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Sermon Notes

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The Parable of the Generous Landowner

Matthew 20:1-16

I love the words of David Livingstone, the courageous pioneer Scottish missionary whose exploratory work opened the way for missionaries to penetrate the African interior with the gospel. This is a man who endured immense pain and suffering for Christ:

He was once attacked by a lion on the mission field crushing his shoulder to the point that its mobility would be hindered for the rest of his life. Livingstone married and deeply loved Mary Moffat, but because of the difficulty of travel and various sicknesses he would spend more than half of his 18 years of marriage separate from his wife. The couple lost a child to sickness on the mission field, and later Livingstone also lost his beloved wife to sickness on the mission field as well. During his time in Africa Livingstone once went 3 years with no correspondence from his family because the letters were unable to get to him.

But for all of this, on December 4, 1857 he spoke to the students of Cambridge University about his years of missionary service:

For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay?—Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter?—Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink, but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall hereafter be revealed in, and for, us. I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk, when we remember the great sacrifice which HE made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us.

“I never made a sacrifice...”!!!

What an incredible statement... of course, for some Christians, it may literally be true... they have never really sacrificed anything for Christ... they have never hurt for Jesus, pushed themselves for Him, suffered anything for His name

But others have labored and toiled, and are sometimes tempted to murmur and complain about their sacrifices, and to speak of them and make much of them

“I hope you know Lord, how much this cost me, this perfume I am pouring over your feet! This was every expensive... it cost me a year’s wage.”

PERISH SUCH AN ATTITUDE!

But yet, it is so easy to slip into it... like Martha who labored hard to clean house for the Lord and make him a nice meal, but ended up murmuring against the Lord:

Luke 10:40 But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."

But the Lord wants us to learn to make as many sacrifices as He calls us to make... to deny ourselves DAILY and take up our crosses and follow Him... And yet to learn to live our lives in humble thankfulness, considering OTHER SERVANTS OF GOD as BETTER than ourselves

This is the lesson of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard... Matthew 20:1-16

I. Understanding the Context: “The First will Be Last, and the Last First”

A. Peter’s Question

Matthew 19:27 "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

1. Seeking to understand rewards... “Treasure in heaven”
2. Jesus promises them lavish rewards
3. He extends the promise to anyone who leaves home for the Kingdom
4. BUT THEN:

B. Jesus’ Final Statement...Repeated

Matthew 19:30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

1. Jesus makes a surprising statement... it seems to be a warning

2. what could this mean?
3. He tells a parable... commonly called "The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard" to explain this truth

Vs. 1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard."

The word "for" means that the parable EXPLAINS this statement

4. Then he repeats the truth

Matthew 20:16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

C. So: This Parable Explains The Principle "The First Will Be Last, and the Last First"

1. any understanding we may have of this parable must explain how it is that many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first
2. any explanation of the parable that doesn't address how some are honored more than others in the Kingdom does not fit Jesus' words

II. Understanding the Parable: The Payment of Various Laborers

A. A Landowner Seeks Laborers

Vs. 1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard."

the landowner is ZEALOUS and PROACTIVE in hiring the men... he initiates the whole thing

B. An Agreement Reached

Matthew 20:2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

1. the focus of the landowners' hiring efforts are on what we would call "day laborers"
2. so the owner and the laborers come to a bargain
 - a. it is not a remarkable bargain
 - b. a denarius for a day of labor was the going rate... nothing all that remarkable

- c. BUT the key is this: they have AGREED to this rate... it is mutually agreeable

C. More Laborers Hired Throughout the Day

Matthew 20:3-5 "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So they went.

- 1. unlike the first batch of workers, no set price is agreed upon; these laborers merely take the landowner as an honorable man

"I will pay you whatever is right"

Literally: "what is just"... I will be just or fair with you; you will not be disappointed by my justice

They took the man at his word and went out to work in the vineyard

- 2. this same process characterizes the whole day:

Matthew 20:5 "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing.

