

*In Nomine Jesu*

## **First in Line, Last to Get Paid**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Today we begin the pre-Lenten season. We turn our liturgical thoughts away from the Nativity and the Epiphany, and begin to consider why we ought to be repentant in the upcoming season of penance. Our Gospel reading for today serves as a reminder for us, just as it served as a reminder to Jesus' disciples when He first spoke it.

However, the context for this parable is particularly important for us to be aware of because it is directly connected with the parable. Before the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, we hear of the rich young man who wanted to follow Jesus. Jesus informs this young man that, in order for him to be perfect, he would have to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor and then follow Jesus. The man goes away sorrowful, and Jesus turns to His disciples and tells them that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup>

The disciples get somewhat upset about this, but this leads to a discussion about what the disciples will get for being Jesus' followers, as well as what anybody who leaves things behind to follow Jesus will receive.<sup>2</sup>

This leads us to consider something that we often don't talk about all that much, for good reason. That is, the fact that we do receive rewards in Heaven for things that we do here and now. Jesus clearly states that those who leave things for Jesus' name sake will receive a hundred fold in the Kingdom of God. This is the truth. However, when we speak of such things, we must also remember what follows this truth, which is the parable that is our reading for today.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 19:16-24

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 19:25-30

*For like is the Kingdom of the Heavens to (a) Man, (a) Master of (a) house, who went out with the morning in order to hire workers in the vineyard of Him.<sup>3</sup>*

Now, this is one of those parables that we've got to be careful to not assign meanings to everything. Some of the things in the parable are clear, others are not, and that's the way that we are going to leave them. The Master of the house is God and the workers are His followers. Moving on in our reading,

*And speaking with the workers for a denarius a day He sent them into the vineyard of Him.<sup>4</sup>*

Now here's where we've got to be a bit careful when assigning meanings to things, because it's tempting to say that the denarius is salvation. However, that would force the parable to be teaching that we as workers earn our salvation by working for God in His vineyard here on earth. This is obviously not true and certainly is not what Jesus is trying to teach the disciples.

So what might the denarius represent then? Since Jesus didn't explain this parable like He does with some others, we really don't know for sure. Personally, I would point back to the reward that people get for leaving various earthly things behind to follow Jesus.

But honestly, the denarius really isn't all that important to this parable. It is simply the tool that Jesus uses to make His point. It is important to notice though, that the Master makes an agreement with the workers to pay them a denarius a day, and the workers agree to that. With that in mind let's keep moving through our text.

*And He went out around the third hour, He saw others standing in the market not working and to these He said, "Go out also you into the vineyard, and whatever is righteous I will give to you." And they*

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 20:1

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 20:2

*went. Going out again around the sixth and ninth hour He did likewise.*<sup>5</sup>

The important thing to hear in this section is that the Master does not promise these workers a specific amount. He only promises that He will pay them whatever is righteous. These men agree to that and off they go to work in the vineyard.

Just to help you keep track of the timing of these events. The Master would have gone out the first time around six in the morning. The third hour would have been nine in the morning, the sixth would have been noon, the ninth would have been three in the afternoon, and the eleventh, which we'll hear about in a moment, would have been five o'clock in the evening. So let's see what happens at the end of the day.

*And around the eleventh He went out, He found others standing, and He said to them. "Why are you standing the whole day without work?" And they said to Him, "For no one has hired us." He said to them, "Go also you into my vineyard."*<sup>6</sup>

Now let's think about these men. They are likely lazy. After all, the master was there in the market only two hours ago hiring workers, so where were these guys? Also they appear to be trying to play the blame game. They point the finger at the employers, of which the Master is one. Yet the Master has pity on them. Make no mistake, this is a complete act of charity on the Master's part. He lets them work in His vineyard for an hour. After that hour has passed, pay time arrives.

*And when evening happened, the Lord of the vineyard said to the steward of Him, "Call the workers and give to them wages starting from the last to the first."*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 20:3-5

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 20:6-7

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 20:8

And so we arrive at the first hint of what this parable is about. The Master starts with the eleventh hour workers. We could spend time discussing who exactly the steward of the Master is, but again it's really not all that important. He's the guy who pays the workers, and that's pretty much all we need to know about him. What's important is that the Master starts with the last and moves to the first. Let's go back to our parable.

