

Understanding the Kingdom

Matthew 20:1-16

As we come to this parable this afternoon, remember the context. Jesus had been teaching on the subject of eternal life. A rich young ruler wanted to know what he was supposed to do in order to gain eternal life. What good work did he need to perform in order to earn and accomplish the goal of eternal life? Jesus used the law in order to show him the impossibility of his question. His answer was to keep that law perfectly, completely. And when the young man claimed that he had already done so, Jesus exposed the idolatry of his heart by calling upon him to “sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

That obligation of perfect law-keeping was, of course, impossible. And that was point, wasn't it?

v.23 Then Jesus said to His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” 25 When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” 26 But Jesus looked at them and said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Who can be saved? If you depend upon your own law-keeping, no one! It is impossible. And in that context, giving encouragement to his disciples, Jesus declares,

v.28 “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My

name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

That's the background for his parable. That is what the parable is about. “Many who are first will be last, and the last first.” It is a great reversal, that those who achieve the most in the estimation of this world, resting upon their earthly accomplishments, shall be last in the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus makes no doubt about the focus of that point with this parable, for we read at the end,

v.16 “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Let's try to understand what that means, beginning by,

I. UNDERSTANDING THE PLAYERS IN THE PARABLE.

As we begin, one reminder about parables. Generally, parables are designed to teach only one point. And all the details, sometimes even the people themselves, serve only to emphasize that one point. So we have to be careful analyzing all the details and making symbolic representations for everything mentioned in the parable. But even with that careful approach, this parable gives us opportunity to make some explanations about the people involved. Beginning with,

A. The master of the house.

Perhaps I can even say obviously, the master of the house represents God himself. Though more accurately, the parable identifies the similarity between the master and the kingdom.

v.1

The subject of the parable is clearly the kingdom of heaven. In terms of the message today, the concept of the kingdom of heaven here is virtually identical with the declaration of eternal life. Or, broadly speaking, salvation. So to enter the kingdom of

heaven is the same as to gain eternal life. Entering the kingdom is equivalent to salvation. The citizens of that kingdom are the same as those whom God has saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

So let's understand the kingdom in terms of this master of the house. He was an employer, hiring workers for his vineyard. There is an obvious business transaction taking place, and thus far, that is easy to understand. He goes out in the morning to hire some workers.

v.2

So what about,

B. The first workers hired.

A few observations. First, this is a labor contract. They came to an agreement on wages, apparently with some necessary negotiations. They were employees doing a job for money. Nothing inherently wrong with that, but the emphasis certainly lies with the emphasis upon money. Nothing in this interaction indicates any appreciation for the honor of the master of the house nor any recognition of the importance of the labor itself. It was just a job.

And they were paid a denarius a day, which was a fair salary. It's hard to quote an exact dollar amount, but it is sufficient to say that was an ordinary day's wage for an ordinary laborer. It was fair, not generous but not stingy either.

We learn more about these workers at the end of the workday, for a lot has happened. We will come back to the workers hired later, but from the perspective of these first workers, those later hires got special treatment. They got the same daily wage for less hours. Considerably less hours in the case of the workers

hired at the 11th hour. So what happened?

v.8-12

So now, much more of their heart is being revealed. Much more of their motives. According to verse 10, they expected to be paid more than a denarius. That seemed fair to them, since they were comparing themselves to the later workers. They weren't focused upon their contract nor upon the quality of their own work, but solely upon what they would receive as compared to others. Their value wasn't in their own work, but in comparison to the work of others.

Surely, we see that same spirit today everywhere. Salary and wages are judged by comparison to others. Contracts are evaluated in terms of what someone else is making. This is especially obvious with professional athletes and public entertainers. Sports contracts always make news because they are public, and the reference point is always the last free agent who signed, or the last bonus that was awarded. If so-and-so gets this much, and I accomplished more than he did, then I should get more.

Gone in all of that, in professional sports, is the love of the game. Gone is the sense of duty and obligation to your own contract. The whole situation promotes greed and envy. And we certainly have that in this parable. Along with grumbling!

v.11

They had their complaint ready, and it was so obviously self-advancing and self-promoting.

v.12

Now we are supposed to feel sorry for them! They worked all day in the scorching heat. But, of course, that is what they had

agreed to do, wasn't it? They took the job! They negotiated the wages. They knew what they were doing, and they did it willingly. That's what a job is all about.

