

Sunday,  
September 20, 2020

## What It Isn't

Grace, Mercy and Peace be to you from God our Father, from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. In our gospel this morning we heard the very familiar parable of the landowner and the laborers in the vineyard. It begins by saying the Kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Let's break that down because that's the foundation of the message of this parable; an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

First of all, that phrase, the Kingdom of heaven. What does that phrase actually mean? Throughout the New Testament the Kingdom of heaven is a reference to God's active work in this world. It could be God's active work in this world through His Son Jesus Christ. It could be God's active work in this world through Christ's disciples, the apostles. It could be God's active work in this world through us, you and me, the redeemed.

Who is the master of the house? Well this could be a reference to either the owner of the house, or the overseer, the person hired by the owner of the house, the owner of the vineyard to take care of all of the cares and affairs of the business. Either way that master of the house represents God the Father or God, the Son.

The laborers, they were day laborers. These were not individuals who were a part of the master's household or the masters field workers. They had no contract. They would be hired on a daily basis and since that was the case, they had no steady income. They would go to the town square with the hope that someone might hire them, and they might get paid for the day. Generally speaking, a day worker was delighted if they were hired early in the morning for a whole day's work. They'd be even more excited if they then, the ones who are not contracted that don't have a salary, if they were to receive a denarius. A full day's wage.

And we find that the master of this house goes to the town square early in the morning. This would be 6:00 o'clock in the morning. And to those who are standing there he says, 'hey come and work on my vineyard, I will give you a denarius. OK, again please understand denarius is not equivalent to minimum wage. Denarius is a full day's work and an honest to goodness wage of 1 denarius. This is what a doctor gets, this is what a soldier would get, this is what anyone would get. Were there others who would pay less? Absolutely! So, this was a great opportunity and workers left to go with this master to work in his field. This is a good employer. But there's not enough. The harvest is ready. So, he comes back at the third hour which is 9 AM. And to those who are standing in the town square, he says, 'go work in my vineyard. I will pay you whatever is right.' And they go. He comes back again at the 6th hour, which would be noon and says the same thing. 'Go work, I'll pay what's right. He comes back at the ninth hour, 3:00 in the afternoon. Go out and work I'll pay what's right. He comes back at the 11th hour 5:00 PM. Go work I'll pay you whatever is right.

And at 6:00 o'clock in the evening, when the day is over, he calls the workers in to pay and he tells his steward or whoever, 'start with those that we hired at 5:00 o'clock first.' Those who were hired at 5:00 o'clock come and each one is given a denarius, a wage for a full day's work. The same for those who were hired at 3:00, the same for those who were hired at noon, the same for those who were hired at 9:00 in the morning, the same for those who were hired at 6:00 in the morning. And when those who were hired first came and they got the denarius, they grumbled. Why? Well, you might say well because they didn't get paid fair. That is not why. Let's get down to the very basics.

This is just like we heard in the sermon last week. Cain compared himself and his acceptance to Abel and his acceptance before God. In this case, those who were hired at 6:00 in the morning compared themselves to those who worked and started at 5:00 PM. Their comparison went something like; this they worked for one hour and got a denarius, we worked for 12 hours therefore the fair thing is for us to get 12 denarii. They probably in their grumbling said something like this; 'after all, we all know the early bird catches the worm.' They probably said something like this; 'we are more reliable. We're not the ones who slept in. We're

the ones who got up early. We were the ones who got there first. We were the first ones in the fields. We should get paid more! Not these people who came in 11 hours late!' Now wait a second here, notice I didn't say they slept in for 11 hours, they came into work 11 hours late. Look at what the master said when he hired those at 5:00 PM because it is quite telling. He says, 'why do you stand here idle all day?' Did you catch that? They were there at 6:00 in the morning, at 9:00 in the morning, at noon, at three in the afternoon, and still at 5:00. The master calls them on it. Why are you standing here idle all day? Which tells us they were either lazy, or it reminds me of a movie that I saw where an individual's been unemployed for seven years and his wife defends him by saying, 'well he's waiting for a management position.'

Now imagine that. Add that into the list of the grumbling of those who were hired at 6:00 in the morning. It's not fair, those lazy guys, they stood there did nothing for 11 hours then they come out for work of one hour and they get paid a full day's wage. This is not right! They chose not to work. And on top of it, look at how they responded to that master. They have no accountability because when that master asked them 'why do you stand here idle all day,' their response was 'because no one hired us.' He was there offering to hire them all day long.

