

# ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

## NEW YORK CITY

### THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE GOODNESS OF GOD

Matthew 20:1-16

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 21, 2008

When Peter reacted to the unbelief of the rich young ruler by reminding Jesus that he and the other disciples had left everything to follow Jesus but were still wondering, **“What then will there be for us?”** Jesus answered by promising Peter rewards. “You who have followed me will – sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.” (Matthew 19:28-29). When I commented on those words in last Sunday’s lesson, I said that God will be no man’s debtor.

But debtor isn’t quite the word to describe what is going on in this passage of our Gospel Text for today, Matthew 20:1-16. Debt implies obligation, that God owes us something. It was what **Peter** meant when he asked, **“What then will there be for us?”** Actually, God owes us nothing, and what ever we receive from Him we receive only because He is gracious. To make sure the disciples understood this concept, Jesus told the parable of the workers in the vineyard. **This parable occurs only in Matthew**, where it serves to illustrate the principle of Matthew 19:30: “Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” This idea is repeated at the story’s close.

**This Is A Straightforward Story:** The parable itself is quite simple. A landowner needed men to work in his vineyard, so he went out early in the morning and hired all the workers he could find. **He agreed to pay them a denarius, a normal day’s wage, for their work.** About **nine o’ clock** he went out again **and found other workers.** He hired them too, but this time there was no set wage. He merely said, **“I will pay you whatever is right.”** The new workers agreed with that arrangement and soon joined the others. The owner did the same thing at noon, at three in the afternoon, and at five o’ clock, just one hour before quitting time.

At the end of the day he paid the workers, beginning with those he had hired last. **He gave each one in the group a denarius**, and so on with those hired at **three o' clock, noon, and at nine in the morning**. At last he came to those **he had hired first**. By that time they were rubbing their hands together happily, supposing that if those who had worked less than they had worked were being paid a denarius, they would receive more. But the owner paid them a denarius too, and they complained. The owner replied, "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

The parable is followed by a statement that is close to the one that ended the previous chapter: **"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."** It is a version of one of Jesus' favorite themes, appearing in Matthew. For instance, in **Matthew 23:12** it is a bit different but similar. It reads, **"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."**

Jesus told this parable in *response to Peter's question*, **"Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"** Peter was pointing out to Jesus all that he and the other disciples had given up in order to become his followers. They had given up their homes, their families, their jobs, their security. Peter had given up his whole life for Jesus, and now he wondered what he would receive in return. In response, Jesus told him this parable. **Peter would receive salvation, eternal life, a place in the kingdom of heaven. "And," Jesus says, "so will everyone else!"**

As a disciple of Christ, as one who has given your life to Jesus, how does Jesus' response to Peter make you feel? How does it make you feel when Jesus says that every Christian, everyone, no matter how much they have given to Jesus in their lifetime, will receive the same wage – salvation? How does it make you feel to hear that some who have wasted their lives and not until the last hour before death confessed Jesus as Lord, receive the same as you do – eternal life with God? It doesn't seem right. It doesn't seem fair. Won't we receive something more than the others for giving far more than an hour of our life to Jesus.

For us, the ones who faithfully do the work of Christ, this parable still doesn't make sense. It doesn't seem fair we are the ones who have done

most of the work. The laborers that began working the first hour of the day picked many more grapes than those who began working the last hour. Yet they all received a whole day's salary. If that were to happen today, there would be labor strikes. The unions would be in an uproar. I would turn our whole economy topsy-turvy. Those who work for only one hour should not receive a whole day's wage. It is only right that the reward for our labor should be consistent with the time we put in.

But this parable has nothing to do with fair labor laws. It is not a prescription of how employers should treat their employees. It is a description of how God works in the kingdom of heaven. **In our Old Testament reading for today we heard that the Lord said to Isaiah: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways."** God's *goodness is incomprehensible to us*. We cannot fully understand it. We are so concerned with making everything fair that we can't understand generosity.

According to our understanding, God doesn't act fairly. In fact, by putting ourselves in the place of the laborers who started at sunrise or midmorning or even early afternoon, we have missed the point of the parable. Jesus is the one laborer who works from sun up till sun down. Jesus is the one who has borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. Only Jesus has earned salvation. Yet God calls us to himself and gives to us the full wage. God gives to you the promise of salvation, not because you have worked hard enough but because Jesus has done it for you. God gives us much more than we can ever earn. **The wages of sin is death, but God gives us life. The laborers in the vineyard all received a full day's wage regardless of the hours they worked. We have all been given salvation, regardless of the sins we've committed.**

It is not necessary either to start early and finish last or start last and finish first. In fact, neither is best. The truly desirable thing is to start early and work with all the might you have, not for reward but out of genuine love for our Lord Jesus Christ, and when you have finished still to say, "I am nevertheless an unprofitable servant. It is such people whom God delights to honor.

**Daniel was such a person.** He was carried off to Babylon with three of his friends at a very **early age**, probably when he was **about fifteen or sixteen**. He was immersed in the splendors of the great Babylonian court and was

trained for high position and responsibility. He could have been swept away by the temptations. But Daniel decided at that **early age not to “defile himself”** with the royal enticements (Daniel 1:8). He determined to serve God, and he was still there decades **later as an old man serving God** and hearing God say, **“Go you way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance.”** (Daniel 12:13).

Daniel served God for seventy years.

Moses served God for eighty years.

Abraham served God for a hundred years.

Enoch served God for three hundred years.

When your life is focused on Christ, when you are giving thanks for your own blessings instead of complaining to God about what others get, God’s generosity and indiscriminate love still may not look fair, but they sure look great! This is the challenge I put before you, especially if you are young. Do not wait to serve God. Do not wait until the ninth or eleventh hour of your all-too-brief life. Start now. Serve now. Keep at your service year after year. And when you come to the end you will not say, “What a joy it has been to serve my gracious and loving Lord!”