

“The First Last, the Last First” (Matthew 20:1-16)

For Your Life in Christ the 14th Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday, September 18th, 2011

Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church of Irvine, CA (LC-MS)

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Introduction: This parable in Matthew 20:1-16 of “the laborers” or “the workers” or “the hours” needs the backdrop of Matthew 19:16-30. Remember context is very important for proper understanding.

¹⁶ And behold, a man came up to him, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” ¹⁷ And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” ¹⁸ He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁰ The young man said to him, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?” ²¹ Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” ²² When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

²³ And Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” ²⁷ Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” ²⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

A. The entire parable is meant to explain what Jesus taught in chapter 19, and is meant especially as an elucidation of 19:30:

Matthew 19:30: ***“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”***

B. When he teaches today’s parable in Matthew 20:1-16, he concludes with similar words:

Matthew 20:16: ***“So the last will be first, and the first last.”***

C. In saying this, Jesus was answering Peter’s initial concern which is also ours: on what basis will we have eternal life? Peter expresses his concern in the form of a statement and a question:

Matthew 19:27: ***“Then Peter said in reply, ‘See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?’”***

D. After all, if it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to be saved, Peter had good reason to be a little concerned about his own status!

E. Jesus assures Peter and the other disciples as he describes their reward based on those who truly follow Christ: [quote] ***“for [His] name’s sake.” [don’t miss the emphasis]***

F. That is, the matter of our attitude, what is going on in our hearts and souls has everything to do with our place in the parable. Do we do what we do as Christians for our own sake, to look good, to pay off God, to receive honor, to have a better status, to be admired in society, to get along with family, etc. OR do we do what we do as Christians for the sake of the name of Jesus?!

Part I: So what IS Going On in Our Hearts?

A. In other words, we are already in trouble! Because our hearts are full of sin!

Jeremiah 17:9: ***“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”***

- B. Peter, like us, shows disconcerting signs right off the bat as he takes inventory of what he has done: ***we are self-centered***. Let me be clear that the parable in Matthew 20 is about the kingdom of heaven on earth which is the visible church. Jesus is talking about people in the Christian Church. Like Peter we want to compare ourselves to others.
- C. To understand God's answer to our grave problem, we need this parable. Now remember that this is a parable, so the symbols correspond to a greater reality. For example, the denarius is symbolic of God's grace given to us all; and the hours represented by the words "in the morning," and then "the 3rd hour, the 6th hour, the 9th hour, and the eleventh hour" are symbolic of how we sinfully compare ourselves to others. Bottom line, we easily think this way: ***"When I compare myself to so and so, I don't think God's treatment is fair!"***
- D. What is going on in our hearts is that we want to treat God not in a relationship of grace, but in a relationship of law, contract, or agreement like the beginning of Matthew 20 indicates. The first workers go forth working based on an agreement (v 2). Now this is not bad in and of itself. For example, when I stood before God to be ordained as a pastor, I did make an agreement even in the context of God's call. During my installation, you also made an agreement. But the problem comes when we begin to treat our relationship with God as a matter of our accomplishment and what we think we deserve. This is the terrible problem raised by our flesh.
- E. Service within the church, however, is not based on the LAW, but on the GOSPEL. If, however, we insist to make our relationship with God based on Law, we will forfeit – really reject and deny – the grace of God, so that the words of Jesus will come true: the first – those called and who believe they are better than others – will be last.

Part II: But Thanks Be To God for The Gospel in This Parable!

- A. There are several times when in the parable God goes out to call others into His service, for the 3rd hour, the 6th hour, the 9th

- hour, and even the 11th hour when the normal day of work was almost over (Jews knew the work-day from 6 am to 6 pm, so if someone started working during the 11th hour, they would work from 5 pm to 6 pm... a crazy idea in the minds of men).
- B. But this is where the Gospel comes out. God doesn't play by our rules of what we think we deserve. The Lord goes searching for the workers even for the last hour. They are the last ones. They are ones who would seem to have the least pride, the least status, and the least able to really give anything. How much work can you get done in the last hour? It doesn't matter. What matters, is the gift of the master. He calls, He welcomes, He puts you to work, He gives you a place, He gives you a family, He gives you a church, He gives you a kingdom, He gives you all of the benefits of grace including eternal life and it doesn't depend at all with our earthly status.
- C. Indeed, a rich person or a poor person can base their lives on earthly standards, but it is also true that a rich person or a poor person can receive the call of God's grace in Christ Jesus and inherit way, way more than they ever had or could have in this world.
- D. When we truly understand that it only through the blood of Christ and His glorious resurrection that we have eternal life, then everything changes in terms of our attitude as servants of God:

Galatians 6:3: ***"For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself."***

2nd Corinthians 12:9: ***"But he said to me, 'My grace is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."***

Luke 17:10: ***"So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"***

- E. On account of our sin, we are last, dead last, but on account of our Savior, we are forgiven, we are made first by Jesus and now we may be finally, true servants, true Christians and do what we do not for reward, not for ourselves, but to glorify Christ and to truly love our neighbors with no strings attached.