

The Last Shall Be First - radio

The scripture for our sermon today is from Matt. 19:27 through Matt. 20:6.

“19:27 Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore? 19:28 And Jesus said unto them, 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. 19:29 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. 19:30 But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first. 20:1 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. 20:2 And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. 20:3 And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 20:4 And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. 20:5 Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. 20:6 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? 20:7 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. 20:8 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. 20:9 And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. 20:10 But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. 20:11 And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, 20:12 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. 20:13 But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? 20:14 Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as

unto thee. 20:15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? 20:16 So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen” (Matt. 19:27-30; 20:1-16).

I’ve entitled this message, “The Last shall be first”. In scripture, God uses the nation of Israel to demonstrate that salvation depends not on the choice and will and work of men, but on the Lord alone. The nation of the Jews constitute the largest God-given example of a people who heard the Gospel, but were not saved by it. The fundamental reason why God’s word did not produce salvation in most that were in that nation is because they were not chosen by God to eternal life. “*Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel*” (Rom. 9:6). All men, according to scripture, transgress God’s law, hate God, and reject His salvation. The only reason any are saved is because God chooses to save them out of His free and sovereign grace. This is the overarching lesson taught here. Salvation is owing to God’s saving choice. “*Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded*” (Rom. 11:7). In this parable, the “last” are those who appear to themselves and to men to be the least likely to be saved. In this parable, the “first” are those who appear to men and think themselves to be the most likely to receive God’s favor. But in this parable, our Lord Jesus pricks the bladder of man’s pride by showing that the natural man thinks evil of Christ because He is gracious to undeserving sinners. At the same time, He comforts trembling, believing sinners by revealing that in the kingdom of heaven, the least likely are both chosen and effectually called to eternal salvation in Christ and blessed with every grace for Christ’s sake alone. The most likely are called externally, but refuse to submit to that call because they reject Christ and cling to their own righteousness (Rom. 10:3). But the effect of God’s electing love is His call of sinners to salvation in Christ by a call that actually accomplishes what He intends: that we call upon Christ and look to Christ with God-given saving faith. All whom the Lord chose before the foundation of the world will be given eternal glory. But many are called in Gospel preaching who hold fast to their own righteousness, and so fall in eternal ruin and receive the just reward of their ways. This is a summary of what this parable teaches.

Let us first, consider the elements in this parable.

- In this parable, The goodman of the household and the Lord of the vineyard is Jesus Christ the Lord God. Hebrews 3 says of Christ, “*Whose house are we if we hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end*” (Heb. 3:6). Christ is the son. Believers are His household. He is the Lord. Believers are His vineyard.
- The vineyard is the Church of God. Paul told the Corinthians, “*Ye are God’s husbandry*” (1 Cor. 3:9). God is the husbandman over His vineyard. His vineyard are His people, the elect of God.
- The laborers in the parable represent everyone who hears the Gospel. We know that the laborers are those who hear the Gospel because at the end of the parable Jesus sums up the matter by saying, “*Many are called, but few are chosen*” (Matt. 20:16). All laborers in the parable were called. But only some of those called received grace. They represent those who are eternally chosen by Christ to salvation (John 13:18). As the Lord of the vineyard called laborers to work in His vineyard, so Christ by the preaching of the Gospel calls His elect to believe Him by effectual, life-giving operations of His Spirit. The work that the laborers do in the parable is attributed as either a work of faith and labor of love (1 Thess. 1:3), and as the eleventh hour laborers represent, or as a work of debt and a labor of legal compensation, as was the full day laborers represent.
- The day in the parable is the period of time in which work may be done. The day therefore represents all that God requires of every man.
- The end of the day is the time of reckoning, the Day of Judgment. Every man shall receive a reward on that day.
- The penny is the compensation made to the laborers. This is the reward for a full day’s work. If someone fulfills God’s requirement, he is rewarded with life. Some think they do all that God requires and therefore have a right to eternal life. To these, God pays in justice, as those who agreed to labor a full day. The eleventh hour laborers received the reward of a full day’s work. But they only labored part of the day. Their reward is the reward of grace.

- And in the parable The agreement made by the full day's laborers is represents the conditions on man's personal obedience in the covenant of works, and their agreement to work to obtain God's blessings and eternal life by doing what God requires. But the eleventh hour workers were told they would be given what was "right." They trusted the Lord of the vineyard to give as it seemed good to Him.

