

November 19, 2018

“The Laborers in the Vineyard”

Matthew 20:1-16

FCF: Thinking too much of ourselves (accomplishments and contributions)

PROPOSITION: (magnet) We are absolutely dependent upon God’s grace.

(anchor) We must never lose sight of that.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

We have two dogs. Lucy is our German Shepherd - friendly but shy, smart but learning, medium size but strong. She can hold her own. Gus is our Chihuahua-Dachshund mix - friendly with energy, smart and learning, small and has no idea. That’s a dog’s mentality. They don’t think about size. They just think, “I’m a dog.” And with little Gus, that could get him hurt.

We do the same. We think too much of ourselves - our abilities and accomplishments. Which is sure to get us into trouble. Worse, this can become a great barrier between us and God.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 19:27-20:16](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Let’s start with a quote from Robert McKenzie’s [The First Thanksgiving](#) ([READ quote](#)):

There is much to admire about the “company of plain Englishmen” who disembarked from the Mayflower almost four centuries ago. They were men and women [who] exhibited enormous courage in the face of unspeakable hardship and loss. They loved their children, they loved the body of Christ, and they abandoned everything that was familiar to them to serve both They have [given] us an invaluable Christian example of belief, action, and endurance. But human frailty is part of the Pilgrims’ story as well. They argued among themselves. They were frequently duped both by strangers and purported friends. They were ethnocentric and sometimes self-righteous. They struggled with their finances They were frightened by wolves. They got lost in the woods A key leader got caught by an Indian deer trap and dangled helplessly upside down In years to come, they would have a hard time keeping a pastor ... and many of their number would move away in search of larger farms, prompting William Bradford to speak of the Plymouth church as “an ancient mother grown old and forsaken of her children.” Their flaws may shock us, but it wouldn’t have shocked the Pilgrims. They seemed to glory in how God could use them despite their weakness and sinfulness. One of their key leaders (Robert Cushman) said, “Our voyage ... hath been as full of crosses as ourselves have been of crookedness, but God can do much.” Another leader (Edward Winslow) said, “How few, weak, and raw were we at our first beginning, and yet God preserved us.”

The best thing you can carry into this Thanksgiving week is to know that you are more weak and vulnerable than you dared to fear. And you are more loved in Jesus than you dared to dream.

To press that point, Jesus tells us this story. It comes after an exchange with a rich young man in which Jesus challenges the idols of his heart. That leads to a dialogue with the disciples in which Jesus warns them of the dangers of wealth and good works. Then these words ([READ Matthew 19:30](#)). Peter was concerned that all they had given up would be ignored. Jesus replied by assuring him, “Yes, I am pleased by your sacrifice, Peter, but not obligated by it.” That’s what we have to understand. God is under no obligation to us. He owes us absolutely nothing. Nothing. We are absolutely dependent upon His grace. And we must never lose sight of that.

That’s where this story comes in, a story with three points bolstered by three sets of characters. First, there is the master. Second, the later workers. And, third, the early workers.

I. THE MASTER

First, the master. As the owner, the authority figure, he clearly stands for the Lord. Jesus is making clear through him that all His followers are equal in His sight ([READ Matthew 20:16](#)).

A) *The Imagery*

Let's start with the imagery. This was certainly a familiar setting to Jesus' hearers.

1. The harvest

Grapes were one of Israel's most important crops. This was harvest time. To bring it in, it was common to hire temporary workers. The master would need them so as to bring in the harvest.

2. The hiring

So he went out into the marketplace. All kinds of business was conducted there. And he went repeatedly, several times in the day. We're not told why. But clearly there was some urgency.

B) The Lesson

Again, all this would have been familiar to Jesus' hearers. What lessons do we learn?

1. The vineyard

In the Old Testament, the vineyard image was used for Israel. God was seen as the owner of the vineyard. There are elements of that here. The vineyard is His kingdom expanse in the world.

2. The workers

The workers are His people, the Lord's followers. All equal in His sight, all receiving the same reward. He does not play favorites. None will be slighted, left behind, or left out in any way.

That's what we see with the image of the owner of the vineyard, the master of the house.

Illustration:

You may know many schools have removed dodgeball from recess, mostly out of worry for physical injuries by shots to the head. I would say, if you're going to rule it out, there are better reasons. And that's just because of the cruelty shown when the teams are chosen. It's always the same select few chosen first. Then that same sad remainder is left to be chosen last.

Application:

Jesus says, "That's not the way I do things. If anything, it's just the opposite." He does not work the way the world does. He never has. And He never will. There's tremendous relief and comfort in that. But a challenge as well. For we are to follow Him, to walk in His ways.

