

Our text today is another kingdom parable. The parable is used as an explanation for the statement Jesus makes at the end of His discourse with the “rich young ruler”. After this conversation His disciples are astonished.

First of all they wonder how it is that a man like the ruler is not really blessed of God, because he is wealthy and it seems that from what he said he has tried to be a godly man. If he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven who can? Jesus answer is, “with men it is impossible (men cannot earn their way into heaven and what seems to be blessings are not proof of being blessed) but with God all things are possible” (salvation is an act of God’s Sovereign grace whether a man has riches or is poor.) This is one of our clues to the meaning of Jesus’ words when He says to them twice, “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

27* Then Peter said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?"

Obviously, this question is asked because the rich ruler was not willing to leave things behind and follow Jesus and walked away with nothing concerning the kingdom of heaven. Jesus then gives them teaching that is meant to be encouraging and future focused.

28* And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon 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 farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.

For the twelve there is a place in the final or consummated kingdom of God when they will somehow under Christ have authority to judge the nation of Israel for rejecting Christ and while on earth the riches of God’s grace in association with and through other believers is much more valuable than the riches of the young ruler. They will also inherit eternal life.

Next, Jesus uses a proverb to bracket the teaching of a parable that He will use to illustrate the proverb.

30* "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.

He repeats this proverb at the end of the parable in Mt.20:16.

Many have mishandled the meaning of the proverb trying to force some kind of role reversal scenario into these words. By this I mean that in the kingdom rich people will become poor and vice versa. Some would say that Gentiles will have prominence over the Jews in the kingdom. Some want to insert an argument that is not recorded here about the disciple’s priority about being first called to follow Jesus.

None of these fits the text or clearly makes sense.

What does make sense is this. Considering the disciples misunderstanding of the rich ruler’s wealth as being a blessing from God and therefore he must be godly Jesus is saying that God’s grace, not any man’s perceived blessedness by the world’s standards, whether it be riches,

power, or prominence, is what allows anyone to enter into the kingdom and continue in the kingdom. Rich men can be saved, powerful men can be saved and so on but their position in the kingdom is what it is by the grace of God. And their position because of persecution by the world may change all that they knew in the world. And so as Jesus told the disciples that what they left behind would be multiplied by and through many means of grace the same is true for any one else.

Therefore 30* "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.

Here we need to go back to Mt. 19:13-15 as a reference point about who can enter into the kingdom, prior to the conversation with the rich ruler.

13* ¶ Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them.14* But Jesus said, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."15* After laying His hands on them, He departed from there.

Only people who exhibit a child like faith in Christ can enter the kingdom. This passage has nothing to do specifically with children being saved. That is a misinterpretation.

The children are being used as an illustration of what Jesus expects from those who put faith in him.

So then, whether rich or poor, powerful or common, all those who come into the kingdom with child-like trust will be received and advanced in the kingdom beyond those like the rich ruler who enjoy prominence now.

Now, the parable begins with a typical scene in Israel.

20:1* ¶ "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

The normal working day was about ten hours or so not counting breaks. Early in the morning is dawn about 6 A.M. and the owner He sets the conditions for his laborers:

2*"When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.

This was the normal pay for a foot soldier or day laborer.

3* "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place;4* and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went.

There were twelve hours from dawn to sunset. The third hour would be around 9A.M., the sixth 12 Noon, and the eleventh 5 P.M.

The market place would be the central spot in town where locals gathered and all kinds of business was being done including looking for day labor.

In some parts of the world this is still a common practice. On our missions trips we experienced this in Poland, especially in the town of Sandomierz. We would go to the town center where there were a few shops and many merchants set up for daily business with tents and tables. We would go and sing a few songs to gather an audience and then do a simple

presentation from the Scripture on a huge sketchboard. Once the presentation was finished we would invite the crowd to come to a preaching service that evening in a centrally located building or as in some other towns to their town park.

As the crowd dispersed we would hand out tracks and try to engage in some personal conversation. All kinds of people would stroll through the market place.

Here the landowner does not set a fixed price for their work but agrees to pay them whatever he deems correct at the end of the day.

He repeats his hiring throughout the day:

5* "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing.

6* "And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he *said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?'7* "They *said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He *said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'

I have experienced the same thing. There was a time when the only work I could find was temporary day labor. Each day I had to report to the agency at a very early hour and wait for an assignment. Sometimes they were given daily, once in a while the assignment might be for some consecutive days. I was paid at the end of the day or series of days.

