attitude of heart in being a true disciple of His. The attitude of heart for a disciple of Jesus should never be one that is looking for "what's in it for me." The correct attitude of heart for a disciple of Jesus is one that gives first priority to others, as well as putting the works and things of the Kingdom of God before anything of self - it is to be all about God, not self. It is living the lifestyle that expresses, "*...the last shall be first and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.*"