*And going to the ones in the eleventh hour he gave them (a) denarius. And coming to the first they supposed that larger would be given and he gave them also (a) denarius. But taking it they grumbled against the Master of the house, saying "These the last one hour worked, and He made equal to them us who took up the burden of the day and burning heat."*<sup>8</sup>

Here you see one of the ways that God's mind is simply different and better than ours is. Because you have to admit that you can totally understand those first workers' point. It only makes sense that the one who works longer would get paid more. Therefore it also makes sense to complain when you work for 12 hours and get paid the same as the guy who worked for one hour. You can totally understand where these guys are coming from right? Let's see what the Master's reply was,

*And He replied to one of them, he said, "Friend, did I not give to you (a) denarius as we agreed? Take yours and go up. For I desire that these the last are given also as you. Is it not to me what I desire to do in myself? Or is it evil in your eyes that I am good?"*<sup>9</sup>

So let's look at the issue here. What it really comes down to is this: Those who were hired at the beginning of the day feel like they were cheated because they got paid the same amount as those that got hired later in the day. The question then is, do they have any right to feel cheated about this?

To put it simply, no they don't. They made an agreement with the Master of the vineyard to work for a denarius a day. That's what they worked, and that's

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 20:9-11

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 20:23-26

what they got paid. The fact that they saw the other workers get paid the same, made them think that they would get paid more. However, to put it bluntly, that's their problem. They made an assumption that turned out to be wrong, and then get all huffy about it because they thought they had been cheated. But the Master was simply being generous to those other workers.

Now what is the point of this whole parable? Well thankfully Jesus was kind enough to tell us that,

*So that the last become first, and the first last.*<sup>10</sup>

Jesus is here giving us a reminder and a warning. Jesus is telling us that things aren't always going to make sense from a human standpoint. It would have made sense to pay the first workers more than the last. However, while it may have been more "fair" according to human standards, it is still the Master's choice what He pays His workers.

Let's bring this up out of the parable though. Before the parable, Jesus promises that those who leave things behind will receive a hundred-fold in the Kingdom of the Heavens. He doesn't give us any kind of time-reward scale though. The person who left their family behind as a young man won't necessarily receive more of a reward the person who did after they retired.

The fact is, that in both cases, God is being generous. He doesn't have to give us any kind of a reward. It is in fact our duty and obligation to serve Him in whatever way He sees fit. It is only due to His overwhelming generosity and goodness that we get any kind of reward for our service at all.

The point that Jesus is trying to make here, is that in the Kingdom of the Heavens, it doesn't matter whether you're first or last. It doesn't matter if you are rewarded more or less. None of that matters because of the very fact that you are in the Kingdom of the Heavens. There is no need to worry or work for levels of glory.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 20:16

Jesus is here trying to warn His disciples away from thinking too much about these rewards that He has just promised them. He had just revealed that they were going to be sitting on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. But that pales in comparison to the fact that they will actually be in the Kingdom.

This is why we don't talk about the rewards that we receive from God very often. It's because it's very easy for those things to distract you from the thing that really matters. You are a citizen in the Kingdom of the Heavens. You are a child of God. Jesus accomplished all that when He died on the cross for you. When He took your punishment on Himself, He gave you the greatest gift that He could give you.

Your Lord and Savior is extremely generous. He gives you more gifts than just your Salvation. He even rewards you for your attempts at serving Him. Feel free to remember that and feel free to be thankful for those things. But also remember that out of all the gifts and rewards that God has given you, none of them come even close to your redemption in Jesus. All who have faith in Jesus receive this gift, and therefore, it doesn't matter who's first and who's last. What matters is, are you in or are you out? And thanks to Jesus, you are in.

**Now may the peace which passes all understanding, and which comes from your salvation in Christ, guard your hearts and your minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.**

Septuagesima 2015

February 1, 2015

Psalm 95:1-9, Exodus 17:1-7, 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5, Matthew 20:1-16

*Vicar Christopher M. Craig*  
*Soli Deo Gloria*