

## Written Copy: Matthew 20:10-16 “The First Last? And the Last First?”

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday @ Pentecost: Proper 20

Sunday, September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023

### Text: Matthew 20:10-16

<sup>10</sup> Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.<sup>11</sup> And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, <sup>12</sup> saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ <sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first last.”

### The text’s intent

The disciples live in a world where a person is reimbursed by how hard he works and how much he does so that the more he accomplishes the greater the reward. But that is not how the reign and rule of Christ operates. We are members only by His gracious choosing, and our blessings: both now and eternal, come by as His gracious loving gift and not according to our earning them by works. In His reign and rule, the playing field is leveled and all are the same: blessed by His gracious loving mercy. To illustrate this Jesus tells a parable describing a Vineyard owner who keeps going out and hiring workers. But in the end, he pays them all the same, even those who worked for only an hour. He pays what He promised to pay them. This stands against how the world works with pay coming according to how hard one works. But in His reign and rule no one works their way into it, all are called by His grace and mercy. And all receive the same blessings He promises to all, here and into eternity, not because of works, but because of His love and grace.

### Focus Statement:

Jesus teaches that in His reign and rule, since we did not chose to be there and couldn’t earn our place, our entire life lived out in faith is by grace alone. The blessings of forgiveness of sin, salvation, eternal life, temporal blessings now, and the eternal blessings to come are ours not because of anything we have done or could do. We could never do enough. They come by His sacrificial and unconditional love. We receive all the blessings promised by grace alone. And all in His reign and rule are equally blessed.

### Function Statement:

#### Why it’s important to know:

Like the disciples we see our works and our sacrifices as adding extra weight to the love and blessings we believe we should receive from Christ now and for eternity

#### What the hearer should do as a result:

We are not to compare ourselves to others in the Church or think that we deserve better than they do. Instead, we are to understand He loves them just as much as He loves us, and that we all have equal standing now and for eternity in His reign and rule.

### Subject Sentence: By Jesus’ Grace All Are Equal in His kingdom

## Introduction

One of the most aggravating things about my time as a manager at Hillers was the work ethic, or lack thereof in the younger generations we hired as stock people and cashiers. I noticed it in those I interviewed for positions. They filled out the applications sloppily, not checking spelling, and not bothering to answer all the questions. They would be late to the interview. More than a few times people I arranged to have an interview with didn't even bother to show up. And then, one of these no-shows had the audacity to call and ask when he was to start. He was genuinely surprised that he was not hired. When I mentioned his "no-show" for the interview he told me, "Oh! My bad! I must've overslept. I promise I'll show up for work. So, when do I start?" I said, "You don't". He said, "Hey, that's not fair! You gotta at least give me a chance!" I told him, "I did. You didn't show. And now I'm supposed to trust you will show up to work on a consistent basis when you couldn't even make it for the interview?"

It was an attitude that many of the employees we did hire had. They thought they were entitled to a job, and we were entitled to pay them no matter what. They seemed to think that all they had to do was show up and we would pay them; forget actually doing any work. I remember one closing shift at the store in Berkley, which was the smallest store in the company. We only had two cashiers on duty, because the other two called in sick. Berkley consisted of three separate rooms made from what used to be three separate stores. The Deli/Checkout room was separated from the main part of the store, which made it a nightmare to manage. I recall manning the lottery desk (because the employee that should've been doing it didn't think it even think it important enough to come in to work that evening or call in). At one point I looked up from the Lottery Machine to see a line of customers stretching out through the hallway from the Deli-Check-Out Room into the main part of the store where I was. It was then I heard someone from the Deli Department paging me to the checkouts. When I walked in I saw everyone lined up at the two checkouts that had their lights on but had no cashiers at them. I can still recall the impatient angry looks of those customers waiting in line. I remember one of them reached out and grabbed my arm to stop me and tell me what a terrible place this was and what a terrible job I was doing. I asked the Deli where my cashiers were, and they pointed out the exit door. I walked out to find both of them standing outside smoking. I asked, "What the (bleep) is going on?" One of them replied, "We just needed a cigarette. We'll be right back in. They can wait for a minute." I replied, "No, they can't. In fact, you can have the rest of the evening off, and tomorrow, and the next day. You're both suspended until further notice." Then I grabbed one of the Deli help and she and I covered the cash registers, with me running back and forth between there and the Lottery Desk until closing.

