

Oh God, reveal your glory through the preaching of your word until every heart confesses Christ is Lord. Not just in this moment we pray that, but that's the mission of God---sending forth a proclamation of his word through your life and my life and our neighborhoods and workplaces and Uganda and Mexico, Japan, all around the globe, so that as his word is proclaimed---the good news of grace in Christ alone---he does that particular work that's his alone, to regenerate a heart. That's an amazing thing, isn't it?

There's a commercial that's currently running on TV---I don't even know the product that it's for---but it depicts this man in a grocery store line---any given grocery will do---and he's got a cart of groceries, and there's a guy behind him with one or two items, and so this man graciously steps aside and lets this guy go forward. And when that guy who was given the place in line goes to check out, balloons and streamers and confetti drop, and he's the fiftieth thousandth-whatever customer, and a huge check is presented. The celebration is kind of in the forefront, it's not really the focus of the camera anymore. The camera pans and comes in on a close-up of this guy's face---the guy who moved to the side. And in his face says it all. It says what's welling up inside his heart, what is there for all of us when we're experiencing that kind of thing, and that's those words that maybe we've said too often and heard maybe also too often: 'THAT'S NOT FAIR!! That's not fair!' This guy standing there, he wanted to be that guy. Because in his heart, somehow he thinks that he deserves to be that guy, regardless that it's the grocery store's prerogative to do what they want with their reward celebration---fifty thousandth customer reward stuff. Regardless of that, he's supposed to be that guy and he's not. And what makes matters even worse, he's not because he stepped aside and did something kind.

That's the kind of entitlement that is rumbling around in our hearts. By nature that's what's there. That's us. That's sinful man erupting and kind of boiling and sometimes over the surface coming out. The parable that we look at today in this sermon series on the parables of Christ, is a parable that Jesus uses to probe that sense of entitlement, the sense that we are deserving of something when we're not really deserving of something good. And when we don't get what we think we are deserving of, it sets forth a series of complaints. Those complaints set in motion make us feel justified in crying foul, foul, against our fellow man, but more tragically, foul against our great God himself.

So we're going to read the parable, but we're going to begin with the verse that precedes the parable's introduction in verse 30 of chapter 19 of the gospel of Matthew. God's word for us today.

"But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you 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 a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last."

May God add his blessing to the reading of his word, to our hearing, and to this message. Let me pray for us in that regard. Father, we do pray now that you would attend to this preaching. That God, you'd give our hearts the ability to hear the truth that you have for us today. Lord, draw us close. We ask for that in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.

This parable is thrown alongside an encounter that occurs in the later part of chapter 19, and it's the context that's important for us to understand this parable---the meaning of the parable. You may be familiar with the encounter that Jesus had with the rich young man. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that this man came to Jesus with the notion that he had achieved a righteous record sufficient enough to inherit eternal life. Because when he asked, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus asked him, 'What do the commandments say?' And he starts touting his record. He says, I've kept all those from my youth. Jesus recognized the young man's heart needed to be exposed a little bit more---the slavish devotion to his wealth. And he said, 'One thing you lack. Go and sell all that you have, give it to the poor, then come and follow me.' Matthew records, [along with] the other gospel writers, that the man went away sad because he was of great wealth. So the disciples are just seeing that encounter, and they're wondering what it means, then, to be saved---how can one be saved? Here is a rich man. That was a sign, in the Jewish tradition, of God's blessing. So here's a man who says he's kept a lot of God's commands, he's got the blessing of God, and yet he's being told this is probably not one who's inherited eternal life. And they're perplexed, and they go to ask questions, and Jesus does something masterful here.

The astonishing departure of the young, arrogant man is a teachable moment for the disciples. It's for us who are in the church. Here's another parable, just like the one we looked at last week, where the setting is the disciples. This is a teaching for those who follow Christ. And Jesus, before he gets to the story, wants to make very clear the terms by which a sinful man is reconciled, made right, justified before a holy God. It's a matter of the heart. It's always a matter of the heart. The human heart that is prone to rebel and not give God glory is graciously transformed at God's initiative by God's Spirit. He renews the mind by God's truth, he deepens the heart's apprehension of the grace of God, who gives Jesus Christ as a substitute for sinners---sinners like you and sinners like me. That's how man is saved. And Jesus is teaching the nature of salvation, the necessity of God's grace, and the focus that must remain on the generosity of a gracious God throughout our entire walk with Christ. That's how this parable comes about.

