

“What About Seniority?”—Matthew 20:8-16

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “What About Seniority?”, is Matthew 20:8-16 → *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.” And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” So the last will be first, and the first last. This is the text.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Seniority has sometimes been recognized in various organizations and businesses by offering advancements of positions to those who have served the longest. Likewise, seniority is often taken into account

when companies downside their work force, laying off those who have served the shortest length of time. What would happen if the tables were turned? How would those who had put in years of dedication, commitment and service to the organization feel if they were laid off or treated exactly the same as those who has labored only a short time? Would they be resentful? Would they feel unappreciated? Would they be angry? Would they have cried, “Unfair! Unfair! What about seniority?” It would be only natural for them to do so because it wouldn’t logically seem fair.

In Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard it appears as if God does not recognize our concepts of “seniority.” The parable is rather simple: A man went looking for workers to work in his vineyard. *Agreeing with the laborers* hired first *for a denarius a day*, throughout the day he hired other workers as well telling them, *You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.* (cf. Matthew 20:1-7) At the end of the day he paid them all a denarius eliciting an “unfair!” call by those hired first. The owner of the vineyard simply reminded them that he was paying based upon the terms of agreement and that he had the right to be generous if he so desired. (cf. Matthew 20:8-15) It is a parable reflecting how God deals with sinners by His grace as they place their faith in Jesus Christ.

In the previous chapter Jesus had encountered a rich church

member who had kept God's commands but lacked faith in Jesus because of his idolatry. Contemplating the fact that this man walked away from Jesus rather than following Him, Peter asked Jesus a question which appears to have prompted this parable. In Matthew 19:27 *Peter said . . . "See, we have left everything and followed You. What then will we have?"* I wonder how many Christians may be thinking the same thing. While it may be logical to expect some kind of results from our labor, the sinful human nature looks for some kind of special reward or treatment from God for our good works, even that of earning heaven itself!

Notice the focus of the parable is on the master's gracious giving equally to all who served him. It did not happen on the basis of logical worldly ways of doing things. It happened on the master's terms. Describing life in God's kingdom, Jesus is basically stating that salvation is extended for all people on His terms. Speaking about this grace Romans 9:14-16 says: *What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* So then ***it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, Who has mercy.*** Your eternal life is completely, from beginning to end, a gift of God whether you were one of the first to believe or the last to believe in Jesus. This is Jesus' point in verse 16 of our text: *The*

last will be first, and the first last.

It may bring pictures to our minds of those who came to faith during the last days of their lives, such as the repentant thief crucified next to Jesus. (cf. Luke 23:43) Maybe you can even think of acquaintances or relatives who fought submitting to the Lord Jesus throughout their life but repented and confessed faith in Him during their last days. This is the cause of rejoicing according to Luke 15:10 → *There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*

But . . . what about seniority? The men in Jesus' parable who had bore *the burden of the day and the scorching heat* took offense that the master made them all equal. Satan is constantly tempting Christ's Church to look with self-righteous doubt or even contempt upon the conversion of those who have rejected and fought against Jesus throughout their lifetime. Take the apostle Paul for example. After coming to faith in Jesus, Acts 9:26 says he went to *Jerusalem* and *attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.* Their fear needed to be removed by the Holy Spirit Who would bring back to their remembrance the words of Jesus: *The last will be first, and the first last.* (cf. John 14:26)

This same temptation plagues the Christian Church today as well. Instead of rejoicing over the sinner who repents and believes in Jesus it is too easy to remember all the rejection of Christ which this person did

during his lifetime. It is too easy to refuse to believe he is a changed man because of the hurt you or an acquaintance received at his hand in the past. It is too easy to be skeptical and even require that he prove his conversion to you—as if you are the ultimate judge of his position before God. Maybe he’s “burned” you too many times in the past and you simply refuse to be hurt again in vulnerability.

Maybe this is what Jesus means by first being last. It is at this point that you need to repent of your self-righteousness and receive the gracious gift of forgiveness from your Master, Jesus Christ! It is submission to him in humble repentance which brings one to this place of worship. It is submission to him in humble repentance which brings one to the altar where Jesus says, *Take, eat; this is My body. . . Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.* (cf. Matthew 26:26-28) It is submission to him in humble repentance which brings one to rejoice along with anyone who comes to faith in Jesus Christ at any time!

What about seniority? When it comes to your eternal salvation you are all the priority of God’s love in Jesus Christ. All the benefits and blessings of God’s grace are yours equally through faith in Jesus: forgiveness of sins, eternal salvation, new life in the Holy Spirit’s power today! It even reflects itself in how we work in God’s kingdom as a congregation. Instead of minimizing a new member’s abilities or ideas

in our fellowship we remember that they too have the Holy Spirit and listen to them. Instead of looking at and treating a person based upon his “labor” or lack of “labor” in the church, we rejoice that we labor together by the power of the Holy Spirit for Christ’s sake, each gifted by the Holy Spirit differently, and encourage each other in our labors. Instead of wondering about the motives of the person who repents and believes in Christ on his death bed we rejoice together with him and the angels in heaven over his repentance and the grace we get to share eternally! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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