



Christianity --Religion at Work

~ Matthew 20:1-16

Here is a story about workers who begin work at various times of the workday, then, at the end of the day all receive the exact same pay; even though some worked for twelve hours and others worked for only one hour. It is given in the form of a parable.

Jesus gives us two clues to unlock the meaning of the parable; one clue is given at the beginning of the story, and one at the end. At the beginning he says, "For the kingdom of heaven is like." At the end he says, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16).

The story itself is about *working* in the kingdom of God. While this parable represents the kingdom of heaven, it does so in a practical manner. There is *work* to be done; God wants you to *work* for him. The follower of Christ is viewed here as a *worker*. We are never to despise *work*, whether it is dish washing, floor sweeping, teaching, or choir directing. *Work* is an important part of Christian experience.

Before we explore this, lets look at the clue given at the end of the parable, "So the last will be first, and the first shall be last." Nothing was more mysterious in the gospel dispensation than the setting aside of the Jews and the calling of the Gentiles --that the Gentiles should become "fellow-heirs". And nothing was more provoking to the Jews than, "they who had been first should be last, and they who had been last should be first" --that Gentiles should become recipients of the grace of God. This seems to be a primary message in the parable. It shows that the Jews were called first to work in the vineyard, and that many of them did respond to the call. Yet, at length, the gospel would be preached to the rest of the world, and many would receive it, going to work for the Lord in the kingdom.

It shows the gentiles being admitted to equal privilege and advantage with the Jews --"fellow-citizens with the Saints." But, this is not just a Jewish thing. Letting other people in has always been a primary debate. Do you let women in? Do you let the Irish in? Do you let the Polish in? If we were to rewrite Woody Guthrie's song it might read "This land is my land." More like a primitive cat guarding its stakeout. How do you get in?

However, the parable also has a general application. It shows us that God is a debtor to no one; that many who begin last, and promise little in religion, sometimes, by the blessing of God, arrive at greater attainments than others whose entrance was much earlier.

Paul, for example, was called in the middle of the day, yet, he was perhaps more useful than many who started in the morning of life to serve the Lord in his vineyard.

There are two parts in the parable: first, the agreement with the laborers, second, the account with them.

First, the agreement (verses 1-7). Who hired them? "A man who is a householder." God is the great householder, whose we are, and whom we serve. As a householder, he has work that must be done -- not only for that sake of the work, but for the sake of the worker. God hires laborers, not only because he needs their service, but because we need to serve. By providing us with opportunity for spiritual service, God saves us from uselessness, idleness, and poverty. He pays us for our work with a pay that we all need --that pay comes in the form of his blessing and approval. That could be something you did not even get from your own parents!

All are hired from the same unemployment office - the "market place." A place where, until we are hired into God's service, we stand "idle" (Matthew 20:3), "all the day idle" (Matthew 20:6).

So it is, that the soul of a man stands ready to be hired into some service or other --it will work either as a "servant to iniquity or as a servant to righteousness" (Romans 6:19). That this is the case, is made obvious by all that we know about our world past and present. The devil, by his temptations, hires laborers into his field to plant weeds in men's minds --some discontentment, some gossip, some bitterness, some hate, some jealousy. Do you remember some of the reviews on the best-seller, "The Death of Satan"? One minister responded a little too enthusiastically, I think, when he said, "Well, he's not dead in our church!"

God, on the other hand, by his gospel, is hiring workers into his vineyard, to trim it, to cultivate it, to harvest it, to keep it. We are given a choice then! By not working for God, we are made to count for the opponent. Passivity is the devil's greatest ally. Elijah once said, "Choose you this day whom you will serve."

In general, until we are hired into the service of God, we are standing idle in the market place in a state of idleness, doing nothing of purpose, nothing worthwhile, nothing that will last. We are idle, or might as well be, for the good we accomplish.

The gospel call is given to those who stand idle in the market place. The market is a place of business, a place of sport, a place where children play (Matthew 11:16-17). And the gospel calls us to a pragmatic seriousness, from a place of business, of noise, of hurry. Still, many will not work for Christ if it means leaving the market place.

