

Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20:1-16

INTRODUCTION:

A. Matthew 20:1-16

B. The meaning of this parable has challenged many expositors, and explanations offered have been varied

[While admittedly difficult, I believe the main point can be determined with a fair degree of certainty. Especially if we begin by taking into consideration...]

I. THE SETTING

A. THE CONVERSATION WITH THE RICH YOUNG RULER - Mt 19:16-22

1. Jesus had been approached by this man with a question concerning eternal life
2. In the course of their conversation, Jesus challenged the young man to give up all and follow Him
3. The man went away sorrowful, unable to accept the challenge

B. THE DISCUSSION WITH THE DISCIPLES - Mt 19:23-26

1. Jesus used this opportunity to teach how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven
2. This causes the disciples to wonder who then could be saved?
3. Jesus' response is that with God all things are possible

C. THE QUESTION RAISED BY PETER - Mt 19:27

1. Unlike the rich young man, Peter and the other disciples had accepted the challenge to give up all and follow Jesus - cf. **Mt 4:18-22**
2. So he asks: **"Therefore what shall we have?"**
3. It appears that Peter is wanting to know...
 - a. If the rich can be saved (though barely, and with the help of God)...
 - b. What more will those receive, who have given up all to follow Christ?
4. Peter's question could be viewed as coming from a commercial or mercenary spirit...
 - a. I.e., having some sort of personal profit as a chief aim
 - b. I.e., motivated solely by a desire for personal gain
5. Peter's motive may have been pure, in which case Jesus' complete answer may have been designed to be a "pre-emptive

strike" against any improper motives

D. THE REPLY GIVEN BY JESUS - Mt 19:28-30

1. First, an assurance...
 - a. Specifically, to the apostles - **Mt 19:28**
 - 1) In the "regeneration", they will be judging the twelve tribes of Israel
 - 2) This promise could refer either to:
 - a) Their role as apostles in the gospel age following Pentecost - cf. **Mt 16:19**
 - b) A special role following the return of Christ when He comes to judge the world - cf. **Mt 25:31-ff**
 - b. Generally, to all disciples - **Mt 19:29**
 - 1) In this life, a "hundredfold" houses, brothers, sisters, etc.
 - 2) In the age to come, "everlasting life" - cf. **Mk 10:29-30**
 - 3) I.e., those who give up all will receive more than enough in return
2. But then, a warning - **Mt 19:30**
 - a. **"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."**
 - b. A rather cryptic warning, one repeated again in **Mt 20:16**

[Since this warning both precedes and follows the parable we are studying, it is evident that the parable was told to explain the warning! And since the warning was first given in response to Peter's question, any explanation of the parable should be based upon the setting that preceded its telling.

With this in mind, let's proceed to consider...]

II. THE PARABLE AND ITS MESSAGE

A. THE PARABLE SUMMARIZED...

1. Early in the morning, a landowner hires laborers to work for an agreed upon wage - **Mt 20:1-2**
2. Later, at different hours of the day, he finds more and hires them also, for a fair but unspecified wage - **Mt 20:3-7**
3. At the end of the day, they are all paid equally, which irritates those who had worked all day - **Mt 20:8-12**
4. The landowner responds to the complainers...
 - a. I treated you fairly, for you received according to our agreement – **Mt 20:13-14a**
 - b. I wish to pay the others the same - **Mt 20:14b**
 - 1) Do I have not the right? - **Mt 20:15a**
 - 2) Are you envious, because I am gracious? - **Mt 20:15b**

5. Jesus concludes by repeating the warning - **Mt 20:16** (some manuscripts add another warning: "For many are called, but few chosen")

B. THE MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE...

1. Many and varied have been the interpretations; for example...
 - a. The various bands of workers are the O.T. saints; those called at the eleventh hour are the apostles
 - b. The workers first called are the Jews, those called last are the Gentiles
 - c. The parable represents the whole gospel age up to Christ's return, and the workers are groups saved at various periods
 - d. It refers to different periods of a person's life in which he may respond to the Lord: some responding early, others late in life
2. In light of this interpretation, the main point of the parable is...
 - a. What everyone receives will be more than "fair" ("**Did you not agree with me...?**")
 - b. No one has the right to question the "generosity" of the Lord ("**Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?**")
 - c. Those who may serve long and hard should not be "envious" if others receive the same reward ("**Is your eye evil because I am good?**")
 - d. Therefore no one should serve the Lord with a commercial or mercenary spirit!
 - 1) The very danger Peter was close to falling into by the question he raised!
 - 2) A danger to which we are all susceptible!
3. Perhaps I should stress that this parable is NOT saying that those who purposely put off obeying Christ until the last moment can be saved!
 - a. If that were the point, the parable would have been worded differently
 - 1) Notice that those who responded at the late hour of the day had not been working "**Because no one hired us**" - **Mt 20:7**
 - 2) They accepted the offer as soon as they heard it, though late in the day -- They were not people who turned down many opportunities to accept the offer to labor in the vineyard, only to accept at the last hour!
 - b. Whether one can be saved at the last moment after lifelong rejection of the gospel is another question that continues to be debated.
 - 1) One which only the Lord can rightfully answer
 - 2) However, notice what is said of those who remain in a condition of rejecting the gospel:
 - a) They judge themselves unworthy of everlasting life - cf. **Ac 13:46**
 - b) They are storing up for themselves wrath in the day of wrath - cf. **Ro 2:4-11**

CONCLUSION

1. It is my understanding that the proper application of this parable is this...
 - a. When we are called by the gospel to obey Christ, we should respond at once!
 - 1) For some, we may hear the invitation early in life
 - 2) Others may not come to know of the gospel until late in life
 - b. As laborers in the vineyard (i.e., the kingdom), we should work diligently in whatever time we may have left
 - 1) We may be blessed to offer a full life of service to the Lord
 - 2) Or we may only have a short time
 - c. We should do whatever we can without a commercial or mercenary spirit (e.g., "Do I get more because I gave more?")

2. With this parable, we learn more about those in the kingdom of heaven...
 - a. Just as the parable of "**The Unmerciful Servant**" teaches us there is no place in the kingdom of heaven for "an unforgiving spirit"...
 - b. So the parable of "**The Laborers In The Vineyard**" teaches us there is no room in the kingdom of heaven for those with either "a mercenary spirit" or "an envious spirit"!

3. My fellow Christians, what is our attitude toward our service to Christ?
 - a. One of gratitude?
 - b. Or one of commercialism? -- There is only one attitude that is acceptable!

4. For those who are not yet Christians...
 - a. Why not let the gracious spirit of the "landowner" revealed in this parable encourage you to accept the grace of God in humble obedience to His gospel?
 - b. Why not live out the rest of your life in grateful service to Him?

5. **God's Plan for Man's Salvation**