- 3. finally one last hiring, just at the very end of the day... the "eleventh hour" leaves just one hour before sunset... it is five in the afternoon, and the sun is already setting

Matthew 20:6-7 About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷ "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

- a. The landowner gives them the same command "You also go and work in my vineyard" but he actually doesn't even promise to pay them!! They have to take his general character and the assumption of pay as sufficient... and they do; they go and work for one hour

D. Payday, and the Last are Paid First

Matthew 20:8 "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.'

- 1. but now comes the first surprise: the last ones hired get their wages first
 - a. this is the honor Christ was referring to, both before and after the parable

Matthew 19:30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Matthew 20:16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

- b. in this way, those who worked only one hour had an advantage over those who worked all day long

E. The Surprising Generosity of the Landowner

Matthew 20:9 "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius."

1. this was entirely unexpected
2. a denarius was the proper wage for an entire day of work
3. they had gotten a twelve-fold increase in their wages!!
4. this is really astonishing generosity
5. the other workers... those hired second and third... presumably also got a denarius, but Jesus never mentioned them

F. The Complaint by the Hardest Workers

Matthew 20:10-12 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² '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.'

1. this is an ugly display of human nature
2. strangely, their complaint actually makes perfect sense to us
 - a. equal pay for equal work
3. However, their attitude is still abominable: the owner says literally their "eye is evil"; NIV gives us that they are jealous
4. their focus is completely on themselves
 - a. they have worked harder and longer
 - b. they have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day
5. Remarkably: Many parable involve harsh criticism of the Master/King/Father or one in authority
 - a. Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:24 "Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed.

b. Parable of the Ten Minas

Luke 19:21 I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.'

c. Prodigal Son: The Older Brother

Luke 15:29-30 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

In all of these passages, there is some accusation of injustice, of unfairness... that the Master is in some sense immoral for how he is dealing with his servants and his possessions

Frankly, this is at the core of my understanding of this parable: the men who labored all day long in the vineyard did so with a very different heart toward the master than those who labored only for one hour

The attitude is EVERYTHING!!!

G. The Assertion of the Landowner's Right to be Generous

Matthew 20:13-15 "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

H. Christ's Final Word

Matthew 20:16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

1. Bottom line: the handing out of rewards on Judgment Day will be done according to God's own sovereign generosity

2. God will judge the heart in giving out those rewards

III. Understanding the Options: Two Choices

A. Option #1: The Parable is About Eternal Life as a Free Gift

Everyone Gets the Same Reward, No Matter How Long They Labor

1. Focus is on the denarius
 - a. Those who labored for one hour get a denarius
 - b. Those who labored for twelve hours get the same reward: a denarius
2. this has led some commentators to come to the conclusion that this parable is about HEAVEN: ETERNAL LIFE
 - a. after all, Jesus did mention eternal life to Peter

Matthew 19:29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

- b. in effect he is saying that our works on earth are in some sense DISCONNECTED FROM our true reward: eternal life, which is given merely by grace
- c. so this interpretation focuses on those heavenly gifts that are COMMON TO EVERYONE
 - i) full forgiveness of sins
 - ii) the right to be called a child of God... adoption
 - iii) bodily resurrection
 - iv) complete freedom from death, mourning, crying and pain
 - v) a place at the wedding banquet of the Lamb
 - vi) full access to the very presence of God... seeing Him in His glory, seeing His face fully
 - vii) a right to worship around the throne with countless others from all over the world
 - viii) the right to walk freely along the streets of the New Jerusalem, and on the magnificent New Earth, gazing at its beauties
 - ix) the right to drink from the River of the Water of Life which flows clear as crystal from God's Throne
 - x) the right to eat from the Tree of Life which is for the healing of the nations

These are the common blessings of the gospel , given to anyone who simply believes in Christ

They are given freely by grace through faith, not by works

And it doesn't matter HOW LONG you served Christ, HOW MUCH LABOR you put in, how DILIGENTLY or with what COST you suffered in this world... every Christian gets these things EQUALLY

3. Thief on the cross... does no labor for the kingdom, but still gets to live in Paradise

Luke 23:42-43 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

This concept is EXTREMELY OFFENSIVE to non-Christians... they look on it as a great display of God's injustice... because some hardened criminal can, right before being executed for a hideous series of murders, be instantly forgiven and accepted into heaven is BRUTALLY OFFENSIVE to many unbelievers, because they actually cannot conceive of the freedom of grace, of forgiveness of sins APART FROM MERIT