8* "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard *said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.'

9* "When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.

10* "When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius.11* "When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner,12* saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.'

At the end of the working day the landowner pays all of the laborers.

In this part of the parable Jesus sets up his audience for a rather unorthodox series of events. His purpose is to startle them and to challenge their way of viewing things about God and the kingdom as He did with the rich ruler.

He called the last group first, those who worked the shortest number of hours, in fact one hour and paid them exactly what he paid those who worked since 6 A.M.

The landowner kept his agreement with the laborers he hired early in the morning. There was no legitimate reason for their complaint. He treated them exactly as he said he would. He had the right to do what he did and he was honest about what he did.

The early morning laborers thought they should be entitled to a greater compensation or a larger reward for their services. They did not appreciate the generosity of the landowner because it did not benefit them. He was generous to the others and just toward them. 'His rebuttal of them is mild and friendly.

13* "But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a

denarius?¹⁴* 'Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.¹⁵* 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?

These questions are rhetorical, in other words the answers are obvious.

He did no wrong. They agreed to terms. He is not acting unlawfully. They were jealous.

Then Jesus says: "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.

This brings us back to the first time Jesus used the same words in this passage.

All that occurs regarding our place in the kingdom of God is based on the grace of God alone.

We earn or merit no special standing in the kingdom, now or in the final kingdom.

The principle here is that God always does what is just. God cannot ever be accused of doing something that is not just. This is not a Scripture to illustrate how to resolve union-management disputes.

The world says he who works the longest receives the most pay even though that is not always true in modern times. That is right and just in the world's thinking. But this is set aside by God because grace prevails in all things concerning the kingdom.

God's grace makes some who are last-first. The point of the parable is that not all in the kingdom will receive the same reward but that kingdom rewards depend on God's sovereign grace.

So here we need to give some attention to rewards, what they are and what they are not.

Some have placed far too much emphasis on earning rewards by the works we do as believers in the kingdom. To live for the glory of God to earn rewards is fallacious and man centered. To be rewarded by God for living godly is truth and Christ centered

Does the Bible speak of rewards for the believer?

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:10, NAS95).

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:1-4, NAS95).

"For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS. (Matthew 16:27, NAS95).

Yes, I think we can safely say the Bible teaches the believer will receive rewards for service to his King, Jesus Christ. What remains is to answer two questions.

1. Are these rewards our motivation for living the Christian life?

2. What are the rewards believers receive?

Are These Rewards Our Motivation for Living the Christian Life?

NO! The reason can be found in an investigation of the GOOD WORKS of the believer. In Ephesians 2:10 we are told that the GOOD WORKS that we do have their origin in God.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10, NAS95).

Even though we, as believers, are responsible to do good works, we can never really take the credit for the GOOD WORKS since it is God Himself who is ultimately responsible for bring these works to pass in our life. GOOD WORKS may be defined as doing something that the word of God calls you to do, the Moral Will of God, and doing it with the express purpose of pleasing Him.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; (1 Thessalonians 4:3, NAS95).

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31, NAS95).

When we say "Thank You" to the Lord we are acknowledging that he is the ultimate cause. And if he is the ultimate cause then it seems a little strange for me to take any pride in my accomplishments.

If my best GOOD WORKS are tainted by sin, then why does God accept them? The answer to this lies in the gracious character of our God. Our acceptance by the Father is based on the perfect life and death of Jesus Christ, which was offered to the Father as a substitute for our wrath-deserving life.

Our GOOD WORKS are accepted as "good" works because we have been accepted by the Father into his family. Although we will never be able to produce any perfectly GOOD WORKS, we will be able to produce works that come from a heart that loves the Lords and desires to please him. Our Father accepts our tainted GOOD WORKS as truly "good" works because we are now "in Christ" and one of his children. To think that my GOOD WORKS in and of themselves really deserve any reward is hard for me to grasp.

What about the Crowns?

Does not the Bible speak of various CROWNS that believers can receive as rewards? Yes, the Scripture does speak of believers receiving CROWNS, but I don't think that they are specific

rewards but rather figures of speech for eternal life. Let's examine some of the major texts that speak of CROWNS and see what we might find.

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (James 1:12, NAS95).

'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Revelation 2:10, NAS95).

