

Matthew 20.1-16 | Never too lost or found

Intro | What is in it for us?

Last week, a respected, religious and rich young man approached Jesus. Convinced of his own goodness, but uncertain of his own salvation, he asks Jesus what last thing he needed to receive the Kingdom of heaven. His problem was not a failure to DO; it was a failure to BELIEVE. He had his savior whom he believed would rescue him from his hell. Jesus reveals the true object of his faith by commanding him to sell all his possessions, give them to the poor, and follow Him. **He walks away weeping, rejecting Jesus invitation to be free and live without fear.**

Jesus says many “firsts” will be “lasts”, and lasts will be firsts. This is shocking for a people who considered power, purity, and prosperity as signs of God’s blessings. Clearly, the Kingdom of Jesus has a value system different than the world. The Kingdom of God is not for those who are prideful enough to declare they are good and strong, but those humble enough to admit they are weak and poor. As the disciples watch this prideful man walk away, unwilling to surrender his possessions, they consider the sacrifices they themselves have made. Peter, speaking for them all, says: **See Jesus, we have surrendered everything; what is in it for us?** Jesus graciously answers their questions. But then, **just as he challenged the rich man about his pride in possessions, Jesus warns his disciples about taking pride in their sacrifices. Just because someone has surrendered their possessions to Jesus does not mean they have surrendered their heart to Jesus.**

Parable | the story

In other words, these like the parable of the irreligious prodigal son and his religious older brother, these two stories in Matthew 19 go together. There are two different ways to avoid God...be really bad...or be really good. The irreligious avoid relationship with Jesus by living according to their own rules and, therefore, become their own saviors. The religious avoid relationship with Jesus by living out His moral rules in order to earn their own salvation.

For that purpose, Jesus tells the story of a master who hires workers for to bring in the harvest of his field. He hires his FIRST workers at 6AM. They work a full day under the hot sun. He then proceeds to hire more workers at 9am, noon, and 5pm. Each wave of laborers ends up working less of the day. The last of these men work for only one hour. At evening, the Master calls in the laborers and pays them beginning with the LAST hired. The men are all paid the same wage—one denarius. Those who worked more than 10 hours watch as those who worked less than two get the same wage. Upon receiving their pay, the workers CALLED to work earlier grumble at the “**unfairness**” of the Master, even though they were chosen while other weren’t, they feel ungrateful; even though were employed in meaningful work, they feel cheated; even though they agreed to a denarius, they feel entitled to more.

The Gracious Master | The point of the story

Many of us will naturally identify with these workers. We identify with the workers because we’re always focusing on our work--even as Christians. We make the parable about work. We make the parable about us. This is the same thing we do in life. Entering the Kingdom of God is not about what WE DO and living as a disciple is not about WHAT WE SURRENDER—it is always and forever about a God who shows grace. The parable is not just a story about farming; **it is a lesson about those who enter the Kingdom of Heaven**—those reject the Kingdom of heaven do not understand grace and find themselves governed by good works and an overwhelming sense of entitlement. Those who receive the Kingdom of heaven, receive grace, and are governed by humility and deep sense of gratitude. **Depending on our response to these workers, we may be more under “law” in our thinking, and less under “grace” than we realize.**

The story is not about the workers at all, **it is about the Master.** Earlier in Matthew, Jesus already made the mention of harvests and workers: **Matthew 9.37 | The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;**

therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Even in this verse, we focus on the laborers when the emphasis is on asking the LORD of the harvest to send laborers and not on the laborers themselves. The subject throughout the entire parable is the not the vineyard, or vineyard workers, but the Master of the vineyard, namely, God. **Even though the disciples as “LAST” in the world, they do not become FIRSTS through doing more or better good work; but because they have a Good Lord.** Before we consider the responses of the workers, let us look at the **grace of the Master:**

The Master CHOOSES by grace | We get chosen

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

The Master is the focus of Jesus parable. The Master rules—it is his house. The Master owns—it is his field with a harvest to reap. The Master initiates—the Master takes the first step. He “WENT OUT” to find workers. He goes to where the men are, the men do not come to Him. The men are not looking for Him. They are not standing at the job board in town or wandering the countryside looking for work. The Master finds them and graciously CHOOSES some to work in His field. **He does not invite everyone onto his field to work but he does INVITE anyone who does work in his field.** We later see that he returns several times during the day and calls more workers...and more workers...and more. 6am. 9am. Noon. 5pm. At first it seems like he calls men who are “ready” to work; but with each new invitation he calls those who had little hope for “employment”—the workers no one wanted. Perhaps they were too old, perhaps they were too young, or perhaps they were too inexperienced. By grace, the Master chooses all kinds, all ages, and at all hours of the day.

Jesus began his parable by saying, “For the kingdom of heaven is like”. This parable is not about a Master, it is about a God who shows us grace. It is God’s world, and it is God’s mission to rescue it. **God always takes the first step.** And it is God’s choice to call men to be in his field. **We do not “invite Jesus into our hearts”. We are invited into His Kingdom—irresistibly so.** Without the Master’s gracious invitation, these men would not have jobs. **Apart from God’s gracious invitation of salvation, we will not have life.** God chooses who He wants, when He wants. Some, like John the Baptist, he calls from the womb. Others, like Moses, he calls when they are 80 year fugitives shepherding sheep. God employs the world unemployable—God uses you! Some of God’s greatest “draft picks” were a *fugitive, a boat-builder, shepherds, a religious-zealot, a teenage mom, politicians, prostitutes, adulterers, invalids, criminals, fishermen, and even ancient IRS agents.* **God accomplishes His mission using the wild, weak, weird, and even the wayward.**

The Master PURPOSES by grace | We get a job...for Him

⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, “Why do you stand here idle all day?”

