

STUDY ON THE PARABLES OF SALVATION

Parables of the Workers in the Vineyard

Read Matthew 20:1-16

The parable now before us is the second of the five parables of salvation and is bracketed by a further variation on the text quoted above. It does not say precisely the same thing, but it is close enough to have come from the same mould. Matthew 19:30 says, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." or, in even tenser language, "the last will be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16). Since our parable occupies the fifteen verses between those two statements, they serve as brackets for the story, which must be an illustration of the principle. But who are those who will be last? Who are those who will be first? How can we apply these lessons to our lives?

A DIFFICULT PARABLE

The parable itself is quite simple. A vineyard owner needed men to work in his vineyard, so he went out early in the morning and hired all the workers he could find. He agreed to pay them a denarius (a normal day's wage) for the day's work. Three hours later (that is, about nine in the morning), he went out again and found other workers. He hired them too, but this time there was no set wage. He merely said, "I will pay you what is right." The new workers agreed with that arrangement and soon joined the others. The owner did the same thing at noon, at three in the afternoon, and at five o' clock, just one hour before closing time.

At the end of the day, he paid the workers, beginning with those he had hired last. He gave each one in that group a denarius, and so on with those hired at three o'clock, noon, and at nine in the morning. At last, he came to those who had been hired first. By that time, they were rubbing their hands together happily, supposing that if those who had worked less than they had were being paid a denarius, they would receive more. But the owner paid them a denarius, too, and they complained. The owner replied, "*Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?*" (vv. 13- 15).

At that point, the parable is followed by the statement mentioned earlier: "*So the last will be first, and the first last.*"

The story itself is clear enough, but that does not mean it is without difficulties.

- The first difficulty is that it presents us with an admittedly strange situation. We have a businessman who is paying people who work only one hour the same wage he is paying those who work all day. We may say, as he does, that the pay for the full day's work is fair. That may be true, but what businessman operates that way? It seems irrational. It produces acute labour problems. More than that, it is bad business. A man who operated like that would soon be bankrupt.
- The second difficulty: the payment to the workers seems unjust. We may be reluctant to say it, knowing that the owner of the vineyard is God, and that God is always just, regardless of what we may think. But still the procedure seems unjust. Why should those who were hired later be paid the same as those who were hired at the start of the day?

Q: Why shouldn't those who worked longer be paid more?

So how are we to understand this parable? I believe it is one of a certain class of parables that deal in part with the problems the Jews had when Gentiles began to believe the gospel and embrace Christianity. The problem is reflected in the person of the older son in Jesus' parable of the prodigal. Above all, it is developed at length in the middle section of Paul's great letter to the Romans (chapters 9-11).

This portion in Romans 9 reveals the heart of our Father (the owner of the vineyard) and we can relate to this parable.

“What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” So, then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.” (Romans 9:14-16)

In the earliest days of Old Testament history, from the calling of Abraham about 2,000 years before Christ, God began to deal with the Jews in a special way. It is almost as though He turned His back on the Gentile nations, at least for a time, as He began to create, redeem, and eventually teach and disciple those to whom the Lord Jesus would eventually come. The Jews were quite proud of that heritage, as we ourselves would be.

But instead of remembering that what they were and had accomplished were due entirely to the grace of God (grace that they had often resisted), they began to suppose that the benefits of their position were really due to their own efforts. They thought they had earned their position by many centuries of faithful labour for God. So far there were no complaints; they were glad for the arrangement. But then Jesus came, and even within His lifetime, as well as in a much larger way thereafter, all the benefits the Jews supposed they had earned were offered to Gentiles, who had done nothing to deserve them. They were like the prodigal, who had squandered the father's wealth. In addition to all that, so many Gentiles were being converted that it seemed the cherished Jewish traditions would be overthrown.

As indicated above, a number of parables deal with the problem though in a variety of ways. The account of the older brother and the parable of the workers in the vineyard are similar. In each the faithful, hard-working people are resentful of the father's or owner's 'generosity to those who deserve less. The root problem is envy. The problem is evident in Jewish reactions to Gentile blessings. But it is not uniquely a Jewish problem. It is a problem for any who think that because they have served God faithfully for however many years, they deserve something from Him. We never deserve God's favours. If we think we do, we are in danger of losing them entirely.

THREE LESSONS

First Lesson from this Parable: God is no man's debtor or God owes no man. Those who had worked longest wanted to impose on the vineyard owner. They wanted to say that because they had worked twelve hours, and because those who had worked nine or less had been paid a denarius, the owner owed them more than they had originally agreed on. The owner rejected that principle, as does God.

When I say that God is no man's debtor, I mean that we can never place God under obligation to do something for us because we have done something for Him. There is nothing you or I or anyone else can possibly do that will place God in a debt relationship to us. God owes us nothing except eternal punishment for our sins. So, if we do not experience that punishment, that, and everything we do experience is pure grace. Our Lord taught that truth when He said (in effect), Your obligation is to work as hard as you possibly can and when you have finished to say, 'At best, I am an unprofitable servant'" (Luke 17:10).

What Jesus' story says is that we must get over thinking of our service in terms of debt or obligation, and instead learn to serve in the spirit of the Son who serves because he loves the Father, rather than in the spirit of the hireling who serves only for his wages.

The Second Lesson of the parable: God cares for people more than for things. Why is it that the owner of the vineyard gave those who had laboured only one hour the same amount as those who had laboured all day? Was it not because he knew they needed the denarius? When we read the story carefully, we notice that not a word of criticism is spoken against those who were not hired in the morning. When the master came and asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" they replied, "Because no one has hired us" (vv. 6-7). Apparently, they had been willing to work, were eager to work, and undoubtedly needed it. But they had not been hired. We are to think that the owner hired them not for what he could get out of them in just a few hours, but because they needed the work, and that he paid them the full denarius for the same reason. The owner was not thinking of profit. He was thinking of people, and he was using his abundant means to help them.

How different that is from the older son in the parable of Luke 15? He was angered because the father was rejoicing in the return of his younger brother. He should have been rejoicing too but instead he was thinking only of how his brother had wasted the inheritance (see Luke 15:29-30). The older brother would have been quite happy if the property had come home and the son had been lost! But as it was, the reverse was true, and he was unhappy. God is just the opposite. He thinks of us far more than of what we can do for Him.

Who are we like? Are we like God in our service, serving because we love Him and not for what He will do for us? Are we like God in our estimate of others, evaluating them in terms of their worth as human beings and not merely as tools for production? Or are we like the unhappy workers or the disconsolate older brother?

The Third Lesson from this Parable. It comes from the verse with which we began: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matt. 19:30). The important word here is "many," for the teaching is not that every person who begins early with God and works for Him throughout a lifetime will inevitably be last or that everyone who begins last will inevitably be first. That will be true for many people, but it will not be true for all. Many who begin early will lose their reward (or not even actually come to a true faith in Christ and salvation) because they are approaching God in a false spirit, based on their merit and not on the basis of His grace. Many who enter last will be first because, although they begin late, they nevertheless recognize that their status is due to God's grace alone and praise Him for it.

It is not necessary either to start early and finish last or start last and finish first. In fact, neither is best. The truly desirable thing is to start early and work with all the power at our disposal, not for reward but out of love for our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, and when we have finished still to say, "We are unprofitable servants." Those are the people God delights to honour.

"And which of you, having a servant ploughing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise, you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'" (Luke 17:7-10)