There are at least eight lessons taught in this parable:

1. **First, The Lord alone makes the difference.** Jesus summed up the parable in v16 by saying, "*Many be called, but few chosen.*" If you and I are saved with an eternal salvation, it will by God's choice and grace alone (x2). Only His choice of grace to give eternal salvation in Christ makes the difference between a hell-deserving sinner and an adopted son of God (Eph. 1:3-6)! Paul said, "*Who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it (but earned it)*" (1 Cor. 4:7)? When we learn that our salvation depends on God's choice, not our decision; His will, and not our will; our initial reaction may well be anxiety, because we naturally think that God's blessings depend on what we do. But our anxiety is quieted when we realize that if anything were left up to us in salvation, we would be utterly and hopelessly lost! This is what the law of God teaches. The law makes God's blessings and rewards conditioned upon our personal obedience. In the law, God says "*if a man do, he shall live*" (Lev. 18:5). The law demands that we do all that God commands, and that we can only live if we do all. If we fail to do one part of the law, we will die. "*Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them*" (Gal. 3:10). But the result of this arrangement, in which blessings and rewards are conditioned on us, is that we are proven to be, in our very nature, guilty and lawless and opposed to God and our own salvation (Rom. 3:19-20; 5:20; 8:7; Gal. 3:22; 2 Tim. 2:25). Therefore, salvation must be by God's grace and His saving work alone, or we will never be saved! Would you rather that your salvation depended on God choosing you, or on you choosing God? Would you rather that your

salvation depended on God's will to save you, or your will to be saved? Would you rather that your salvation depended on Christ's work alone, or depended on your work in some part? Do you want your salvation to depend on your own faithfulness, or Christ's faithfulness? Can you rest in a salvation that depends on your love, or do you only find peace and rest knowing God's love for His own is everlasting, unalterable and will not fail to have the objects of His love in spite of their helplessness in sin? The love of God in Christ is stronger than sin and death (Song. 8:6-7)?! The answer to these questions, if you are Christ's, is that you look only to Him and flee for refuge to Him! With the Psalmist, you exclaim, "*1 Truly my soul waiteth upon God: from him cometh my salvation. 2 **He only is my rock and my salvation; he is my defence; I shall not be greatly moved**" (Ps. 62:1-2). Only if Christ is all of my salvation can I stand unshaken in life, in death and in the Day of Judgment "*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love*" (1 John 4:18)!*

2. The Second lesson in this parable is that, **God does give rewards.** "*Verily, there is a reward for the righteous*" (Ps. 58:11).
 - a. But those in the parable who labored for a reward were paid out of justice according to the agreement they made when they were hired. The apostle Paul said, "*Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt*" (Rom. 4:4). If we work for a reward from God, our reward cannot be a reward of grace. If we work for it, it can only be compensation from God for what He owes us as our due, our wages. All such payment from God can only result in death, because all that we do, even our very best, is nothing more than filthy rags in God's sight (Rom. 6:23; Isa. 64:6)! If we think to get God to bless us or reward us or save us by what we do, we arrogantly imagine that God is our debtor. We think we can do something that God must recognize and reward! But all such thinking only increases our own indebtedness to God because of our sin. God cannot be any man's debtor because He gives us all that we have. Solomon said, "*Of thine own have we given thee*" (1 Chr. 29:14). And the Spirit of God, to

humble high minded man, said, “**35** *Who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? 36* *For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever*” (Rom. 11:35-36). Acts 17 says, “**24** *God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; 25* *Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things*” (Acts 17:24-25). God needs nothing from man! He made all things! He gives life and breath and all things to every man! No one ever gives to God but what He has already first given to them! If I work, expecting God to repay my labor, I will be rewarded according to God’s justice, and not according to His grace! And justice will discover me to be God’s debtor, not Him my debtor! If I work to earn a reward from God, I attempt to make myself God’s creditor and make God my debtor! What kind of arrogance is this?! It is the arrogance of an ignorant, blind, sinful man, thinking he can elevate himself above God and subject God as a debtor to his thoughts and actions! But if God blesses any, it will be purely out of His grace, not a reward or repayment. If we think to receive salvation or blessings or grace from God by our work, God must deal with us on the basis of His holy law! We cannot have it both ways! “*If by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if [it be] of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work*” (Rom. 11:6)!