And so they are not only dissatisfied with what they themselves had received, they were envious of the others. They resented what the late-comers had been paid. They begrudged what they received as much or more they complained about their own salary. Quite revealing of their heart, isn't it? Jealousy is an ugly trait. Envy is so destructive and harmful. Measuring yourself by the standard of others is so disastrous. And begrudging the good that others receive is simply evil!

All of that is present with these workers, who should have simply accepted the wages to which they had agreed in the first place. Well, back to those others,

C. The workers hired later.

There is a different spirit right from the outset.
v.3-4

No negotiations. And an amazing sense of trust. "Whatever is right I will give you." Who of you would take a job under those conditions? These men did,
v.5

The pattern continued all the way to the eleventh hour.
v.6-7

So evening comes in this vineyard. And remember, the kingdom of heaven is likened to this master of the vineyard. And he calls in all his workers. So the image intended is that of the end of the age, the day of judgment, the day of reckoning. And the parable teaches something particularly important about that

day, something particularly important about the kingdom of heaven. Namely, the sovereignty of God.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD WITH REGARD TO HIS KINGDOM.

v.13-15

First, "I am doing you no wrong." The master is fulfilling his promise, his obligation. And sovereignty means I don't have to treat everyone the same way. It is not a union contract negotiated by collective bargaining. It would be wrong if the owner had promised a certain wage for certain labor, and after the labor was completed, to withhold the wage. That would be a breach of his promise. Once the contract was established, the performance of the work obligated the owner of the vineyard to pay. And he did pay!

v.13

So he says,
v.14 "Take what is yours and go your way."

That's what we could call a works-principle. In terms of the kingdom, that is a system of works and merit. You work for what you want. You earn what you get. You deserve it, and the payment of your wages are an obligation. So here's the point.

A. Entrance into God's kingdom does not operate on a principle of earned wages.

Period.

The kingdom of heaven is like this master of the house, and the point of this parable is to draw a contrast between these first workers and the later workers. As soon as you stand before God in the context of a works-principle, you are doomed. As soon as you think that you somehow have some earned wages by which

you can enter the kingdom of heaven, you are doomed. It's impossible.

"Take what is yours and go your way." These workers no longer serve to illustrate the point Jesus is making with the parable. Their story is over. They negotiated a contract. They did their work. They got paid what had been promised. That's it.

So if you want to earn your wages by keeping the law, if you want to earn your entrance into heaven by keeping the law, then you are under the curse of that law, for the duties and obligations are perfect obedience. If you want to earn your entrance into God's kingdom, then keep the law perfectly. On the basis of the works-principle, that is what God requires. So it is impossible, isn't it? Like threading a camel through the eye of a needle!

Let me define it correctly, this idea of entrance into God's kingdom.

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast."

Not of works. Not a result of works! Not a matter of earned income, or wages paid for jobs performed. And if you want to talk about wages, then you have start talking about what you have actually earned and deserved. Here is how the principle of wages works before God,

Rom. 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death."

That's how the works-principle operates. Like it did in the garden of Eden. If you disobey, you die.

Gen. 2:15 "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of

the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

No provision for a blessing. No provision for mercy, or forgiveness. Or redemption. "For the wages of sin is death." But that previous verse in Romans 6 continues, of course: "...but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So be sure that you never introduce this works-principle into the doctrine of salvation. Don't allow any sense of your own merit to play a part in your understanding of how you enter the kingdom of God. It is not based on works and salary, but rather upon the basis of God's own sovereignty.

How, then, can I be saved? How can anyone be saved? What is the point of this parable that Jesus would have us to learn? God's sovereignty. And particularly, the generosity of God's sovereignty.

B. Entrance into God's kingdom is focused upon the generosity of God's sovereignty.

So please understand God's sovereignty in this context. Generosity. Free and extravagant displays of sovereignty unto the salvation of the lost.

It is not a sovereignty that looks like fatalism, impersonal and arbitrary in unfairness. God's sovereignty does not refer to causing harm to those who deserve good. But rather, the generosity of God's sovereignty focuses on his willingness to do good to those who deserve harm! That's the point, not a fatalistic sense of doom if that is what God chooses for you, but rather a sense of his generosity in loving those who actually deserve and have earned his wrath and justice.

So the point to be made by these later workers becomes obvious. They had agreed to no set salary. He said to those hired at the third hour, “You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.” “So they went.”

