

Matthew 20:1-16

Septuagesima, Jan. 28, '24
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"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. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ 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?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸ 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.' ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last."

"Nobody wants to work anymore. The entitlement is sickening! Everyone wants to work fewer hours, get paid more, more vacation, more days off. People these days think they're *entitled* to getting everything they want without really needing to work for it! What happened to the work ethic in our country? Where did this entitled generation come from?" You've probably heard complaints like that, maybe even said them yourselves. It's a common complaint in recent years, but it's also nothing new.

I found an article where a shoe repair business owner complained, "Nobody wants to work anymore. They all want to work in front of a computer and make lots of money." That was from the Clearwater Times in Clearwater, FL—November 10, 1999. I read another article interviewing a business owner whose dry-cleaning business was closing after 40 years because he couldn't find anyone to work for the salaries he could afford. He said, "Nobody wants to work anymore. The government puts everybody on welfare when they ought to be working." That was from the Ohio News-Journal, May 9, 1979. And another newspaper printed an opinion that claimed the reason for high unemployment rates is that "nobody wants to work anymore unless they can be paid enough wages to work half of the time and loaf half of the time." That was from the Mulberry News in Kansas—May 5, 1922.

I think it's clear, the sense of entitlement—that's not a recent problem, that's a human problem! And, as we work through our text today, we might even find it's a problem for us. Jesus tells a parable about workers who feel entitled to more, who aren't satisfied with their wages. And it's a warning of the law that's directed at *our* hearts, because it's about something much more important than just work ethic. Jesus is warning us against the very destructive notion that we might sometimes have, which is that we are entitled to God's grace, and others are not. That's destructive because it's a sinful attitude that would work to separate us from God's grace altogether! However, thanks be to God that, in the words of our theme: **At the End of the Day, God's Grace Has Final Say.**

The surrounding context will help us with this parable. Jesus had just had an encounter with a rich young man that had *everything*. (cf. Matthew 19:16-30) You probably know the encounter I'm talking about. That was the young man who thought that there was some good deed that he could *do* to guarantee a place in heaven. But Jesus knew that a major stumbling block for the man was his wealth; it was *that* in which he placed all of his trust, making his wealth his god. So, to show this to the man, Jesus told him to sell everything he had. And the man went away sorrowful because he didn't want to make that sacrifice. At that point Jesus announced it's very difficult for rich people to enter heaven.

Hearing this, the disciples asked Jesus who could possibly be saved, and Jesus gave that great answer: **"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."** But *then* the disciples were a bit concerned because they understood the implication. Here was a rich young man unwilling to sacrifice anything at all, but it *could* still be possible for *that* man to be saved. So, Peter voiced his concern, **"See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"** They'd dropped everything, sacrificed all to follow Jesus, *surely* they should be entitled to more than *that* man who wasn't willing to sacrifice anything at all! That was the concern! So, Jesus told this parable.

Understanding that context, the parallels in the parable become very clear. Here we have various groups of workers going to work in a vineyard for differing portions of the day. Some started work at 6 am, others at 9 am, still more at noon and then at 3 pm, and even some that only started work at 5 pm. These last ones only had to work one hour before receiving their paycheck, and yet every single worker receives the exact same pay, whether they worked twelve hours or one hour. No difference.

And this just really strikes us as being totally unfair! This parable tickles our sense of justice, it's just not right! How is it fair that someone could barely break a sweat and yet be paid equal to someone else who had **"borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat"**? Some of us have been there before; maybe you work hard and get passed over for a promotion by someone who only works when the boss is watching. Or maybe you put in all the effort on a group project for school while your classmates ride your coattails, and you all get the same grade. It's not right. It's a tragedy of injustice!

Yet, here's the *real* tragedy—the real tragedy is when we take this sense of injustice, of what's right and wrong in terms of reward, and we apply it to things spiritual. What I mean by that is this: it is possible—and even easy—for Christians to look at the sacrifices they've made for the Lord and start comparing *those* with what they see *other* Christians doing. And *then* it's easy to become disgruntled with the idea that *those people* over there are apparently planning on just coasting along, and guess what, you might all end up with the same status at the end of the day: eternal life. And it's this prideful, spiteful attitude *specifically* that Jesus is warning us against. And we need that warning.

We need it for two reasons. First off, we're sinners. And, as sinners, our default viewpoint is a sinful viewpoint. But the second reason is that many of us make very real sacrifices. There are many in our congregation that drive 45-minutes, an hour just to make it to church on Sundays. They drive past hundreds and hundreds of churches on the way to here because they're convinced that we teach the Word of God in truth, and they hold faithfulness to the Word of God as being of primary importance. That's a sacrifice. There are some in our congregation who have changed work schedules so that they can be here. That's a sacrifice. There are some who attend on very little, if *any* sleep due to work.

