

## **Pentecost 17 - Sept. 24 2023 - SJ, SM**

Matthew 20:1–16 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>“About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup>He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ <sup>5</sup>So they went. “He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. <sup>6</sup>About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ <sup>7</sup>“ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup>“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ <sup>9</sup>“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup>So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup>When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. <sup>12</sup>‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ <sup>13</sup>“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’ <sup>14</sup>Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. <sup>15</sup>Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ <sup>16</sup>“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

In the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, dear fellow redeemed:

Normally, losers don’t get much attention. Yet in the Special Olympics, attention is paid to each athlete. Similarly, there is recognition that finishing a marathon, all 26.2 miles is a difficult feat, so some recognition is given to everyone who crosses the line and finishes the race.

That’s not the way it usually is. The world usually only cares about winners. However, with God, things are very different. Jesus tells us that the first will be last and the last will be first. As we consider today:

### **Losers Can Finish First!**

1. Those who think they are ahead may be coming in last
2. They can become winners by God’s grace

### **1. Those who think they are ahead may be coming in last**

Anytime that our Lord Jesus tells a parable he is trying to explain something spiritual using a situation from every day life. To help us understand God’s goodness to the sinners of this world, Jesus talks about the familiar situation of a business hiring people to work for him.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t give us every detail about the landowner. He doesn’t tell us what work the men are being hired to do, nor does he tell us how many men are being hired. None of the people are given names. Why? Because none of those details were important. Jesus is drawing our attention to the payment that is being given to the workers by the landowner.

The man goes out early in the day, assumedly at sunrise or 6:00 a.m., and hires a group of men to work the entire day for him. He agrees to give them a denarius, what was considered a generous day’s pay. It was the same amount of pay that a Roman soldier received for a day’s work. In today’s money, it would probably be around \$200 or so.

The landowner doesn’t hire all his workers at once. After the first group hired at dawn, he also goes and hires more people at 9:00 a.m., at noon, at 3:00 p.m. and the last group at 5:00 p.m. And finally the day ends twelve hours after it began and the time to pay the workers arrives. Some of the workers have worked a full twelve hour day, but others have worked only nine hours, six hours, three hours and some only an hour.

The landowner chooses to pay the workers beginning with those who worked the least amount of time — and they are all paid exactly the same — the payment for a full day’s labor, a denarius. This upsets those who had worked the longest because they thought they were deserving of a greater reward than those who had worked only an hour.

This parable really is talking about believers and for what part of their lives they have been Christians. Many Christians believe for their entire lives, from the time they are baptized until they die at a ripe old age. But others are believers for only half their lives or others for ten years. And some may only believe for days or even minutes as they come to faith just before they die.

Not always, but sometimes people who have been raised in the church are apathetic in their faith. They just aren't excited for their Lord, especially compared to someone who has just become a Christian. These lifelong Christians are the people in Jesus' parable who had been hired first, early in the morning.

Jesus' point in telling us this parable is to warn these lifelong Christians not to feel superior to new converts to Christianity. They should not feel better than other Christians. *No Christian should ever feel superior to any other Christian.* Nor should we really even feel superior to unbelievers, because except for the grace of God, we too would still be unbelievers. As Christians we should not feel resentment that we must bear a cross that others are not asked to carry.

Even worst yet is when Christians complain that God shouldn't save a particular person on their deathbed or because they were such a wicked sinner all lifelong. Jesus makes this very point when he says: **when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'** Rather than resentment, we should be rejoicing with the angels of God over every soul that repents! The danger of this kind of thinking is that we begin to believe that we EARN our way to heaven or that we are more deserving of the blessings of heaven than other people are.

We dare *never* think of heaven as something we deserve or have earned. Heaven is ours only by the grace of God poured out to us in the person of his Son. Eternal life was *purchased* — not by us — but by Jesus through his bitter suffering and death and the innocent blood he shed for us. Jesus earned our way to heaven, not us.

## **2. They can become winners if they discover the mind of God**

Anyone who believes that they are deserving of a better place in heaven may not realize it, but they have replaced the works of Christ with their own good works. What they are failing to recognize (like those workers in Jesus' parable who were first) is that they believed before other people not because they were better, not because they had special power in or of themselves, but only by God's grace. By thinking they are first and that they deserve to be first, they may end up last — and losing the gift of salvation.

They are also failing to recognize their very nature separates them from God and makes it impossible to do anything that pleases God. Our every thought, word, desire and action is tainted by our sinful nature. God says of mankind that **every inclination of the thoughts of his heart are inclined only toward evil all of the time.**

God's reply to us is this: **Friend, I have not been unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?** If God promised people rewards in heaven based on what they did in this life or how long they were Christians, then giving everyone the same gift of salvation would be unfair. But our God has promised every Christian the exact same thing: eternal life in heaven. Every Christian, whether they have been a believer for only seconds when they die or 969 years as did Methuselah, they will all be given the same prize. A gift not based on our good works, but on the love of God poured out to us through the grace of God. It isn't based on what we do for one day or our entire lives; it is and always will be based only on the perfect life that Jesus lived for us and the payment that he made for our sins.

I have heard Christians say, *Why should we send money to people we don't even know? Or Why should we send money someplace when we could use it right here at home?* Certainly our sinful flesh wants us to think this way. But God doesn't want us to think that way. Our sinful flesh wants us to resent the salvation of others. But as the people of God, enlightened by faith, we realize that God's love for us in no way diminishes his love for us. God truly does want all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. And his will is truly our will, then so will we.

Through the use of this parable, our Lord Jesus has sought to teach us two important truths, a truth that we not allow our sinful fears to interfere with the saving of souls. True love for our neighbor means that we desire the same blessings that God has given us also be given to our neighbor. That means that we want all the people of this world to receive God's blessings of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and heaven.

The second important truth is that those of us who are lifelong Christians might be in special need of hearing. We are no more deserving of God's grace and the gift of heaven than the worst sinner who comes to faith on their deathbed. It is still true: **that it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one can boast.**

Amen.