They are still looking at justification as if it were by works, and they think the thief on the cross, and the prisoner on death row cannot possibly do enough good works to outweigh the bad

So, many commentators on this parable think this is what Jesus is teaching:

4. John MacArthur quote

In this parable, Jesus wants His disciples to understand that everything they get from the Master is pure grace, given sovereignly and freely, apart from anything that they deserve... they cannot earn it, it is given equally and freely to all to whom the grace comes

John MacArthur: "Believing tax collectors, prostitutes, criminals, and social outcasts will have the same heavenly residence as Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Wesley. There are no servant quarters or lower-class neighborhoods in heaven. Everyone will have a room in the Father's house specially prepared for him by the Son. Every believer is a part of the church, the bride of Christ; every believer is a child of God and a fellow heir with Christ, and every believer is blessed with 'every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.' It's not that every believer receives an equal part but that every believer receives equally the whole of God's presence. Just as hell is the total absence of God (at least in terms of his positive presence), so heaven is the total presence of God. And every one of His children will enjoy equally the fullness of His presence there." [Commentary on Matthew 20]

5. Assessing the Strength of this view

- a. It is TRUE that nothing we do merits anything truly from God
- b. Any reward we get is simply by grace, completely beyond what we deserve

- c. The men who worked only one hour, then, are pictures of the humble recipients of grace, far more than they deserve
 - d. It is also true that there are many blessings in heaven which we will all equally enjoy no matter how much we worked for Christ here on earth
6. Assessing the weakness
- a. BUT I don't believe this is what the parable is addressing
 - b. First of all, the denarius was given to those who labored for twelve hours are the expected pay for their labor... they worked and it was JUSTICE for them to receive it; there was actually no lavish generosity in their case, except that the master hired them to begin with; other than that, in Jesus' time, a denarius was the expected pay for a full day of labor
 - c. Secondly, the "Everyone is equal in the Kingdom" view fails to deal with the reason Jesus told the parable:

Matthew 19:30 - 20:1 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who..."

Matthew 20:16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

- d. Jesus' whole reason for telling the parable is to prepare us for the distribution of rewards on other bases than we are used to in this world

B. Option #2: The Parable is About God's Sovereign Right to Judge Our Labor

1. Key concept: How are the last first and the first last?
2. SIMPLY PUT: When assessing our labors for the Kingdom, Christ looks not merely at the QUANTITY but also the QUALITY of the work
 - a. It could very well be that the one hour put in by the laborers hired at the end of the day was a greater honor to the master than the twelve hours put in by those hired at the beginning of the day
 - b. The men hired at the end were NOT PROMISED ANYTHING... just commanded to go and work in the vineyard... they didn't even get the assurance "I will pay you whatever is right"
 - c. They did their hour of labor simply by faith in the essential goodness of the master, that they would not be disappointed by his generosity
 - d. That one hour of work done with a sweet spirit of love and faith to the master is worth more than twelve hours done by those with a selfish, accountant-like spirit, those who notice who's working more, who's

working less, those who are comparing themselves to others; those who complain, perhaps, about how hot the day is, and how miserable the working conditions are

- e. A sweet spirit of love makes an hour of labor for Christ VERY SWEET to the MASTER...
- f. So, I think this parable is teaching that God looks at the heart motive to see what He will reward... not the quantity of labors and works

3. The Widow's Offering

Luke 21:1-4 As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. ² He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ³ "I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴ All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

- a. This is a helpful commentary on this Parable in Matthew 20
- b. When Jesus assesses the offerings, He does not look as man looks... at the quantity of the gift
- c. The wealthy were putting in huge amounts, but they were giving out of their wealth
- d. The widow put in more than anyone else, because she gave out of her poverty everything she had to live on
- e. So also in assessing our lives of service, God will be looking at the HEART MOTIVE of every action... Was there faith? Was there love? Was there genuine sacrifice?

