

MATTHEW 20: 1-16

THE WORKER'S REWARD

Introduction:

Peter raised the question of reward after the sad departure of the rich young man and the words of Jesus about the difficulty of coming into the kingdom if you are rich. He rightly acknowledged that he and the twelve had paid a price for following Him, if you just looked at the monetary side of it. They had left their businesses and become itinerant followers of Jesus, dependent on the help given to them by those to whom they ministered. Peter wanted to know if there was a reward for what they had done.

Jesus overlooked the apparent selfish interest in the inquiry of Peter, and gave to the group a word of encouragement. He assured them that they had not made a mistake in choosing to follow Him. The benefits in this life will be much greater than they have ever imagined, and then there is an eternal dimension. The outcome of what they have done will not be fully seen in this life, but in the life to come. They will be surprised on that day. There will be what Eugene Peterson calls “the great Reversal” in his paraphrase. The first will be last and the last will be first. While this may have a primary reference to the relationship between Jewish and Gentile saints, it has a broader application.

Then, as usual, Jesus tells a story to illustrate the truth about the worker's reward. Actually it might better be called a word about the worker's Lord. While the focus is on the workmen, the primary figure is the Owner of the vineyard who invites men to come work in His vineyard.

While the details in the story reflect the local culture of the day, the lesson is for every age. It is the gathering of a grape harvest that is the burden of the Owner. He goes to the local market place at 6:00 a.m. and hires some workers, with a promise that they will receive the ordinary pay for such work—a denari. He goes back at 9:00 and hires some more but with no indication about the pay. He goes back at twelve and hires some more, but with no promise concerning pay. Then he goes at three and does the same. Then he goes at 5:00 p.m., only one hour before quitting time, and hires some more with no promise. They are all men who desperately needed the work. The job was probably the difference between food and hunger for his family. They were poor day workers. To be hired was a special favor.

Now from this unusual story we learn some important things about the worker's reward. The word "for" with which the parable begins gives us the clue that there is connection with the question that Peter had raised. It is a parable about service—not salvation.

I. THE WORKER'S REWARD IS BASED ON FAITHFULNESS.

The big turn in the story happens when the Owner instructs his steward to call the last that have gone to work first, and to give them their pay first.

Truly he chooses to make the last first. This reverses the order that would be normally expected, and it created the questions from those that had gone to work first. The last to go to work, that worked only one hour, receive payment as though they worked the whole day. This creates false expectations on the part of those who went to work first. Since they have worked twelve hours—not one, they expect a larger payment when their time comes, but they get only what the Owner had agreed to when they went to work—one denari.

There is an obvious lesson here.

1. Faithfulness counts more than length of service.

There is a different scale of values in kingdom work. Without Lord faithfulness counts more than length of service. It is true that the last worked only one hour, but they went to work when they were invited. You do not enter kingdom work until the Lord invites you. Some of us He called early and some of us He called late. It is not when you were called that counts, but

what you have done since you were called. Have you been faithful? Have you fulfilled your assignment?

2. Faithfulness includes having the right motive.

There is something about motive in this evaluation. In His response to Peter, Jesus said, “Everyone that hath forsaken...for my name’s sake!” This confronts something that He saw in Peter without being direct. Peter’s response had smacked of a lower motive—maybe serving for a reward. Jesus focuses on a service that is given at great personal cost just for His name’s sake.

“For my name’s sake” reveals the proper motive.

Service for a reward is not a proper motive. There is a lot of difference in working for pay and working for the Lord. Faithful workers work for the Lord without thought of the pay. They welcome the opportunity share in the vineyard of the Lord.

II. THE WORKER’S REWARD IS DETERMINED BY GOD’S GRACE.

While scholars disagree about some of the details of this parable, all are agreed that it is about grace. Grace always involves receiving something that

you do not deserve. This point of the parable seems to be given the nature of God, the workers called at the later hour received more than they deserved.

