

## PARABLE OF THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD (Matthew 20:1-16)

### – The Biblical Attitude in Following Christ

The immediate context that preceded this parable from Christ was the question posed by the apostle Peter. He asked Jesus in **Matthew 19:27**, *“Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?”* Apparently Peter asked on behalf of the other disciples because Jesus said unto 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 his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first. (19:28-30)”* The last verse of Christ’s reply corresponds with the last verse of this parable. This is the clue needed to understand the main thrust of the parable.

**Elements of the Parable** – The account of daily waged labourers waiting to be hired in the market place was common. The householder and the goodman of the house are one and the same and refers to Christ; the labourers are those who supposedly come to Christ and will be considered as followers of Christ.

**Explaining the Parable** – Daily waged labourers would wait upon householders for work to be given to them. They will normally start work first thing in the morning at around 9.00 am and work till 6.00 pm which is the end of the day. The Jews begin their day from 6.00 pm to 6.00 pm the next day. These labourers would bargain with their prospective employers on the agreed sum for that day.

In this parable, there were four groups of labourers who were hired. The first three groups were hired from the third hour (9.00 am), sixth hour (12.00 noon) and ninth hour (3.00 pm). All of them agreed with the householder that a penny was their daily wage. The first group worked the full day for a total of 9 hours, the second worked for 6 hours and the third for 3 hours. Their agreed wage was 1 penny.

The fourth group of labourers worked for only 1 hour. Their agreement with the householder was different from the other three. **Matthew 20:7**, *“They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive.”* They felt unwanted and unworthy to be hired. When the offer from the householder was *“whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive,”* they readily accepted the offer. There was no bargaining, only acceptance. The goodness and grace of the householder was depended upon rather than a prescribed arranged payment.

When it was time for payment, the householder deliberately told his steward to bring in the hired labourers *“beginning from the last unto the first.”* The fourth group who worked for only 1 hour was given one penny. The first group who saw the amount given to the fourth group supposed that the householder would give them more since they had worked 8 hours longer than the fourth group. But they were also given one penny. They murmured against the householder, now called the goodman of the house. Their murmur is recorded in **Matthew 20:12**, *“Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.”* The hours were longer and the work was harder. They felt that it was not right or fair that the fourth group was paid the same amount. Their argument seems legitimate until examined closely.

The reasoning of the goodman in **Matthew 20:13-15** was not only just and fair, it was gracious and righteous as well. *“But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?”* It was fair and lawful for the goodman to pay the first group 1 penny, for that was what was agreed upon from the very beginning. The agreement was honoured justly. Wrong was not done to the first group. It was up to the goodman to give to the fourth group the amount as he sees fit. He was gracious to the fourth group who had agreed to work, trusting in the householder to pay them what he thought best. They did not bargain with the householder.

The conclusion of the parable is *“So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen. (Matthew 20:16)”* The last phrase, “for many be called, but few chosen,” is an addition not found in Matthew 19:30.

**Applying the Parable** – Peter the apostle was a little perturbed. He and the other disciples had given up all to follow Christ. It seemed to them that they had made a big sacrifice to believe in Christ and to serve Him. What did they get out of it all for THEMSELVES? The lesson from the parable is that service unto the LORD is always an honour and a privilege. There should be no bargaining where service unto the LORD is concerned. This includes following the LORD. It has to be a total surrender of ourselves to God. It is an unconditional surrender with no strings attached, trusting entirely upon the grace and mercies of God.

Salvation and service come under the same category of selfless, unconditional devotion and surrender. Those who see themselves as last, with no self-esteem and unworthy of salvation and service to the King of kings, will surely serve unconditionally and with immense gratitude. Those who consider themselves first in terms of how good and great they are, and that it is God who is privileged to have them to serve Him, will surely be last. These are like the ones described in the church in Laodicea. They are bankrupt in their souls, and unless they turn to Christ in total unconditional surrender, they will have no part in the kingdom of heaven.

“Many be called, but few chosen” can refer to both believers and unbelievers. If the message is with reference to salvation, then the application would be that many hear the gospel but only some will be saved. If the message refers to service, then many are called to service but only some will be chosen. The chosen ones are those who serve unconditionally and sacrificially. They trust in the LORD’s goodness and grace to reward them even as they serve, without thinking of rewards, and are constrained by the love of Christ to serve. Every believer must realize that he is an undeserving sinner bound for Hell but for the Saviour who loved him and saved him unto Himself. Service to Christ is therefore the highest privilege bestowed upon every believer and thoughts of service for rewards or gain stems from an unregenerate heart of ingratitude. Chosen one serve out of love thinking not of reward at all because they know they are chosen. AMEN.