4. God loves a "cheerful giver"

2 Corinthians 9:7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

- a. The men who worked all day in the vineyard hardly seemed cheerful to me
- b. They seem like the kind who spent their whole time comparing the level of their sacrifices to those of the others
- c. They complained about their sufferings: **"They bore the burden of the work and the heat of the day"**

- d. So Jesus is giving the Apostles and the whole church a warning... if you have a grudging, or hard attitude in your service to Christ, you may have a diminished reward

5. 1 Corinthians 13's lesson

1 Corinthians 13:3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

6. Jacob's attitude

- a. When laboring for Rachel, whom he loved

Genesis 29:20 So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

So may it always be in our service to Christ!!! It seems like NOTHING out of our love for Christ!!!

IV. Application

A. First... Give Thanks to God that You Even Have a Ministry at All

- 1. What incredible grace it is from Christ to use us as laborers in his harvest field
- 2. This is a GREAT GRACE from God... He doesn't NEED us at all
- 3. To be able to play ANY ROLE AT ALL is a lavish favor from Christ

B. Make Many Sacrifices... But Don't make Much of Your Sacrifices!

- 1. Remember David Livingstone... "I never made a sacrifice..."
- 2. People who speak a lot of their labors, their trials, their struggles, their sufferings for Christ have lost perspective
 - a. "Jesus paid it all... all to Him I owe..."
 - b. No labor of our hands or sufferings of our lives is even worth mentioning compared to what Christ did for us on the cross
 - c. Speaking much of our sufferings means our focus is too much on ourselves
 - d. Learn to make as many sacrifices as you can, but make very little of it

"We are unworthy servants... we have only done our duty"

C. Prepare Your Heart for the Surprise of Judgment Day

1. God's ways are not our ways
2. God's thoughts are not our thoughts
3. His way of assessing our lifeworks is true and righteous altogether... it has to do with the attitudes of the heart
4. MANY who were considered least on earth will be considered GREAT in heaven
5. As we will learn later... the standard is HUMBLE SERVANTHOOD
6. Learn to do as much as you can in service to Christ and to His people without thinking at all about what it cost you, how much you have done, all the things you have achieved

D. It Is God's Way to HIDE Our Effectiveness

1. When Jesus died, only a small handful of followers stood around the cross
2. When Paul died, no one stood at his side or came to his support... and he said everyone in the province of Asia has deserted him
3. Earth alone cannot show the full effects of the labors and sacrifices we make
4. Learn to leave it to God

E. A Humble Pattern for Storing Up Treasure in Heaven

1. Present yourself to God as a living sacrifice:
 - a. Humbly acknowledge that everything you have is God's: your body, your gifts/talents, your money, your opportunities
 - b. Present every one of those things back to God for Him to use as He sees fit
 - c. Say to Him, "Lord, I know nothing I do can ever pay for my sins—I am trusting in Christ for that; but I want to live for your glory every moment of the day"
2. Walk in the simple good works He has prepared for you that day
 - a. It could be your household chores, or your job or buying groceries
 - b. Do it with a mind to pleasing Him
 - c. Do it cheerfully by faith
3. Challenge yourself to be bold for the gospel

- a. God knows how difficult something might be for you compared to someone else
- b. The widow put in more than anyone else because of what it meant for her
- c. So also someone who invites someone to Easter worship when they've never invited anyone before is giving more than a traveling evangelist who does that kind of thing all the time

F. Recognize God's Grace in Rewards

- 1. nothing we do it of any merit whatsoever apart from the blood of Christ
- 2. only because of Christ's work on the cross for us can we store up any treasure at all
- 3. "Many who are last will be first" means that the humblest servants of God will be elevated by God to positions of honor.

G. Wait for the Lord's Assessment

1 Corinthians 4:5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

George Whitefield, the great evangelist of the First Great Awakening, was mindful of the fact that his fame as a preacher of the word was astonishing, and that he had an incredible reputation in the world

He yearned that his own name vanish into the dustbin of history, if only Christ's name might shine the more radiantly

He desired these simple words put on his tombstone:

"Here lies George Whitefield; what kind of man he was Judgment Day will discover."

Only on that final day, when the motives of our hearts are revealed will our rewards be revealed; and based on Christ's assessment of our motives, he will reward us; make your motives simple: your joy in God's glory!!!