That's a sacrifice. There are some in our congregation for whom it is physically very difficult to come to church, yet they come. Another sacrifice. I'm a pastor, there's a missionary in this congregation—both of these roles involve sacrifices both by the individuals themselves and their families. And I'm thankful for all of these sacrifices. I praise the Lord that He's congregated together a group of like-minded individuals who willingly make sacrifices for the Lord. But let's not toot our own horns here.

In view of these sacrifices, let's take a good long look at the mirror of God's law and see the danger of pride creeping up as we *think* about our sacrifices. How easy it would be—and really, I should say, how easy it *is*—for us to *overvalue* these sacrifices. It's terribly easy for us to look at what *we* do, and then start looking at what others are *unwilling* to do—like the disciples with the rich young ruler—and think “it's just not right that we should both be saved. How is it fair that God would look at both of our contributions and then on judgment day welcome us both into His eternal kingdom?” Another way of saying that is, ***“These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”***

“You have made them equal to us.” That's the problem, isn't it? We compare, and we contrast, and we might even believe that we ought to rank higher up in God's accounting than others. We don't like to think of ourselves as equal to everyone else. And you see how disastrous this is then, don't you? We proclaim that we are saved by grace—that is “undeserved love”—but sometimes our attitudes reveal that we actually think we *deserve* God's love while others don't. And that is the type of entitlement that is truly sickening. Because if that was our attitude, it would be no different than telling God we'd rather be judged based on our sacrifices and *not* according to His grace at all. And if that were the case, we'd be judged on our entitlement too. And we would *not* like the ruling.

Well, thanks be to God that **At the End of the Day, God's Grace Has Final Say**. This really is a parable that's all about grace. Sure, the characters that leap off the page at us are the workers, and the seeming injustice of the payment system might be the thing that sticks out the most. But this parable is primarily about the grace of God, an idea that is littered throughout the parable. Take, for instance, the Master who keeps going out throughout the day to find more laborers for His vineyard! If any of us were in a similar position and kept going out to find laborers throughout the day, our need to do so would be based upon our poor estimation of how many workers we would need for the day. The initial hiring would be done with as few workers as we think necessary in order to reduce cost of labor. And throughout the day, if it looked like the work wasn't going to get done, we'd continue to do the same, hiring more workers but only what we'd consider to be the bare minimum required.

Is that *this* Master's goal? Keeping a minimal staff and cutting costs? Not at all! After all, at the end of the day, He pays each a full day's wage, regardless of how many hours the laborers had worked. He doesn't care about the money. He doesn't go back out because of any lack of foresight; He keeps hiring more and more because what He wants *most* of all is even more laborers being given the opportunity to work! He *wants* to be generous with even more. And praise the Lord that's the case!

Because, if you haven't caught on yet, in this parable, the Master represents Jesus, and the laborers represent us as Christians. We have the opportunities to labor for the Lord, to make sacrifices for the Lord, and we have those opportunities *only* because Christ sought us out! Always wanting more,

always desiring to be more generous, Christ has continued through the ages seeking more and more to join Him. And so, He sought *you* out, and He found you. And whether you have toiled all day in His kingdom, or if you feel more closely related to those who have come last—it makes no difference, you are not out anything. The Lord is gracious and receives the last even as the first. And in this payment system, again, we see nothing but grace.

Notice the Master's response to the bitter full-day laborers: ***"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."*** Jesus is generous with the last, freely giving them what they have not earned. And the same can be said to the first. Jesus gives only what He promised. And what has been promised is full forgiveness for every sin, the crown of life, and eternal salvation.

Because if Jesus were to pay us according to what we have *earned*, then every one of us—whether we are those who came at the first hour or the eleventh hour or anywhere in between—we would each receive only death. ***"For the wages of sin is death . . . but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*** (Romans 6:23) We are entitled only to damnation, but this free gift of life is that payment that Jesus has determined as fair and right for each one of you. Notice how the Master refers to this promised payment: ***"Whatever is right I will give you."*** The only reason this payment is right and fair for us is because Jesus also made a sacrifice. A great sacrifice. A final sacrifice. An all-sufficient sacrifice. ***"He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."*** (Hebrews 9:26)

Let's keep our focus there, on the sacrifice that *God* made in His flesh for us. Let's remember that the only reason we are able to labor in His vineyard at all is because of this sacrifice. He has called us to Himself, given us the opportunity to labor in His kingdom, and has promised us that when we line up **At the End of the Day, God's Grace Has Final Say**. What we will receive are the fruits of His grace. Love that we haven't earned, that we couldn't deserve, that we are not entitled to—yet is truly ours.

With that as our focus, we can view our own sacrifices and give them proper weight. They don't entitle us to more, we simply have the opportunity to sacrifice because we've already *been given more*. The Master says, ***"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"*** What belongs to our Master is unending peace, perfect rest, complete unity with God, and an eternal kingdom. And what does He choose to do with these? He chooses to give them to you as a free gift, the result of the labors of *His* hands. Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.