A couple of things before we dive into the parable itself. Look, if you have a Bible, but maybe if you're jotting down notes---in Matthew 19:16 the young man inquires about inheriting eternal life. In Matthew 19:23 Jesus uses the phrase 'kingdom of heaven.' In verse 24 he uses the phrase 'kingdom of God.' In verse 25 the disciples ask the question, while discussing the exact same topic, 'Who can be saved?' In Matthew 19:29 as part of Jesus's answer he uses the phrase again 'inherit eternal life.' Do you see what's happening there? All those phrases are synonyms for the same thing: entry into the kingdom, participation in the kingdom of God, to be saved, to have eternal life as your security. And so it's fitting, with Jesus making things clear by way of the parable, that he begins the story of a landowner, "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." unto these things.

What we have here is a parable that describes God's grace. Why. Because our hearts desperately need to remember that it's all of grace. It's not our works that God looks on with favor and draws us to himself, and it's not our works after we've come to faith that are the thing that secures or keeps us in God. It's all of grace.

You see one more thing before we get into the parable. You see Peter again? Remember last week's parable? It was prompted by a question by Peter. Here's Peter again, asking a question, wondering out loud---and thank

you, Peter, we appreciate that, because maybe that's where we were, too. He sees the encounter with the young man, he hears from Jesus's mouth the response, and then he asks the question, 'Well, then who can be saved?' This seems impossible. And Jesus confirms, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." You see that doesn't then take on this little cutesy truism kind of phraseology---With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible---put it on a bumper sticker, wear it on a T-shirt. What Jesus is saying there is, with man it is impossible to be saved, but with God all things are possible. He saves---to the uttermost---sinners. Even in that sentence Jesus's speech is dripping with grace. It's impossible for man to be saved, if man thinks he's going to earn God's salvation, but with God all things are possible.

You see, what that does is it takes it from the realm of a quaint truism, and it makes Jesus Christ our only hope. He is our only hope of salvation. And throughout his entire ministry he made that exclusive claim: I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me, through my work, my finished work, my righteousness, my sacrifice on the cross, my blood shed to cover your sins. That's what Jesus is preaching. Praise be to God.

So Peter's like, wait a second. That heart of entitlement, that guy in the grocery store line, the close-up camera coming in on Peter if there were such a thing. Lord, we've left everything and we've followed you. What will we have? That's in Matthew 19. Peter is just right....he just heard Jesus say...it's all of grace, Peter. And Peter starts holding up, 'Look what we've done.' And Jesus answers him, and it's as if Jesus says these words: Peter, for those who follow me there will be no disappointment. When I come into my glorious throne, whatever you have lost for my sake will not only not be missed, but when you try to imagine how it's replaced and added to, your mind can't grasp it. It's all of grace, Peter. It glorifies God, Peter. It exalts Christ, Peter. But you can't imagine the glory of it all. There's no disappointment in those who follow me. It's all of grace. And when we take our eyes off that fact, the self-centered heart tends to show up and display discontentment, and when discontentment is present, it means that there's something out of focus in these eyes of faith.

So the parable. Jesus gives us this parable. Whenever we read a parable of Christ, what he gives detail to in the story, we need to pay attention to the detail. And when he simply passes over detail, we don't need to speculate. So Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven..." for his disciples gathered there with him, he says, "...it's like a master of the house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." The landowner had a vineyard, a crop of grapes were ready to be harvested. I don't know much about anything about harvesting grapes. But what I do know I learned from reading in preparation for this message. When the grapes are ready there is an urgency to the picking. It needs to take place then and there. And so perhaps that's what we have here---the urgency of this harvest and the master of the house hiring various workers throughout the day. Workers hired, apparently, didn't have any other source of income. They were day laborers. They went to the marketplace as was the custom, and they waited. They were completely at the mercy of another. We see the same scene even in our present day. I've seen this in Mexico, we've heard it spoken about in Ghana, I've seen it in Atlanta when I was a roofer, and just between the two services someone told me that they see a large group of day laborers waiting at Takoma Park near DC every day, dependent on the mercy of another to come by there to pick some workers out and to take them to whatever the project is for the day. That's what going on here. These men are gathered in the marketplace there, awaiting.