What shall be their wages? The usual daily wage (Matthew 20:2). The Roman wages for a day's work -- a Roman penny. Yet, the reward for this work is of grace, for we are all unprofitable servants. The story specifies that there is a reward to be gained, and a sufficient one. Everyone gets a day's pay, and that is

exactly what everyone needs, not necessarily what everyone earns. It is also to say that "God will do right;" to be sure, God will not be behind; there is never any loss in working for God.

For what term are they hired? For a day; or, for whatever is left of the day. That is all that any of us have to give. It is a short time, the time of one's life, in which, all the work must be done. The work is only for a day; this should energize us to work the harder, before the night falls.

Notice is taken of several hours of the day, at which, the laborers are hired. Some are called to begin work in the kingdom when they are very young --they are sent forth early in the morning. They "remember their Creator in the days of their youth, while the evil days come not." Timothy "from a child was taught the Holy Scriptures." Obadiah "feared the Lord from his youth." This is a worthy Biblical admonition.

Others heed the gospel call in middle age, "Go work in my vineyard at the third, sixth, or ninth hour." It is a remarkable thing to see the power of Divine grace at work on these folk who have already established a life philosophy. It is remarkable --even astonishing, that God could call one who, in effect, has his or her mind already made up. Divine grace is magnified in the conversion of some, when they are in the middle of their life and pursuits, as, for example, the Apostle Paul.

So, God works in all age groups. None can say, "this is the best time or that is the best time," for now is the best time. We can only work for whatever part of the day we have left. "Go, you, also, into my vineyard." God turns away none that are willing to be hired --everyone can get a job.

Yes, God even hired people out of retirement, in old age, at the eleventh hour, when the Sun of life is ready to fall behind the Western horizon. He hires people with only minutes to work.

However, none will be hired in the twelfth hour, when life is done. But, while there is life there is work to be done for God, and a great amount of it has been done by these people with little time left on the clock. Old age can be a hopeful time. When we come to God in sincerity, we will doubtless be accepted, regardless of our age, for true repentance is never too late!

Still, let none, upon this presumption, put off the gospel invitation until they are old. That is not the point. It is true that these were sent into the vineyard at the eleventh hour; but, no one had hired them, or offered to hire them before. The difference is this, those who have had gospel offers made to them at the first, third, sixth, or ninth hour, cannot say with those who were hired at the eleventh hour, "No man has hired us."

Still, the promise is there, "I will restore to you the years that the locust have eaten" (Joel 2:25). "I will restore the wasted years." Not to discourage any, but to awaken all, it must be remembered that "Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation." It matters little if you are old or young; *now* is still the word. God was the one to coin the phrase "It is what it is; we'll have to go from here."

That is the agreement; now, for the account with the workers. The account was settled "when the evening was come." That is why some people are still getting away with it, and you are wondering why. Whoever taught that now is payday is altogether mistaken. We must give an account to God in the evening. "It is appointed unto man to die once, and *after that* the judgement." --not before. After that --the accounting, not before.

The pay is general; they all receive a penny. Everyone who answers the gospel call receives the pay. Not primarily for the value of his or her work, but as the gift of God. All will have complete happiness. All will have full pay, come payday. The giving of an entire day's wages to those who had not done a tenth part of a day's work is designed to show that God's distribution of his rewards is by grace and not because he has a debt with us.

All Christians will be rewarded for their faithfulness, regardless of when they begin. "Well done thou good and faithful servant," is the saying. I would expect it to be this way! If my neighbor needs a full days pay to get on, I am glad that he or she shall have it.

The important thing is that they were in the market place, waiting to be hired, and that when they got an opportunity to work in the Lord's vineyard, they took it. The important thing today is not your age, but whether or not you will accept employment with God. And grant you, those of you who are old will get everything you need on payday, just as those of you who are young.

You see, we all need the same pay to make it. "Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe; sin had left a crimson stain --he washed it white as snow." What he pays, is exactly what everyone of us needs. We cannot get by on less than the grace of God, or the cross. Here is the picture: As Christians, work is what we do, grace is what we get. We are not only God's *workmanship*, we are God's *workers*

Christianity is less of a religion and more a way to live and work --"a way of life." Remember, Jesus said, "I am the way... I am the life." His initial and primary invitation was, and always shall be "follow Me" (Matthew 4:19). If you won't follow --then, how have you accepted? He gets to "lead the way." That's how Christianity works. He leads, we follow --it's a way of life. **It is our way of life!**