- b. Notice, however, that in this parable, **those who were hired by grace, were rewarded according to grace**. Though there was but one hour remaining in the day, the goodman hired them! And they were compensated for a full day’s work. Here again God reveals the principle of His grace: “*To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness*” (Rom. 4:5). That God would reward a man for grace that He gives is entirely contrary to our natural thinking. God’s reward to a believer is never a reward for work, but a reward of His grace. Scripture gives

several examples of this. Jesus said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" Now, no one is poor in spirit but those made poor by the operation of God's own Spirit (Ps. 51; Ps. 107; John 16:8-11). And what a blessing it is when I am enabled to realize in my conscience that I do not have one thing of all that God requires of me! I am poor and bankrupt before God! I have a great debt, but I have nothing to pay! I owe perfect obedience, but cannot fulfill one thing of all that God requires. My soul is hungry and thirsty, but I have spent all my labor and wasted all my money on everything that cannot satisfy (Isa. 55)! I must be given the bread and milk of the Gospel of salvation in Christ alone without any payment on my part, but by God's free grace alone! It is indeed a great blessing to be poor in spirit. God requires it. But it is a gift of His grace. And Jesus said that there is a reward for this God-given grace: "*theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt. 5:3). When I am enabled by God-given faith to know that God looks to Christ for all that He requires of me, that when He received the Lord Jesus Christ when He raised Him from the dead, that He received me with Him, then I have the reward of grace, the reward of the grace of God-given faith. That reward is joy and peace in believing (Rom. 15:13)!

Therefore, all rewards that God gives believers, are the rewards of His grace. Can I earn one thing that God gives by grace alone? Can I earn the gift of repentance and forgiveness of my sins from Christ on His throne? "*Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins*" (Acts 5:31). What can I do to earn the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ? Rom. 5:17 says righteousness is a gift. What can you do to earn eternal life and eternal glory? Rom. 6:23 says eternal life is a gift. What can you do to earn the indwelling Spirit of God, spiritual life and every grace from Him? Gal. 4:6 says the Spirit of God is given to us because we are the sons of God by eternal adoption and by Christ's redeeming blood (Eph. 1:4-6; Gal. 4:4-6). What can you do to earn God's adopting love, to earn being the sons of God? 1 John 3:1

says, “Behold *what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God*” (1 John 3:1)! What can you do to earn the everlasting love of God?! Hosea 14:4 says, “*I will love them freely*” (Hosea 14:4)! What can you do to earn the gift of God’s own dear Son, the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8), the Prince of Life (Acts 3:15)?! To all of these questions we must answer: There is absolutely nothing a dead sinner can do! And there is absolutely nothing a saved sinner can do to earn one thing from God. **All rewards that God gives believing sinners, are rewards of His grace in Christ.** He finds reason in Himself alone, and gave His only Son to make His gift of grace a just compensation to undeserving sinners!

3. **Third, The Lord gives what belongs to Him, to whom He will as it pleases Him.** Jesus asked those who opposed His grace, “*Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?*” It is right for God to give grace to whom He will. It is always right to lavish kindness and favor on the undeserving. God’s grace not only gives what is not earned and what is unearnable, but God’s grace gives what His justice demands so that He is both just and gracious in all of His gifts. It is right for Christ to be gracious, because God is the standard of right, therefore, if Christ did it, it must be right. It is right because God’s gift of salvation and eternal glory to His people in Christ magnifies God’s glory. He makes known all the perfections of His character in His Son by His doing and by His dying for sinners! There we see His grace! There we see His justice, His wisdom, His power, His holiness, His faithfulness, His truth, in short, we see all that God is in Jesus Christ and Him crucified (Heb. 1:3)! Therefore, it is right for the Lord to give graciously by Jesus Christ!
4. **Fourth, The Lord gives exceeding abundantly far above all that we ask or think** (Eph. 3:20). Everyone was surprised that the Lord gave a full day’s wage for only one hour of work! Such grace was unexpectedly more than they supposed should be given! Truly, our Lord Jesus Christ is gracious!! Those who worked only one hour received a full day’s compensation. And so it is in the Gospel. The full day’s labor in this parable represents everything God requires of us. If we could keep the law perfectly,

completely and continuously, then we would be given life. But, “*if there had been a law which could have given life, verily, righteousness would have been by the law*” (Gal. 3:21). The fact is, there is no law by which we can be righteous (Rom. 8:1-4). Therefore eternal life by keeping the law is impossible! We are sinners. God is holy. Sin must be punished. We cannot satisfy the smallest part of God’s justice by suffering God’s punishment against our sin. Nor can we obey one thing of all that God requires of us to be righteous (Deut. 6:25). “*There is none righteous, no, not one*” Rom. 3:10). Yet by His great grace, our great God and Savior gives all things to us in Christ. He gives all things to us consistent with His gift of His Son as a propitiatory sacrifice (Rom. 8:32). God’s grace gives exceeding abundantly far above all that we ask or think or deserve. And in Christ, God gives all that is required to make His grace a just compensation (Rom. 3:26)!!