Wow! Ask yourself, are the arguments of those at the very beginning, right, justified? And if you're like me, on the face of it, absolutely, there grumbings are justified! But then the point is made, 'not so,' why? When you came to work, I told you I'd give you a denarius and you were more than happy to work for a denarius. It's my money. Shouldn't I be able to give that money away as I see fit? You see again, it takes us back to the danger of comparing ourselves to others. Instead of just being focused on, are we doing right? When we start to compare to others, is when we become like Cain and we start to fall into that pattern we saw last week. When we compare ourselves to others, that leads to jealousy. Jealousy leads to anger; anger leads to rage; rage leads to violence.

So, what was the message of this parable or what is the message we are to get from this parable? well let me begin by saying I can tell you what it is not about. And I'll be very honest, I was shocked this week as

I looked at this reading. This is the prescribed reading, the pericope for this Sunday. So there are many churches right now, focusing on this gospel this parable, and as I read commentaries about how to approach this message, I was shocked because this is what I read and I'm going to quote: "This week's gospel reading is an occasion to highlight the issue of wage stagnation and widening income inequality." Another said, "we are called to engage in acts that right our relationships with the labor on the land." Another, "Maybe the concern is to work within the localized system and provide, if resources allow, funds so that everyone has enough food." And I'm sure that those who wrote those things would say 'this is the Noble thing to do.' 'This is the caring thing to do, this is the loving thing to do, and the gospel is all about love.' And that all sounds very good, but the problem is this. That is not the message of this parable. That is taking scripture out of context and socializing, politicizing, the gospel. And it is dead wrong!

This gospel, this parable begs the question, is it a temporal or an eternal, a spiritual message? Is it a message about the earth with an earthly meaning? Or is it a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly, a spiritual meaning? If you contend it's an earthly story with an earthly meaning, then socialization, political ramifications, all of this kind of stuff would be correct. But I'd like you to consider this, we have to compare it with scripture. Is this what scripture teaches? And as soon as we go to 2 Thessalonians 3: 10 where we read, "If anyone is not willing to work let him not eat." These men had been idle all day so from a scriptural standpoint, they should not eat. Therefore, it cannot be a parable about social justice because it contradicts one of the basic tenets of scripture. It goes all the way back to Genesis; man was created to work and so God put him in the garden to tend the garden and from that time on it was expected that man would work.

So, what is this parable, this earthly story with a heavenly meaning, all about? Well let's frame it shall we? Let's take a look at what comes right before and right after this parable. This is Matthew chapter 20 beginning at verse one. This is where the parable begins the first. Right before is Matthew 19 verse 30 where Jesus says, I quote: "but many who are first, will be last." Well that was his final response to what? That's the very ending of the chapter. What led up to "but many

who are first will be last”? A teacher came to Jesus and asked him the question, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit the Kingdom of God?” Jesus’ first response was; “why do you call me good only God is good?” Then he goes on and he tells this rich teacher; ‘you know the commandments, do them.’ The man’s response is; “all these I have kept from my youth.” To which Jesus says, ‘go sell everything you have, give it to the poor, follow me.’ And he went away dejected, because he was very rich. This is then where Jesus says; ‘it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.’ This was totally contrary to the Hebrew teaching of the time that came from the scribes the Pharisees and teachers. They taught that if you were right with God, God would bless you physically, therefore the more riches you had the closer you were with God and this is what then lead them to well; stealing from the Temple, stealing from the people, putting excise taxes on the sacrifices, and everything else. As they brought in this income gave themselves raises became richer and richer they use that to say to the people we obviously are doing what God says because God is blessing us and you know that because you can see how rich we are. So Jesus says, ‘it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God’ because often times, note I say often times, not always, but often times riches can lead a person to not be more generous, but to seek even more; and to do so at the cost of others.

Now when the disciples here Jesus say this about you know camel going through the eye of a needle; it would be easier than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven; there still with this mind set of well it’s the rich who were being blessed by God, so they respond back, “who then can be saved?” Jesus responds, “with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” And then Peter, the bold talker, we’ve talked about the last couple of Sundays said, “see we’ve left everything and followed you; what then will we have?” That’s what Jesus says to them, ‘there is no one who hasn’t left house and home and family etc. etc. for my namesake, who will not receive 100-fold and inherit eternal life.’ Notice what Jesus is saying. Peter is saying, ‘we’ve left all this.’ Jesus takes it from the action to ‘why would you leave?’ ‘It’s your faith, Peter and anyone who has faith, and put their faith in me above their riches will inherit 100-fold, eternal life.’