The Master does not hire men so that they can stand in his field. He takes them from standing still to doing something. The invitation of the Master is not to be CALLED a worker...it is to actually work FOR HIM, in HIS field, to harvest HIS crops. Before the Master invited them to work in his field, they were standing in the Marketplace idle all day. Their goals in life were to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. **They were wasting their life. They have no meaning. They have no joy. They have no hope.** The 16 hours between morning and night were speedbumps between getting up from and laying down in their beds. As attractive as that kind of life sounds to the overworked, in truth, is a life without meaning is maddening. Now, by grace, these men have something to accomplish, they have a direction and purpose. And even though they are blessed, all of their work is essentially for to make the Master greater.

And what of God’s gracious call? According to Matthew, Jesus calls his first disciples (fisherman) was not to bow at an altar; it was not a call to pray a prayer, it is not a call to simply be “good”; it is a call to work

Jesus tells these four fishermen that they will now be “catching men”. Jesus invitation to “work” is for His mission to others. In other words, it is not FOR US...it is FOR HIM. We are not just given a new identity—we are given a mission. **He does not say follow me and I will save your souls. He says follow me and I will empower you to save the souls of others.** Our salvation is not just for us. In fact, nothing is for us. Our marriage is for Him. Our job is for Him. Our families are for Him. Our possessions are for Him. Our time is for Him. Every breath we breathe is a gift of grace...for Him. Jesus gives us purpose for our lives, something to accomplish for Him here as his disciples. **Without His grace we don't have anything. Without his grace we don't have a purpose. Whatever patch of land we find ourselves in, it is still in God's field. We are WORKING to accomplish his mission.**

The Master's grace is GENEROUS | We get more than we deserve

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.’ ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.

Before we focus on the grumbling of the 6am workers, we need to recognize that the Master's grace is GENEROUS to the later workers. When evening arrives, the Master calls all of the workers into pay. Consistent with his LAST shall be FIRST theme; Jesus says the Master pays the later workers FIRST. Even though they only worked one hour, the 11th hour workers were paid a full day's wage. The Master is generous. **And though the Master is generous to all the men, those who KNOW they deserve it least recognize this truth the most.** Those who were the laziest, those who wasted the most time, those who were not looking to work (perhaps even avoiding it), those who were the LAST that the world would have hired are blessed as much as the FIRST. **The Master gives them more than they earned, more than they expected, more than they deserve.**

And what of God's grace to us? Though we are apt to identify with those who work hard and long, we should probably identify with those who get more than they deserve. God does not deal with us according to the QUANTITY of our work or the QUANTITY of our FAITH. God does not deal with us according to the QUALITY of our work or the QUALITY of our faith. He deals with us according to His glorious and generous grace. As Tim Keller so aptly says, **“It's not the quality of my faith but the object of my faith that holds me up.”** Even though I am not saved by my work, my work matters—God delights in it, however deformed and imperfect it is, for Christ makes it perfect. Those who surrender their lives and “leave everything” for Christ are rewarded as Jesus promised. And if the rich man, who refused to surrender, were to be “invited” at the 11th hour—he too would receive the same reward. Our God is great. Our God is good. Our God is gracious. And our God is generous. **Such grace to the undeserving should lead us to joy not jealousy.**

The Master's grace is UNFAIR | We don't get what we deserve

Even though we know this, our flesh wants to grumble. The only reason **we grumble** is that we forget the grace of God. **We grumble** because we believe we chose God. He is lucky to have us. **We grumble** because we believe our work is for us. **We** believe we **grumble** because we deserve more (or others deserve less). When we see a respectable man, a “religious” man, or a rich man who refuses to surrender, we secretly boast in our own salvation as if we have anything to do with it. THEN, when that same respectable, religious, and rich man REPENTS...we grumble like the prodigal's older brother in Luke 16.25-32:

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but

he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' "

Like the 6AM workers we cry out..."It is not fair", not realizing that we are proclaiming truth. . **God's grace is not fair—we do not get what we deserve.** If God were to give the workers what they "deserve", he would have left them idle and lost in the marketplace. We deserve poverty. We deserve purposelessness. We deserve punishment.

But God is a God of GRACE—sovereign grace, meaningful grace, and generous grace that only seems UNFAIR if you believe the quality or quantity of your work is good enough. The disciples do not go for LAST TO FIRST because of their GOOD WORK, but because they have a GOOD LORD. God's commitment to us is based on His own faithfulness, not ours. The only reason ANYONE is invited into His Kingdom is that God is not fair—he doesn't give us what we deserve. The only right response to God's "unfairness" is humility and gratitude.

CONCLUSION | Grace leads to works

Truly, we are saved by good works...**just not ours.** Our salvation does not come from doing good work or avoid bad work—but from trusting in the perfect work of Jesus Christ for us. **The one who was first became last so that we might be made first.**

And when you behold the GRACE of GOD in the face of Jesus Christ...you are changed. Through the cross, pride gives way to humility; idle wandering gives way to mission; entitlement gives way to gratefulness; and jealousy for your own salvation gives way to joy in the salvation of others. **When you behold the grace of God in the face of Christ, you will be changed.** ¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

For the RICH MAN...you're never too lost to receive God's grace; and FOR THE DEVOTED DISCIPLE...you are never too found to not need it.

For the 11th hour IDLE MAN...you're never too late, old, or inexperienced to SERVE God's MISSION; and for the GIFTED 6AM MAN...you're always getting more than you deserve.