And Jesus gives detail about the first arrangement that is arrived at. The arrangement is that for one day's work, you'll receive a denarius pay. Everybody in the commentary says that's a pretty good day's pay. It's not going to make them rich, but it will meet the needs of the family. That's what these men signed on for. The 6 a.m. workers, they were the first ones picked. The arrangement was if you'll work for a denarius, you can go to my vineyard. And they did. They headed off to the vineyard to work. And then for whatever reason---again, Jesus doesn't give us the motivation for the landowner to go out time and time again, but he does. Something

compels him to go out. The landowner goes at 9 a.m. or the third hour, and the arrangement, then is, 'Why are you standing here? Go to my vineyard, and I'll pay you what is right.' See, the language is slightly altered, but the landowner apparently was trustworthy enough that these men went. And then Jesus records that at the sixth hour, or about noon, and then again at the ninth hour, which would have been 3 p.m.---he simply states that the landowner did the same with others. And he's got all these workers in the vineyard. So at this point you can see there are many workers in the Master's vineyard. They're hired at various times throughout the day, comprising different sets of workers.

Once again, the master of the house goes out. Again the reason isn't given by Jesus, but he's compelled to hire more workers. Jesus does however make a point of the exchange between these eleventh hour, 5 p.m., workers, and the master of the house. These are those who now await the setting of the sun, and from their hands no work has been done to this point. They see that the sun is getting low, and if they are not even able to scrape together something, their needs cannot be met. The landowner approaches. 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' The simple answer is this: 'Because no one has hired us.' We were standing here, but we haven't been chosen yet. We're at the mercy of another. More than likely these workers maybe were still unemployed because they were the oldest. Or maybe they were the weakest or maybe they didn't present as good workers. Who knows why they were [passed] over the first several times. They're probably very aware of their deep need, however. And regardless of why they are still idle, the landowner gives them the simple command, 'Go into the vineyard.' And they go.

So Jesus is setting up this story. We've got this scenario, we've got all these workers---they're hired at different times---and everything's coming away. And as a listener, I wonder if the disciples are like we should be at this moment---what's the takeaway? What's the point? What are we supposed to get out of this?....remembering that Peter's asked the question, remembering the things that have gone on, and Jesus is now giving this story to his followers. So he describes the time of settling of accounts. It's payday. It's payday at the end of the day, every day. This is the practice---Leviticus 19:13 speaks of this---it's in other passages of Scripture, where the master of the house says, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages.' He instructs through the foreman. The foreman is well aware of how his master works. 'Now I want you to pay them their wages, beginning with the last up to the first.' Now this may have caught the attention of the hearers, because Jesus has just finished his preface to the parable by saying, "Many who are first will be last, and the last first." So now in the parable that they're listening to, the arrangement of the payday seems out of order. It's topsy-turvy. This may be the take-away, there's something in this, listen closer.

So they're drawn in, even maybe further, to listen. Jesus says that those who were sent into the field at the eleventh hour are placed in the front of the line, and then you've got the 3 o'clock workers and the noon workers and the 9 a.m. workers, and then those men who were hired at the break of dawn, the 6 a.m., workers. That's how the line is set up. And then the foreman dispenses the first pay. The eleventh hour workers are given a full denarius as payment for the one hour that they put in laboring in the vineyard. Huh? What? I wonder if the listener at that point, knowing the denarius better than we do, was like, *Can you split a denarius twelve ways? Like one-twelfth of that would probably be good.* That seems....fair. That seems just. That seems equitable.

What about us? Do we feel anything welling up inside as we listen? Those words that we're so often prone to say---maybe we don't let them all get to the tongue and the lips and fly out, but down here....That's not fair!...seems to be sometimes the cry of our heart. That's not fair! You know, maybe we've moved beyond the distribution of cookies or the size of a piece of pumpkin pie in terms of 'that's not fair.' We're able to give that over. But I wonder if we've moved beyond the fairness game as it relates to deeper struggles---as you observe the marriage of another couple and you make a comparison to your own, or perhaps physically, whether well or sick, you long for something different, physically, than what you've been given. That's not fair! Maybe

