

The Parable of the Laborers

The teaching of the parable found in Matthew 20 concerns the fact that **TIME** (duration) is **not** a governing factor as the Lord measures faithfulness in a servant. **Longevity is not an advantage in Christian work, but willingness is!**

The parable we are about to examine declares the Lord's right to compensate His servants by His own reckoning, and not by man's reckoning. Man is forced to consider **TIME** when computing the pay of an employee, however, this is not the Lord's way of doing things! When we use the word faithfulness, we picture someone on the job for a long time. However, the Lord does not do things by the way in which man calculates time. God has His own criteria for measuring a servant's faithfulness. Just what exactly God's yardstick is to measure faithfulness. Is something that- we don't know. But that He is **not obligated** to reckon **TIME** as a determining factor, is clear from this parable

Matthew 20:1-16, "*For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 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?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' 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.' The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So 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.' But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

Again, as in the other parables, we have a wealthy landowner. He goes to the labor market early in the morning (let's say 6 A.M.) to hire laborers. When he agrees with a group of them for a price of 17 cents a day, he sends them into his vineyard. About 9 A.M. he returns to the labor market, finding more idle men, agrees with them to work for him for the same price. They go out into his fields and work for the day. At noon the landowner goes to the labor market and hires more men for the same price, 17 cents for the day's work. Around 3 in the afternoon, the landowner goes to the labor market, finds more men, and promises them the same thing. They go into his field and begin to work. At 5 o'clock the landowner does the same thing with more men. Even though it was getting late in the day, all were to receive the same wages - 17 cents in silver.

In the evening, the landowner himself went into the field. There he instructed his foreman to pay the workers, beginning with the last group hired, down to the first. As you can imagine, those hired first expected to receive more than those hired late in the day. When they saw that

they received no more than those who came into the fields at 5 P.M., they complained to the farmer. They grumbled that he wasn't fair. They had to endure the heat of the day, while the latecomers worked only a few evening hours.

But the landowner replied in verse 13, "*Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?*" Verse 15 states, "*Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?*"

Those are the last words of the parable, to which the Lord Jesus adds a further comment: "*Many first ones shall be last, while many last ones shall be first!*"

That, of course, is the point of the parable. But what of the interpretation?

It should be stated that many scholars feel this parable does not easily give up its interpretation. Not a few confess great difficulty with it, so we will tread with as little presumption as possible. I can't help but feel though, that most difficulties arise from trying to press too many particulars from the story. Parables are poetic pictures taken from real life and used as vehicles for truths of the kingdom. It is when a person begins to particularize details, pressing every item for a meaning that he runs into difficulty. We'll try to avoid that and be satisfied with the central truth.

The entire parable revolves around the Lord's admonition at the end of Chapter 19. Peter had asked the Lord a mercenary question, "***We, who have given up so much to follow You, what are we going to get out of it?***" . . . (Can't you just hear Peter saying that? Only he would have enough nerve) . . . The essence of the Lord's replay is contained in the words, "*Many first ones shall be last, while many last ones shall be first!*" (Matthew 19:27). Then, after making this statement, the Master proceeds to tell the story of the laborers in the vine- yard. He uses the parable to explain what He means by these words. So that statement is undoubtedly the key to the interpretation.

The Lord is not speaking to theologians, but common people. The truth, therefore, is to be sought on the surface of the story and not so buried it requires a "*reading between the lines.*" What do we find on the surface? Men working **different time** spans, yet receiving the **same wage**. How may this be applied to the Judgment Seat of Christ?

This parable . . . as do the other three parables which we have studied . . . deals with God's workers and how they are rewarded. Each of the four parable which we have considered views some aspect of the judgment some feature as to **HOW** we earn our reward

This last parable brings up the matter of **TIME**. The others don't mention it. Obviously then, we are to learn what part **TIME** plays in rewarding Christians for faithful obedience during their earthly probation.

From the parable we see that **WHEN** a man went to work, and **HOW LONG** he was on the job had **no bearing** on his pay. Applied directly to the Christian, this suggests that because one man is called to serve the Lord early in life, he need not expect a greater reward than one who begins his servitude late in life. In other words, **longevity in service** is not necessarily an advantage. And **lateness into the race** is not necessarily a disadvantage. This can be comforting to people who are not saved until their later years. On the other hand, it warns the Christians who

enjoys the luxury of being raised in a Christian home, that his privileges do not guarantee him a bigger reward.

There is a possible danger here. Someone might say, "*I'll just wait until late in life to begin serving the Lord.*" He must remember that this is only **ONE** parable. The other parables show a servant is under obligation to squeeze the most from his one opportunity. If this opportunity comes early in life, - he must begin early to live as a bondsman. This parable is dealing with **WHEN** the opportunity comes. If a man receives his **MINA** late in life, he is not penalized.

God's yardstick for measuring **faithfulness** is applied to that portion of a person's life when he can be a slave, that is, at the moment the **MINA** is handed to him. It is graded in terms of intentions and willingness and how vigorously one prosecutes his opportunity, **NOT how long** he is on the job. It is possible, therefore, for those who find Christ late in life, to receive the same reward on an equal basis with those who have been serving Christ all their lives. Their chances for winning a good position with Jesus are just as good as those spending a lifetime serving Christ.

When Peter asked Jesus, "*What do we get out of following You?*" (Matthew 19:27) Jesus' answer was, "*Just because some followed Him first, and served Him longer, it did not automatically guarantee them a superior status in the kingdom.*" **Why?** Because God's rewards are **NOT** based on **WHEN** a man is called. Otherwise, those who receive Christ late in life, could never hope for a good position with Christ. In order to be fair, the rewards are based on **quality** of one's devotion to the Master's interest, **not quantity**. While some students interpret the different hours cited in the parable as applied to different periods in church history, there can be no question that they, especially, apply just as fully to the different stages of a person's life and experience.

We keep in mind that salvation is not in view here. Salvation is **FREE**, only rewards are earned. These men are being **PAID** for something **THEY DO**. The parable focuses on the hour of **PAYOFF**, the time of reward. It shows us that time in the field is not a critical factor in competing for Christian crowns.