

What You Have Is Good
October 12th, 2014

Matthew 20:1-16
Pentecost 18 A

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You know, it's not just tough work *being* a Christian in a sinful world. It's a labor just to *think* like a Christian in a sinful world. So many of the things the world teaches us are outright lies. So many of them seem to be true on the outside but God comes to us and teaches us, no, that's not how things work. And we have before us today one of the greatest lies that our society teaches us: if you work harder, you'll get more.

The parable we read today comes just after Jesus' famous declaration that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And then Jesus goes on to tell a story about men hired at different times of day. The first group worked the whole day and agreed to a day's wages for their labor (a denarius). The rest were brought in but only told that they would be paid fairly. But when the group who worked one hour got the same as the group who worked all day, those who labored more cried foul. They grumbled and complained...that they got what they agreed to. They got the idea in their heads that they deserved more than the others because they worked harder. But this parable is designed to teach us the opposite. Now, we instinctively function this way. We want to collect, we want to amass and our culture does nothing to stem those urges. Work hard! And you'll get your fair reward.

But even though so many of us "buy" that lie, how hard do you have to look even now to see it's not true? How many billionaires can we think of that dropped out of college and made all their money on just a clever idea instead of hard work? How many people go to their jobs every day, do their duties faithfully and work hard at them, only to come home no further ahead than the day before? We may want to call this all unfair, but it is exactly how our God and Father wants to work. He just needs us to understand better how this all goes together.

Hard work and greater reward are not tied together. The things we have, the blessings we've obtained do not come *from* the things we do, says our God. Rather, it's the other way around. God blesses us out of grace and kindness. He gives to us without our ever deserving and *then* tells us the work we can do in order to thank him. He shows us his will, his way of life as a way of honoring the gift he gives. Not to earn or deserve, but to show gratitude.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the greatest spiritual gift our God has given us, and likely the one this parable is directly alluding to. I'm talking of course, about our forgiveness. And this is the place where we ourselves are most likely to sound like those long-suffering workers who spent the whole day in the vineyard. Have you ever had those thoughts pop into your head? We sure really appreciate what God did for us, he died, he set us free, he rescued us from death, he bought us eternal life. And we work hard to do what he says even here and now because we know it's the right way to live as a Christian, it's what we're supposed to do. So we try so hard to be loving and kind, supportive of even the people who irritate us. We spend time every day in God's word, we come to all the functions and studies and do everything we're supposed to do...

So, it's kind of irksome to think about that other person we know whose faith barely registers in their life. That person says they believe in Jesus and are all happy to be saved by him, but they hardly show it at all! They're in church like twice a year maybe, hardly act like a believer in the world, never mention Jesus to anyone. And that person because of the thread of faith they still have is going to get the same heavenly reward as me? How dare they! They should really have to step up a whole lot more before God lets them in. They shouldn't get the same reward.

It ought to be fair.

Oh but as soon as we use that word "fair" we're on very dangerous ground, aren't we? By the measure you use it shall be measured against you. There's no system of fair before God that comes out with you looking good, is there? If God were fair, you would stand condemned for your own crimes. Don't pretend like the meager good you've done in your faithlife has somehow made up for all the sin that keeps pouring out of you ever day. We've been jealous and selfish like Jonah, not wanting someone else to be saved because we want justice for them! Just not for us. God died to pay for the sin of the world. Everyone. Even those who barely hold to their faith. Even those who realize just before death that they need God to rescue them. Even those who think that God should like them better because they try so hard. Even those who won't take the gift.

God wants all to be saved. If it's a skin of the teeth saving then he'll take it. If it's a firm and secure faith, that's what he prefers. But to suggest that it's not fair how he's set things up is to put yourself in the place of God and think you know how to dispense justice better than him. You need his forgiveness as much as anyone.

Instead, remember that it's not a work/reward system. Look at what you have. What you have is good. You have the promise of forgiveness, of a resurrection, of eternal life in God's presence. That is what God has promised to give you simply because he wants you to have it. What more could *you* possibly ask for? Is there a greater reward?

But then that sinful nature kicks in again and whispers to us. You know, if that's what *everyone* gets regardless, why should I try so hard? Why not be one of those people who just sort floats by? Still get the same result, right? So why work at it? But before we give into that logic, let's consider their situation a little closer. Those who barely hold to faith, is that a good or a bad thing? If their trust in Jesus is hanging by a thread, what's to stop that thread from snapping the minute the slightest tension is put on it? Those who think they can wait until they need God to come and listen to him, who's to say they're going to see the need coming before it's too late?

Yes, some of these people will be saved. And we rejoice that they are rescued. But the game they play between God and death is a dangerous one. It is not something that should be taken as lightly as they make it out to be. The devil is after them because they are easy prey. He would like nothing better than to give them a reason to abandon what little faith they have left. Yes, the men who were hired at the 11th hour got the same payment as those hired at the start, but what if they had given up and gone home, or wandered away at the wrong time? Wouldn't it have been better to be hired first thing in the morning and secure their days wages from the start?

The faith and trust that God gives you in his promises is your lifeline. It is that which receives the blessings Jesus won for us on the cross. Consider it like being airlifted by rope out of a flood or forest fire. If you slip and fall, you die. If you hold tight, you will be rescued. Are you going to swing from that rope by one hand, or are you going to wrap your whole body around it and cling to it for all you are worth?

The other issue is our perspective on work. "Working" for the Lord isn't a burden. We've said many times before that God's law isn't something set over us to stress us out, it is ultimately a guide of how this world was created to work. It's the way we're supposed to be and by God's grace through faith we are able to be. Living a life according to his will, living a life according to the principle of selfless love is the best way to live. It truly does bring joy and contentment in all circumstances. Those that neglect their faith and their God miss out on this. At the very least we shouldn't be jealous of their lives and if possible we should try to help them.

The life you have for the Lord is good. Treasure it. Be glad that you have a savior to be thankful for. Be glad that God gives you opportunities to show that thanks. Be glad that by his power we are able to live in the way that's best for us. We do not work for reward, we have our reward in Christ.

And I'd just like to take a minute to say that the same is true of earthly blessings. Certainly the spiritual is the more important perspective, but the same principles apply when we talk just about the stuff God gives us here. Everything we have is a gift from God. We did not earn it, we did not deserve it, any more than we earned or deserved our salvation. God *chose*, in love, to give us all the things that we have. He chooses every day to feed us, clothe us and give us the strength we have. We do not earn them through the work we do. In many cases he provides for us through the work we do, but it is not a reward for our work.

We work, again, because God asks it of us. As part of living for him he has given us each earthly responsibilities. To an employer, a family, our nation, whatever it is. And he asks us to carry out those duties faithfully. Not to gain anything from him that we don't already have, we do it because he asks it.

And so understanding that the blessings come before the work, we may see some disparity, some "unfairness" here, too. But again, to think that is to question the wisdom of God. God knows exactly what earthly blessings will aid your spiritual journey and which will hinder it. God knows what you need and what you shouldn't have; and he knows those things much better than you. You are not the person next to you. You each have your own weaknesses and strengths. And so each path must be carefully tailored by your Father. Don't compare. You're not the same person, don't expect that God will give the same blessings. What matters is that God gives you exactly the blessings you need to keep you on the narrow path to heaven.

Don't let the world deceive you with its lies. God works equality in ways we can't comprehend. Don't expect your journey to be the same as anyone else's. Don't think that he's ever being unfair, except in the best way, the way where he doesn't count your sins against you. You may have worked harder than someone else and you may have the same or less than them. But what you have is what God decided to give you. And what you have is good. Amen.