'that's not fair' wells up inside when you consider who in your family is walking with the Lord and who is in apparent rebellion to God's word and God's way. Maybe you get that sense when you look back on the choices of your life, and you realize where you are is not where you thought you'd be. And somehow in that progression to this point you say, 'That's not fair.' Maybe the temptation to believe that in this life you're supposed to be having your best life now, and maybe that temptation is gaining more ground in your heart, and 'that's not fair' erupts on more occasions than you're comfortable with. Whatever might be the case for you, consider that feeling for just a moment. Let God's word do what God's word can do for us and in us today. Consider that feeling. Where does it come from? What's feeding that feeling that we aren't getting what we deserve? And even, what drives the notion that what we deserve is going to be something good? I think that's what Jesus is trying to draw out from our hearts through this parable. It's for his followers.

The story he tells goes on to describe the workers who are hired at the first hour, those workers who have been in the field all day long. And they've been watching the scene, they've been watching the payday, and it's safe to assume that if the eleventh hour workers received a denarius, then these others did as well, because when they get up to their point in the line, Jesus uncovers their heart for us in the story and says they thought they should receive more. He just lays it out. Jesus peels back the protective covering of the first workers' hearts and says that upon observing the payment, they were disappointed when they received only a denarius. Only a denarius. Now think back to those men at 5:58 that morning---a.m. They were at the marketplace at the exact same spot that every one of those other workers were. They were at the mercy of another, they had nothing to offer.

And they were chosen, and they were placed the vineyard to work, and the agreement was one denarius. And that's what they received. But they thought it should be more.

It all hangs on where the focus is, right? If the focus is on the self and the notion of what we think we deserve, then everything else gets twisted. If my focus is on me and what I can give to God, then everything gets twisted up. Think about it. Think about the first hour worker watching the payday take place, and they're observing the eleventh hour workers and the other workers. Their focus is on the other workers for a moment. Think about that. If you think about that first hour worker seeing what is taking place with the other workers, I can see the potential for rejoicing springing forth from their heart, their rejoicing that each one of these individuals, regardless of the amount of time they spent in the vineyard, are going to have a day's wage in order to provide for their need. So if their focus is on the other workers, there is rejoicing potential that comes out. Observe the first hour workers if they were looking at the landowner and his foreman. They're seeing a denarius come to each one of these groups. And if their focus is on the landowner and this foreman who's passing out denarii when they weren't earned, I can imagine marveling coming from their hearts. They marvel at the generous landowner, his gracious gift, and the abundance with which he wants to distribute the wealth that he has.

But the first hour workers don't rejoice and they don't marvel. They stew and they grumble and they complain. Jesus records in the story they say, 'These last worked only one hour, and you've made them equal to us! We've borne the burden of the day. It's hot out there---scorching heat.' They just start to tout their record. *Look at what we've done. It doesn't seem fair.* Jesus says the landowner says, 'Let's not talk fairness, but let's talk justice, and let's talk mercy and grace.'

The landowner says, 'Friend...' It's a Greek word, *hetairos*. It's not a term of 'intimate, compassionate friend.' It's a term of 'casual friend.' It doesn't mean there's no relationship. It means that implied here, as it's used in other places, it's like a gentle rebuke. The landowner says, 'Friend, I've not done you any wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? This arguing isn't productive, in other words. You shouldn't be arguing this. You should appreciate what you have.' And then he goes and he vindicates his own honor because he is the landowner and says, 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge me

my generosity.'

This parable is for the believers in Christ. It's for us, beloved. It's for us to see again that our place in the kingdom is all of grace. We were chosen. And Jesus says, so the last will be first and the first last, remember that it's all of grace. Such is the nature of salvation. Such is the way of the kingdom of heaven. All who are saved are saved not by their deserving nor by their devotion. They are saved by the grace of God, whether it be a story like Timothy, who was taught the holy Scriptures from his earliest infancy, which were able to make him wise unto salvation in Jesus Christ---or like the thief who was crucified next to Christ, who had but hours to exist on this planet. Both of those men, saved by grace, seated at the table of the King. That's the picture from this parable. All of us who have at some point in our lives come to an awareness of our need of Jesus Christ the Savior, all of us who have the privilege now to proclaim him, even as we stumble and bumble our way through the vineyard work---to those in Uganda, to those in Mexico to those in King's Contrivance, Ellicott City, Catonsville---we don't have anything other than a gracious King to proclaim. I'm in the kingdom because of God's grace, and that's our message. The disciples, they got that, eventually. You see later on, even in this passage, and in Luke 22 at the Last Supper. They still don't quite get it---they're arguing amongst themselves, who's the greatest. You see James and John's mother coming and saying who can sit at your right and your left. We need this parable. They needed this parable. We all need this because we must remember that it's all of grace.