And those two cashiers? Thanks to the union they got their jobs back, with pay, because I didn't first give them a written warning. Now the Union is not all bad. It forced management, especially upper management above me, to stop playing favorites and treat everyone equally. But the downside is, it encouraged the attitude that all one has to do is show up and get paid. It doesn't matter how hard you worked or how much you do, everyone gets paid the wage the union negotiated according to how long you have been employed. This echoes of the story from Jesus' Parable of "The Laborers in the Vineyard", and Jesus catchy saying "**The Last will be first, and the first, last.**"

## **Jesus' Parable: The Laborers in The Vineyard**

As we look at this story you will see Jesus is a master storyteller. He builds suspense into the story that keeps those who hear it for the first time on edge. And for those of us who have heard it before, He would invite us to pay attention and listen for those details that would've made His original audience, as well as us today, have head-scratching moments where we stop and say, "Wait a minute! Why on earth would the Master of the House do that?"

We start out with a story that sounds normal enough, that Master of the House going out at the break of dawn, say 6:00 AM, to hire laborers for the vineyard, to help with the grape harvest. He chooses them, and says, "I'll pay you a denarius to work the entire day, 12 hours, in my vineyard. Do you agree?" The laborers had been standing idle, needed work, work was being offered, and the pay was the standard wage for a day laborer. So, they agreed and went into the vineyard.

Then the Master of the House makes four more successive trips to the marketplace, one at the 3<sup>rd</sup> hour which would be @ 9:00 AM, then at the 6<sup>th</sup> hour which would be @ noon, then at the 9<sup>th</sup> hour @ 3:00 PM. Each time he finds men who are standing idly by. He hires these also to go work in the vineyard. But to these he makes no promise of a wage, only that he will pay them whatever is right and just. Now here is where the suspense comes in, how much is he going to pay them? Certainly not for a whole day's work, especially those that he hires later and later in the day.

And then comes the first head scratching moment. He goes out at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, which would be @ 5:00 PM, an hour before quitting time. He finds additional men standing idly by. When he asks why they are not at work they truthfully tell him, "No one has hired us." Now if this Master of the Vineyard is any kind of a businessman at all he should've told them "So sorry to hear that. Where were you when I was hiring earlier." Why on earth would anyone hire more men with only an hour left? If you don't have enough help to finish off the day hire more of them tomorrow. But he does hire them. And we are left to wonder if he is really hiring them for his good, or for theirs.

Then the suspense builds when pay time comes. And to keep the suspense up the last to be hired, an hour before quitting time, are going to be paid first. And here is a second, even greater head scratching moment. He pays them a denarius each! He pays them just as if they worked a full day in the vineyard. What's going on here?

Jesus skips over the other workers to get to the climax of the suspense and the biggest head scratching moment. **Matthew 20:10-12** <sup>10</sup> **Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.** <sup>11</sup> **And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house,** <sup>12</sup> **saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'** When those originally hired at 6:00 AM come to get paid, of course they would think they should receive more, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you expect double what they received, at least two denarii, if not more. After all you worked twice as hard, picking more grapes and doing so when the sun was at its peak. Most people hearing this story for the first time, then as well as now, would agree they deserve to be paid more. That's the way things work in the world, then and now. But low and behold they too are paid a denarius.

Now at this point, perhaps one of them should call the union! That's not fair labor practice. Perhaps an experienced businessman should advise this employer that is no way to run a business. Someone should tell him, "By doing that you're encouraging all these men to wait until the last hour to go to work and be paid for a full shift!"

To help us understand what's going on here it helps to know that Jesus has changed the title of the main character in **Matthew 20:8** **And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.'** He changes the title from "Master of the House" at the beginning to "Owner of the Vineyard". Perhaps a better way to translate that title is "Lord of the Vineyard". Jesus has inserted Himself into this Parable. It makes sense since, after all, He began by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." And who is the Lord and ruler of this kingdom? The one who is telling this very parable.