Now let me ask you, what would you pay for eternal life? If Amazon had a button there, add to the cart-eternal life, and it was guaranteed; what price tag do you think would be put on that? See, that's what Jesus is talking about. He's talking about the price of salvation. But most of all, he's talking about salvation. What he said rocked their boat, because they thought the rich were the blessed and the ones who were going to heaven. Jesus comes back with, not so. And this is then where he says, 'many who are first, will be last.' Many of those who do you think are first, are very last in the Kingdom of God because they are lost. And that is when he gives this parable. When we look at it, that's what leads up to it. Many who are first will be last.

Now think of the very last words of our gospel this morning. The end of the parable, "so the last will be first, and the first, last. Ironically, do you know what comes right after that? The mother of James and John come to Jesus and request her sons to be at the right hand and the left hand of Christ when he comes in his Kingdom. And so right in the middle of, here's a very rich man and he wants to know how to enter the Kingdom of heaven and when Jesus tells him you know put your faith in action sell everything half give to the poor, follow me. He fails miserably. He's not the first, he's last. Now and it follows with a mother of the disciples saying they've left everything to follow you, so please grant them. That's not what it's about.

You see, what this parable really is about, is about medicine. Medicine for what is called, I will call, "the Jonah syndrome." You heard it in the reading this morning. Jonah was upset that the Ninevites, a gentile group repented and turned to God. He hated them. They had defeated the Israelites in battle. They were an arch enemy and now they believe in the same God and he's angry that God does not smite them. Instead, He chose to save them. And God's response to Jonah is basically this; 'You Jonah are all worked up about a bush. But shouldn't I be concerned about the 120,000 Ninevites? It takes us back again to last week's sermon. God couldn't help but to do everything that he possibly could to say his creation.

And so, this message this parable, an earthly story with the heavenly meaning, is a message to the Jews. You think your first because the gospel message was proclaimed to you first, the Messiah came through your heritage, but the last the gentiles there coming too. It's a message to the disciples, look you left everything to follow me and you've been with me the whole way, but there are going to be those who in the last minute of their life are going to turn to me, and they will be in heaven too. And there will be great rejoicing because of them. Because you've always been a part of me. That doesn't mean there isn't rejoicing in heaven because of you, but that one was lost and that one is saved, and the angels will rejoice in heaven. They go from being last to first and it is a message to the disciples. It is a message to the Jews. It is a message to you and me to rejoice. God doesn't give according to what we earn or think we deserve. God forgets what we have earned. We have earned death through our sins. But all who put their faith in Christ are saved. All who put their faith in Christ, God as we heard last week, forgets their sin. So, if you're a Christian from birth, we don't compare ourselves to the person who becomes a Christian in the last minute of their life. No, we rejoice that they became a Christian in their last minute of life, and we rejoice that we've been Christians our whole life, and our whole life we've had that peace of knowing we belong to God and God will save us and we rejoice because that person, that poor person who comes to faith in Christ in the last minute of their life, they never had peace. Their whole existence on this earth was filled with questions about what happens. What this, what that? I don't like that I am just modified pond scum. What is my purpose in life? It's what is leading to an epidemic in our country right now that no one wants to talk about.

In 2018, in our country, we averaged 132 suicide deaths a day. Think about that. That's almost three persons per every state, every day, killing themselves. That does not take into consideration so 1.4 million who attempted to commit suicide but failed. Put that into the context of Covid right now. We are grieving, and rightly we should grieve the deaths of 190,000 plus people. But if all of those people who attempted to kill themselves, and take their lives had succeeded, that would be about 1.5 million. And that was back in 2018, before the pandemics where I have read now suicide rates are up 800 per cent. Why? Because

they don't have peace. They don't have purpose. They don't have Jesus as their savior.

That's where this parable comes in. There are many people in our country will have been raised on the societal norms that have been foisted upon our schools our universities and even the way we think that there is no God, you are nothing more than modified pond scum, and your purpose in life is to make yourself happy. You'll probably be happy if you are rich, and if you are not, oh well shucks. The answer we're hearing today is, 'well take from those who are wealthy and give it to the poor because that will make them happy. It will not. It will not give them peace. It will not give them joy; it will not give them purpose. **Only Jesus will.**

When we take that gospel into this world, maybe we share it with a homeless guy sitting on the side of the street, or with an atheist friend who thinks you're absolutely stupid for coming to church on Sunday, or for reading the Bible in believing it, or I'll just let you fill in the blank. When we bring that gospel message to them and it hits home, they realize that's what I really want. I want the eternal life that costs me nothing that comes through Jesus I want that peace that passes all human understanding I want to know that when I die there is more and it is abundant when we see it we don't say God, that stupid atheist came to faith that's not fair! We raise our hands to heaven and save 'Hallelujah! Praise be to God. That soul has been won. That soul is at peace and the Kingdom of God has just grown to the glory of His Name.' Amen