And when the day ended and wages were to be paid, he said to those first workers, “Take what belongs to you and go.” And then he describes his generosity in terms of his sovereignty.

v.14 “I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?”

God made a choice. God made a decision. It was his to make. In terms of the parable, it was his vineyard. It is his kingdom. None of us have a claim upon that kingdom, for even if we were to perform our duty perfectly, on the basis of God’s authority, we would rightly here what Jesus says in,

Luke 17:10 “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

The master of the vineyard is not dealing with these later workers according to that works-principle. Rather, he is operating in the realm of generosity! Not any obligation, on God’s part. Not anything that has made him constrained or accountable to act a certain way under external compulsion. No, God is sovereign. There is no external compulsion upon him. No obligation to anyone. That’s the meaning of his sovereignty, so well expressed in the words of the parable, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?”

Let me step back a minute, and focus just on those words, “... do what I wish.” That’s sovereignty, God does whatever he wishes to do, he chooses. And what determines his choice?

What determines the object and focus of his choice? Why does he choose what he chooses, especially in terms of entrance into his kingdom? If it is not works-principle based on merit, what is it?

I hope you know where I’m going. I hope you know the answer clearly. Our entrance into the kingdom of God is not based on our merit or works, but instead based on the sovereign choice of God. And that is called grace.

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.”

That’s the motivating impulse in God, that’s his motive and objective in all that he does, “to the praise of the glory of his grace.” And so this parable gives us great clarity in,

III. UNDERSTANDING THE PRINCIPLE OF GOD’S GRACE.

Not just sovereignty. Not just authority, but grace. Grace to make choices for our benefit, that are not based in anything that we have earned or deserved. Grace to grant us entrance into the kingdom of heaven, not dependent upon anything that we have done or might yet still do. Grace. It’s a gift. And we are those workers hired later in the day, and God chooses to be generous to us, as an exercise of his grace.

And that has always been God’s plan and purpose, even before he created the world. He created the world knowing precisely what he would do. He had already determined in his

own will what we now call his eternal decree. It is a decree of grace, a determination of generosity. “in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace.”

Back to the words of this parable. Note the end of verse 15, “Or is your eye evil because I am good?” The ESV translates it, “Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

In other words, are you jealous, are you envious, because I am good? And their answer, if it were honest, would have to be, “YES!” They are envious because the other workers were the recipients of God’s generosity. They are jealous because the later workers benefitted from God’s grace. And although they had negotiated a labor contract based on their own works, they wanted more. Because God showed others the generosity of his grace.

A. God’s grace is an expression of his goodness.

“Is your eye evil because I am good?” God asks. The obvious point is that God is good, in his determination to saved those who have sinned. God is good, in his sovereign choice to bestow the blessings of the kingdom of heaven upon those who don’t deserve it. God is good to forgive us our sins. God is good to receive and adopt us as his children. God is good to reserve an inheritance in heaven for us. God is good to protect and preserve us until that day when we are glorified. God is good to make us like Jesus, that he would be the firstborn among many brothers.

God is good to shower his lovingkindness upon us, we who have earned and deserved his condemnation. God’s grace is an expression of his goodness. So when God says, “Is it not lawful

for me to do what I wish with my own things?”, he means, “Am I not allowed to save those whom I choose to save?”

Remember the reference to the twins Jacob and Esau, as we read in,

Rom. 9:11 “...(for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), 12 it was said to her, “The older shall serve the younger.” 13 As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.” 14 What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! 15 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.” 16 So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.”

I propose to you that is the essence of God’s goodness, for Paul is quoting from,

Ex. 33:18 “And he said, “Please, show me Your glory.” 19 Then He said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”

It is God’s goodness to show you mercy. It is God’s goodness to open the doors of his kingdom to do. It is a matter of his grace, not a matter of your works. And that grace produces a reversal of fortune among men.

B. God’s grace produces a reversal of fortune among men.

v.16 “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

So dear friends, don’t be among the first, those workers who

were fulfilling the duties of their job by the effort of their own works. They were hired first, but because they sought to earn their entrance into the kingdom of God, they will be last. And the last, the least of all men, the one who is poor and humble in his heart, he will be first.

To repeat what we have seen before, when the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”, we read this,

Mat. 18:2 “Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, 3 and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Beloved, it is all a matter of God’s grace. God’s amazing grace, that would save a wretch like you, and like me. So we are left to sing his praise, to boast in Him because we have nothing in ourselves.

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”