## **What Jesus is Saying to His Disciples Then and Now**

Through the Owner of the Vineyard's answer Jesus was speaking to His disciples then as well as us here today. **Matthew 20:13-15** <sup>13</sup> **But he replied to one of them, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?** <sup>14</sup> **Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you.** <sup>15</sup> **Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'**

Jesus is not advocating unions that protect workers who sluff off. Jesus is not siding with a generation that is sadly lacking in work ethics. Jesus is not telling us how the world should work. Instead, He is opening our eyes to how the Kingdom of Heaven-His Reign and Rule-works. Perhaps the best way for us to understand this application is to change the word “generosity” to grace.

This Owner of the Vineyard did not have to go out and hire those 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers. He hired them not because He needed them, but because they needed him. We likewise did not choose to be a part of His kingdom, He chose us. And for the sake of inserting ourselves into the story each one of us is called into His vineyard, His kingdom, His reign and rule at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, because He didn't need us, we desperately needed Him.

All those workers called into the vineyard received exactly what the owner promised, and even more so. He promised a denarius, the fair wage for a day's labor, and He paid it. In this He is just and right. And especially for those hired later he was more than fair in what He paid. He did that not because He had to, but because he wanted to, because he has a loving and generous heart, grace filled heart. And that describes the Lord of the Vineyard, which is the Kingdom of Heaven, who is Jesus Christ, the head of the Church.

You and I were called into His kingdom through the Gospel Message, yet we don't deserve to be there. What we deserve because of our sins is to live apart from our Lord now and for eternity. Yet what do we undeserving people receive? Blessing upon blessing, now and forever. No matter who you are, or what you've done, no matter how long you've been a Christian, no matter if you are a Pastor or a layperson, no matter if you are a regular attender or an occasional one, an online worshiper, or even one who never goes to Church. If you believe that Jesus is your atoning sacrifice, that He died to forgive all of your sins and rose again so that you could know you are right with God, then you receive the same gifts that I do, and everyone else present today. You are completely and eternally forgiven for those sins. You receive salvation from the devil's condemnation and grasp, and you have a place reserved in eternal life to come. None of these things come to you because of anything you have done. They are all the free gifts of grace, by faith, through Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Kingdom of Heaven.

They come according to His great generosity, His great grace, which flows from the greatest love you can ever know, the love of Christ that is unconditional and sacrificial. He had that love for you before you were born. Because of that love He called you by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, through baptism, into His kingdom. You didn't deserve it or earn it. He simply did it out of that greatest love for you, and for me.

There is no explaining it any better. As the Lord of kingdom tells us in **Isaiah 55:8-9** **8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.** Jesus is the God who abundantly pardons and has compassion on those who do not deserve compassion, because that is the kind of God He is. We may not always understand how He can be so gracious and loving, but by faith we believe He is; always!

## **Conclusion**

Life in the world isn't always fair. Some will always work harder than others. Sometimes those who sluff off are you and me, shirking the responsibilities He calls us to as His Church. Life in the Kingdom of Heaven in some respects isn't fair because none of us get what we truly deserve. We deserve suffering and death. But all who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior get what He promises us by faith: forgiveness of all our sins, salvation from the devil's kingdom of separation from God now and forever, and instead we have the resurrection promise of eternal life. No matter who you are, what you do in His kingdom, how long you've been a believer, or even how far you've fallen short in sinfulness. If you believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior all your sins are forgiven, and He loves you the same, more than anyone else in this world. And nothing you can do in faith can make Him love you any less, or any more than He already does. Jesus sums up this parable with this concluding thought **Matthew 20:16** **So the last will be first, and the first last.**" What does that mean? The playing field is level. No one is more important in His kingdom than anyone else. All of us are His precious beloved children. And we need to see and treat our fellow brothers and sisters in faith accordingly. We are not that because of anything we have done or could do, but only because of all Jesus has done for you and for me, out of that greatest love. Amen.