The way we view this parable is that we didn't come to God on our own. He came to us. God is the landowner. Jesus is his foreman working those payments out. The laborers are believers. The day of work is this present age. A denarius is eternal life in Christ Jesus alone, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, how to be saved, eternal life. Those things all hinge on what Jesus is teaching through this parable.

The parable is an encounter once again with the sovereign grace of God. God's sovereignty in salvation is either a source of great comfort to our heart, or it is a source of consternation. It is either a comfort to know that there's nothing in my hands I bring, but simply to Thy cross I cling, and I don't cling with my strength, either. I cling with the grace-enabled grasp that you give to me. And that should be a great comfort to us, and it should compel us forward by Christ's love to serve and to work. But God's sovereignty can be a consternation to a heart that says no, no, no---I have something here to offer. Please take note of me and what I can do. God says your righteousness is like a filthy rag. It's a stench to my nostrils. Good works, I think Martin Luther said, that the Christian not only repents of his sin, but he repents of his good works. It's all of grace all the time.

You'll see the principles there at the end of the outline. I know the time is short, so we probably won't spend a lot of time on those. But we take these principles away, because these highlight the grace of God. Have you thought these through recently? I'm indebted to John MacArthur for bringing some of these principles to light for me.

God initiates and God completes salvation. He is the landowner and he does what he wants with what he has. Salvation belongs to the Lord who sits on the throne.

God establishes the terms of our salvation. He does that through Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus said when asked the question, 'What work must we do to do the work of God?' Jesus answered in John 6. 'This is the work of God, that you believe in the one whom God sent.' Believe, trust, receive Jesus Christ. That is it.

God is continually drawing people to salvation. Even this morning, even in this place, the landowner is about the business of calling workers into his vineyard. We've got to believe that. He's continually drawing people,

and no one comes to Christ unless the Father draws him. Jesus promised to those who believe they are being called, that he will raise them up on the last day. They're secure in him.

God saves with no partiality. The writer of the New Testament---most of the letters---the writer, the apostle Paul, makes that very clear in Romans chapter 2 he says, 'God shows no partiality.' I want this to be our clarion call, our motto. There is no partiality in God. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 1 Paul says, 'Consider your calling. Not many of you were noble. Not many of you were wise. Not many of you strong. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. He chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. He chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.' That's the message of grace. That's what we proclaim. It's not about what I could do for God, it's about what he's done for me. He saved me from my sin.

And he richly meets my greatest need according to his sovereign grace. The denarius day's wage was what each of those workers needed at the beginning of the day. A denarius day's wage for us is eternal life in Jesus Christ. All of us need to be saved by another because we are incapable of earning that on our own.

So God calls diversely skilled and gifted workers into his vineyard. We have a body of believers here and the church of Jesus Christ universal. It's made up of all kinds of people. You're not supposed to be me, and I'm not supposed to be you. You have gifts and skills that you bring to the occasion, and I have gifts and skills that I bring to the occasion. And when we bring them together in the body of Christ, Christ is honored.

That's another principle from this parable---that God would take this and work this deep enough so that our evangelism would be motivated by God's grace, our service to one another would be motivated by God's grace, our love for one another would be motivated by God's grace. Because what we deserve is God's wrath forever and ever, and what he's chosen to give to us, beloved, is grace unmeasured, an inheritance that is kept in heaven for us, that never spoils or fades. Joint heirs with Christ, wonderful good news.

Let's pray and ask the Holy Spirit to drive down deep. Lord, we do pray that you would take what you can, Lord, from this word and make our hearts more aware of our need of Jesus. And Lord Jesus, show us your great sacrifice on our behalf. All we have is Christ. Hallelujah. Jesus is our life. And we pray that you would make us people who love to proclaim the good news of Christ's blood shed for sinners like us. In his name we pray. Amen.