Both of these passages of scripture refer to the need for the believer to persevere to the end to be saved. This can't be a special reward for only some believers. In the letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation the one common theme that runs through these seven letters is that

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6, NAS95).

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12, 13, NAS95).

What about the crown of righteousness?

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6-8, NAS95).

Therefore, it does seem that this crown is also another figure for eternal life. No one gets into heaven without persevering to the end, and no one gets into heaven without loving Jesus Christ. There is also the crown of glory because we will be glorified 1Pt.5:4

Also it seems rather silly to imagine us in heaven with multiple crowns stacked on our heads.

We must also see that Paul uses crowns figuratively regarding people:

Philip. 4:1* Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

1Th 2:19* For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?

So, if the crowns are only another way of referring to eternal life, we still have to contend with the notion that the rewards refer to an opportunity for the believer to rule with Jesus Christ in the world to come. This idea persists in certain evangelical circles that if you are a good believer you will rule over much. If you are a not-so-good believer you may get into heaven but you will not rule at all. I believe that this is a false notion of rewards. The Bible

doesn't say much, but it does say in the letter to the church at Thyatira that all believers will rule with Christ.

'He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; (Revelation 2:26, NAS95).

Since all believers will persevere to the end, all believers will rule with Jesus Christ.

Therefore what is The Biblical Motivation for Living for Jesus?

In Hebrews chapter eight the salvation which the Son of God purchased on the cross is referred to as the New Covenant. This salvation consists of two parts. The first is the forgiveness of our sins. The second is the giving to each believer a new heart. This new heart consists of a Holy Spirit-led desire to love Jesus Christ and to obey him. This new heart or set of desires will drive the believer on to live for Jesus Christ and to persevere to the end. Since every believer gets a new heart, every believer will experience a transformed life, and every believer will be motivated from the inside out to live for Jesus.

"FOR THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR MINDS, AND I WILL WRITE THEM ON THEIR HEARTS. AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. "AND THEY SHALL NOT TEACH EVERYONE HIS FELLOW CITIZEN, AND EVERYONE HIS BROTHER, SAYING, 'KNOW THE LORD,' FOR ALL WILL KNOW ME, FROM THE LEAST TO THE GREATEST OF THEM. "FOR I WILL BE MERCIFUL TO THEIR INIQUITIES, AND I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE." (Hebrews 8:10-12, NAS95).

So, what are the rewards believers receive?

The one thing we can be sure of is that praise will be given to believers when they stand before the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ. Beyond praise, we can be sure of nothing else.

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. (1 Corinthians 4:5, NAS95).

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; (1 Peter 1:6, 7, NAS95).

So why are rewards so important to some believers? Why are some segments of evangelicalism so adamant about rewards? To answer this question we need to understand something about the theological makeup of those who stress rewards.

The vast majority who see rewards in this light are called dispensationalists. One significant theological feature of Dispensationalism is its understanding of conversion. They teach that a

person can become a believer by accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior but not necessarily as their Lord. Embracing the Lordship of Christ is an optional commitment that is not necessary for salvation. This leads to two kinds of Christians-carnal and spiritual, which is a false notion. Therefore, because the desire for the Lordship of Christ is a fundamental part of the salvation that was purchased by Jesus Christ on the cross, because we have a new heart, then to accept Jesus as your Savior only, would leave you with somebody who thinks that he is a believer but is not internally, Spirit-ruled and motivated to live for Jesus. The result would be an individual who needs some sort of motivation to live for Jesus. So this makes for such a great emphasis upon rewards. Rewards function as a motivation to push the professed believer to be obedient. But, a true believer needs no push. He has a new heart and he is an incurable God-lover. He recognizes that whatever good works he is able to produce are tainted with sin and owe their goodness to our Heavenly Father.

What is the condition of your heart when confronted with obedience to Christ?

The principle we learned from the parable is that God's sovereign grace places us in the kingdom and is responsible for how we are advanced and rewarded in the kingdom.

Everything defers to our just and gracious God. Our purpose is to live for the glory of God and God alone. However our deeds and rewards match up the Scripture does not give us any clearer indication of what our rewards will be.

Whatever they may be they will be just and right as God grants them according to His grace and gracious purpose for His own glory and to the praise of His glorious grace. Not one of us, unlike the day laborers hired in the early morning, will be jealous of another's reward. If we are to rejoice now as we should at the blessings a brother receives, why should it be any different in heaven?

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