1. To have a place of service is an expression of God's generosity. This is the part that the grumblers overlooked. They were worthless unemployed people standing at six o'clock in the morning in a market place with nothing to do. This good landowner came, gave them a job for the day, and promised to give them a fair wage. This saved them from the boredom of a long day of waiting, and gave them money to buy food for the children at the end of the day. The good landowner had shown them grace and mercy giving to them a place of work for the day.

The Apostle Paul recognized this to be true in his life. He felt himself to be one called into the vineyard at a late hour. He acknowledged to the Corinthians that he felt himself to be the "least of the apostles." He had a bad record of persecuting the church before the Lord called him. But he explained, "But by the grace of God I am what I am; and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." (1 Corinthians 15:10)

In his first letter to Timothy he set forth the same testimony. "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful,

putting me into the ministry; who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious; but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which in Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 1:12-14)

Is this not your testimony? You are in the ministry today by grace and mercy. Is there anyone here who can stand a claim that you deserve a place of service in the vineyard of our Good Lord?

2. Any reward that comes for service is an act of generosity on God's part.

He does not owe us anything. Sure He gave the men who were not called until nine in the morning, and those called at noon, and those called at three, and those called at the eleventh hour more than they deserved, but so He does with everyone.

Jesus simply calls the reward “eternal life” in his word to Peter. This is the privilege of sharing the life of God eternally, and then He promised participation in His rule over the Kingdom of the Father eternally. While He specifies the role of the Apostles, the implication is that all of His workers receive such a trusted place in the eternal kingdom.

Who among us deserve to participate in the rule of the sovereign Lord of the ages? Who of us can turn in a resume that indicates that we have earned a

promotion in the kingdom? We do not deserve to be in the kingdom itself, not to mention a place of service in the kingdom. From beginning to end it is all of grace. O to grace how great a debtor we are eternally compelled to be. Whatever we receive is an indication of the Lord generosity, not of our merit.

III. THE WORKER'S REWARD IS GIVEN AT THE END OF THE DAY.

The time of the reckoning is significant. It comes at the end of the day.

1. The Old Testament law required the payment of the worker at the end of the day.

This was in keeping with the Mosaic Law. Landowners were required to pay their workers at the end of each work day. Life was so hard for many of them that they needed their pay to buy food for the next day. They truly lived from day to day dependent upon such jobs. So our Lord makes his story conform to this cultural pattern that the law required, but that landowners did not always follow.

2. The day of our work will end in the Regeneration.

We get a hint about the meaning of the end of the day in the word that Jesus spoke to Peter and the disciples. He said to them, "Verily, I say unto you, that ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man

shall sit in the throne of glory, ye also will sit with me upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” “Regeneration” is the key word. The regeneration will mark the end of the day of man, and the beginning of a new day for every one of His followers. The word literally means “the new birth,” or “the resurrection of the universe.” It is that work of God out of which there comes the new heaven and the new earth. It is in the new heaven and the new earth, in the beginning of the consummation of the eternal kingdom of God that we receive our final reward.

Don’t expect it in this life. I wonder if Peter was not expecting to receive His reward on Friday, like a payday. If you expect to live in the big house in this world, you may be disappointed. You might well get to live in jailhouse like Paul and John Bunyan. If you expect to get a lot of monetary reward for following the Lord in this life, you may actually be severely disappointed. The reward for following Him does not come until the regeneration. Until this old world system has passed away under the judgment of God, and a new heaven and new earth have appeared and new Jerusalem has come down from God out of heaven, you will not receive your reward.

3. Jesus will bring His reward with Him.

You may remember one of the last promises that Jesus made as He closed the book of Revelation. He said, “And behold, I come quickly, and my

reward is with me, to give to every man according as his work shall be. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.”

(Revelation 22: 12-13)

So are there rewards for serving and following the Lord? Does it pay to serve Jesus? Absolutely! But the rewards are based on your faithfulness to the opportunity that God gives you, and will be an expression of the matchless goodness and grace of our Lord. We will all find it wise to take whatever crown we receive and lay it at His feet in gratitude.

So to the work, to the work, we are servants of God!