5. **Fifth, Those who live by works will be judged by their works** (Rom. 4:4-5). Those who think and live by the principle that they will be rewarded for what they do, thinking God saves and rewards and blesses on the basis of their personal obedience, will receive just compensation from Christ on the basis of His justice. All that men do who work for reward, they do out of fear of punishment or to gain a blessing from God. They live under a covenant of works in which they have made a mental agreement with God to be compensated according to what they do. In their very conscience, unbelievers think God will only bless or curse them based on what He finds and sees in them, even if only in some part. But Jesus said, “*Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny?*” They agreed to work a full day for one penny. The day represents the complete time in which work may be done. Therefore, a full day represents all God requires of men. Those who worked a full day thought that they had fulfilled all God required by their work. But when Christ gave them their due, they grumbled, faulting His goodness.
6. **Sixth, Those who live by works find all of Christ’s service to be a burden.** Peter said to Jesus, “*We have left all and followed thee. What shall we have*” (Matt. 19:27)? Peter thought that he had given much, therefore he should be compensated accordingly. But Jesus spoke this parable to correct

all such thinking. When we think God deals with us on the basis of our works, we view all that we do as a burden and self-sacrifice. The laborers who worked all day took pleasure in their own suffering and thought highly of themselves because they served even though it was a burden to them. “*We have borne the heat and burden of the day*” (Matt. 20:12)! The only way we will find service to Christ to be a joy is if we are called by grace and given grace to see that our salvation is entirely in Christ, and that we are therefore free from sin and the law of God to serve Christ for nothing but His honor and in thankfulness Him! As God told Moses to tell Pharaoh, “*Let my people go that they may serve me*” (Ex. 8:1)! It is a fact. I cannot serve God, I cannot worship Him, unless I am enabled in my conscience to see that God, by His free grace, has already received from Christ all that He requires of me! Only then will I love and worship and give all that I have in joyful thankfulness. “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service*” (Rom. 12:1). We only love much if, when we had nothing to pay, we were forgiven much (Luke 7:42,47)!

7. **Seventh, Those who live by works hate Christ and His grace.** Those who live before God and men on the principle of works and rewards, accuse Christ of being unfair for sovereignly giving grace to the undeserving, and they envy those who receive salvation and blessings and rewards apart from their works, because they think they deserve salvation and blessing and rewards by their works! Jesus asked the full day laborer, “*Is thine eye evil because I am good*” (Matt. 20:15)?! If I charge God of being unfair because He saves and blesses and gives grace to whom He will as it pleases Him, then by this I show that I am evil because He is good! What greater evil is there than that evil that is excited by Christ’s good grace! Such evil reveals what we think of God: that He owes us and is greedy like us! But haven’t we learned that if we receive what God owes us, we will only receive everlasting punishment!? Therefore, we must look and call and come to Christ for mercy, for grace unearned, for blessings God only gives for what He finds in His Son!

8. Eighth, **Many who hear the Gospel will not be saved**. There will be many on the last day who have received external blessings of the Gospel, who will not receive eternal blessings from God; they will not be saved. Jesus said, *“Many are called, but few are chosen.”* I want to know how I can know that I am chosen of God! In John 13, when Jesus, told Peter, *“If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me”* (John 13:8). Peter immediately replied, *“Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head”* (John 13:9). Peter needed one thing: to be with Christ and to have only what he had in Christ! Peter did leave everything and followed Jesus. He could not live apart from Him (John 6:68-69)! This is the evidence of being chosen and called with a saving call. How do I know the Lord Jesus Christ has chosen me? Because He called me by His grace to look only to Christ, to desire only what I am in Him (Php. 3:9). I know He has called me, because when He calls in the preaching of Christ crucified, I call upon Him! The Psalmist said, *“The righteous cry, and the LORD heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles”* (Ps. 34:17). Do you call on Christ to save you knowing you cannot do one thing to save yourself? Do you look only to Him? Is He all your cleansing and acceptance and holiness before God? Or do you have something else that comforts you and gives you peace in addition to His word and what He has done? Every believer is taught by the Spirit of God to say, *“As for me, I will call upon God; and the LORD shall save me. Evening, and morning, and at noon will I pray, and cry aloud: and He shall hear my voice”* (Ps. 55:16-17). The evidence of being chosen by God to salvation is that the result God intends by His call is actually achieved in us: we call upon Him. To call is to cry from the inner man out of a believing heart, looking to Christ, finding every reason in myself why God should reject me, yet finding in Christ every reason why God receives me! God’s call to us causes us to call on Him by abandoning all that may be called mine and coming to God by all that is Christ’s. Saving faith is looking to Christ away from all that I am, and finding in Him all that God has for sinners! **The called call**. *“Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called [to be] saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of*

Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2-3).