

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; ⁴and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" ⁷They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, "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." ¹³But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

In Nomine Jesu

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I guess that it seemed inevitable to those who knew. The conflict between Jesus and his adversaries intensified. The time for our Lord's sacrificial death drew near. And he was saying some truly shocking things. Counterintuitively in our minds. It didn't bode well.

Some of these – we might call them "politically incorrect statements" – are recorded in Matthew's Gospel, just before the words of our text – which were also shocking. When some parents sought to bring their little children to Jesus, so that He could bless them, the disciples rebuked them for doing so. They thought Jesus was too busy and too important to be interrupted by children. Jesus corrected His disciples, instructing them to allow the children to come to Him, because, He said, **"the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."** The scribes and Pharisees didn't see it that way. They thought that heaven belonged to them, because of their religious excellence, and because of their lofty positions.

Then, Jesus was approached by a man we know as **"the rich young ruler."** This man wanted to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life. He felt that he done a truly excellent job in keeping the law from his youth, so Jesus had to show him how far

he was from measuring up to God's standards. Jesus told this **"rich young ruler"** to sell all that he owned and to give the proceeds to the poor. That was too high a price to pay, and so the rich young ruler went away sorrowful ... befuddled.

Then Jesus turned to his disciples and pointed out how hard it is for the rich to enter heaven. He was talking about those whose love and their trust is in their wealth – more of us that we might want to admit. So when Jesus said that **"it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven,"** the disciples were shocked. You see, in that day many assumed that the rich all went to heaven, while the poor went to hell. They believed that wealth was God's reward for being righteous, while poverty was God's punishment for sin. Jesus told His disciples that the gospel turned the religion of that day upside-down. He said, **"many who are first will be last, and the last first."**

Jesus then went on to tell the parable that is our text for this sermon. It's clear that it was meant to explain our Lord's words, **"many who are first will be last, and the last first,"** because these same words are repeated at the end of the parable in our text.

The parable went like this. A landowner needed to hire day laborers to work in his fields, and so he went to the labor pool and hired a bunch of workers. He agreed to pay these workers the standard wage – a denarius a day. Needing more help, he made several more trips to the labor pool, hiring additional workers. But to these workers, he gave no specific commitment. He did not tell them what he would pay, only that he would do **"whatever is right."** The last group of workers was hired only an hour before the workday ended. Again, the landowner made no specific commitment to them about how much they were to receive.

In those days, the workers were paid for their labors at the end of each workday. When it came time to pay, the landowner began with those workers who had labored for only an hour. Everyone was amazed when they saw that these workers were given a full day's pay, for only one hour's work. You can imagine how the rest of the workers began to reason to themselves. The ones who worked two hours must be getting paid twice the daily rate, and the ones who worked all day must be getting eight times what they were promised is what they thought.

The parable deals only with the "first" and the "last" groups, for rather obvious reasons (**"the last will be first, and the first will be last"**). It's those who were hired first who protest when they are paid their normal wage, even though this was the payment upon which they'd agreed. It's not that they had been cheated; it's that they thought the last group of workers were paid more than they deserved. I don't think they would smile to hear me say, "Life isn't fair."

And by these words, I don't mean to suggest that this landowner has cheated anyone. He was "fair" with those who worked the entire day because he paid them the wage he'd promised, and this was also the amount for which they had agreed to work. No one was cheated here. Their protest had to do with the generosity of the landowner towards the late-comers, who worked a mere hour. They hardly broke a sweat, but they were paid a full day's wage.

You see, the thing that angered the early workers wasn't the landowner's greed, but his grace. They were angry that while they worked so hard and long for what they got, the late workers received the same reward, but for lots less labor.

And here's the point. Angry workers represented the legalists, who thought that salvation came to those who worked the hardest. Lots of us find a certain comfort in the fact that we're "better" than a lot of folks; we've worked harder than many. But when it comes to getting into heaven, the Bible makes it clear that no one can work hard enough or long enough to earn eternal life.

Here's what St. Paul wrote,

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.

And in that same chapter of Romans, Paul makes it very clear that all of us are sinners, unworthy of heaven, and deserving of God's eternal wrath:

9 What then? Are we better *than they*? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. 10 As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; 11 There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. 12 They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one." 13 "Their throat *is* an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "The poison of asps *is* under their lips"; 14 "Whose mouth *is* full of cursing and bitterness." 15 "Their feet *are* swift to shed blood; 16 Destruction and misery *are* in their ways; 17 And the way of peace they have not known." 18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

But St. Paul taught that it's only by grace that any of us can be saved, and this grace is available only in the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made on the cross of Calvary, where He took all the sin, all the guilt, and all the punishment for lost sinners.

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

OK, the criteria for eternal life are not "fair." Eternal life is a gift of God's grace. If eternal life were "fair" (that is, as a payment to us, based upon the quality and quantity of our good works), no one would ever see heaven. It can't be earned. But – get this – it can be received as a gift. And that is what this parable is meant to convey.

It's not the "righteous" – that is, those who do the most good deeds – who get to heaven; it is sinners, who know that they deserve nothing but God's wrath, *but who gladly receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ*. It is not "the first" who get to heaven, but "the last" who get there, *by grace through faith*.

What an encouraging truth, that God has made salvation and eternal life available to us all, apart from works -- and by grace alone -- through faith. It's a joy it is to celebrate that truth every time we remember those who have gone before us and are at rest in our prayers of thanksgiving in our prayers at worship and in our thoughts and memories. And we can do it only in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If you are one of those who still wrongly suppose that salvation is something you earn, something that God gives you in payment for your good deeds, let me urge you to recognize that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not work this way. No one will get to heaven because they tried to live a good life, or even because they seemingly lived a better life than others.

Those who we'll join in heaven are those who have known that even our finest works can only condemn us, and that *it is the work of Christ alone that saves*. Trust in Him, in what may be our final hours, so that we can rejoice forever in the grace of God.

In the Name of Jesus.

AMEN!

Soli Deo Gloria