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II. THE LATE WORKERS

Moving from the master, we have the workers - one group at the 11th hour. These are those who would seem to deserve nothing. And receive so much (**READ Matthew 20:14b-15a**).

A) The Imagery

The imagery here is a stark contrast between what they deserved and what they received.

1. What they deserved

What did they deserve? Too much is read into why they started late. But nothing is said about lack of skill or laziness. The fact is that they stayed looking for work. And started once they were hired. But they were hired at the 11th hour. And so they deserved but 1/12th day of pay.

2. What they received

But what did they receive? Not what they deserved but what they needed - a denarius, a full day's pay. This is where things take an interesting turn. This is utterly unfamiliar territory to us.

B) The Lesson

The lesson stresses God's goodness to His people. Of which we need to be reminded.

1. The fact of God's goodness

First, the simple sweet fact of God's goodness. He is so very generous, knowing and giving us what we need. And, beyond that, He is so very gracious, not giving us what we actually deserve.

2. The grounds of God's goodness

That's the fact of God's goodness. Then there are the grounds for it. Not anything in us but ever and completely in Him. Why is He so good to us? He delights to be. It is His very nature.

That's what we see in the image of the later workers, those who arrived at the 11th hour.

Illustration:

The song "Amazing Grace" was written by John Newton. Newton was a pastor when he wrote those words but that was not his first career. He had been a slave trader, the captain of a slave ship. He mourned his past, the cruelty and injustice of what he had done. And he marveled at God's amazing grace to him. You hear that in a letter ([READ quote](#)), "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior."

Application:

Would we remember those two things very clearly ourselves! God is generous to those who deserve nothing. He delights to be gracious. Some of us know too well what it is to be 11th hour workers. We came to faith later in life. We can look back over extended periods of our lives that were squandered in waywardness. And at times we feel like we have so little to show.

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III. THE EARLY WORKERS

Which now brings us to the early workers, those who seem to deserve so much. And what assurance are they given? That no one is treated unjustly ([READ Matthew 20:13-14a](#)).

A) The Imagery

The imagery here is not so much a contrast but of one thing leading to another.

1. Their experience

Think of their experience. They were there working from the start in the fields, enduring the burden and heat of the day through the whole day. And they watched these others straggling in.

2. Their assumption

And then they watched them get paid. This got their attention. Their hopes and expectations were rising. They assumed, "Yes, he said he'd pay us a denarius. But surely we deserve more."

B) The Lesson

It's easy to see the logic, to feel what they were feeling. What was the lesson then?

1. The context

Again, the context of all this was an answer to the disciples' questions. And Jesus declares, "Your standing is not secured by what you do." Peter then said, "But we've done so much!"

2. The warning

So Jesus is warning Peter. And us ([READ Matthew 19:29-30; 20:15-16](#)). They really had done so much. But they'd spent too much time thinking of what they'd done and too little of who they'd done it for. It's worth noting that v.15 literally says, "Is your eye evil because I am generous?" Meaning, "Are you so blinded by your self interest you have no compassion?" Yes.

That's what we see in the image of the early workers. Not an assurance but a warning.

Illustration:

Back to the Pilgrims. Their first winter at Plymouth, was ugly ([READ McKenzie, p.91](#)):

Within weeks, 52 of the 102 passengers who reached Cape Cod were dead, including 14 of 26 heads of families and the colony's newly elected governor. All but four families lost at least one member. Of the 18 married couples who had sailed from England, only three had survived intact.

What happened? They planned to settle near an established village and so had few tools and no horses or oxen. They had no idea it would be so cold and were unprepared. They worked in snow, waded in icy water, and slept on damp ground. So pneumonia took hold and took toll.

It was ugly and brutal, a disaster. But you can trace that disaster back to its cause.

Application:

You can trace the disaster of our hearts back to its cause as well. Our lack of patience with one another, our lovelessness to those without Christ, the little time we spend in prayer, our little interest in reading the Bible, our recurring bouts of bitterness and worry - it's all traced back to this. We think too much of ourselves. We think too much of our obedience. So if the message to the later workers is "Take heart," the message to the early workers is "Take heed."

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CONCLUSION:

Most friendships do not end with a bang but with a whimper. Oh, there are exceptions. "We had a history, good times. But you betrayed my trust. So get out." Pretty cut and dry.

But that's not the way most friendships end. Usually, it's not a supernova but a setting sun. Think of your friendships from high school or college, even the best ones. Time goes by. A few moves, weddings, and births. And now you're doing well to find one another on FaceBook.

Most friendships do not end with a bang but with a whimper. Jesus is warning us and is saying that can happen here. How? We think too much of what we've done and too little of who we've done it for. So we drift in our love for Him as our delight in Him fades and our pride in ourselves grows. Jesus tells us this story to press that upon us. We need to take this seriously.

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