

The Church's Economy

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Date: 17 November 2019

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[0 : 00] So we're picking up today where we left off two weeks ago, in Matthew 19. And there we encountered a rich young ruler, and in him we saw the danger of wealth choking out the good fruit of the gospel.

And the disciples who were at hand recognized they'd given up a lot to follow Jesus. So they asked the question, if this man's treasure is worth nothing, what sort of treasure will we get for following you?

And though Jesus promises them a great many things, he concludes with that memorable line, many who are first will be last, and the last first.

And that's the context we need for today's passage in chapter 20. Because Jesus finishes his teaching today with a very similar phrase in verse 16. If you've got a pew Bible, you can turn to it and look at it with me.

So there Jesus says at the end of his parable, the last will be first, and the first last. And this highlights for us, Jesus' teaching is meant to illustrate what he just taught the disciples at the end of chapter 19.

[1 : 05] As is often the case, they need to hear it more than once. The parable is another answer to the question Peter asked in verse 27, chapter 19.

What then will we have for following you? Put another way, the disciples want to know, if worldly riches are empty and deceitful, what does the economy of eternal life look like?

So Jesus begins, verse 1, The kingdom of heaven is like. And the story we read here is pretty familiar to us, I would say. The master goes out multiple times during the day, He hires laborers for his grape harvest, and everyone gets the same wage.

The story is so embedded in the substrate of Western culture, most of us have probably forgotten that phrase, the eleventh hour, actually comes from this parable. When the master hires, one last round of workers a mere hour before the end of the day's work.

But as familiar as the story might be, I think it's also true to say in our lived experience, this story is probably quite unfamiliar. The poet, W.H. Auden, in his Christmas oratorio writes, The real is what will strike you as really absurd.

[2 : 23] And this parable from man's perspective is rather absurd. We live in a society of earners. How on earth are you going to run a fair and equitable business?

If everyone gets paid the same wage, regardless of the amount of work they do, what justice is there in that? And interestingly, a rabbinic parable a few centuries later tells a similar story, except at the end of that parable, the moral is, the fellow who only worked an hour or two deserved what he got, because he was actually the best worker.

He accomplished more in that short window than everybody else. But that is not the case here with Jesus' parable. These last workers hired at the eleventh hour are probably the bottom of the barrel in the local workforce.

Not only are they chronologically last, they are economically last. Take a look at verses six and seven. And about the eleventh hour, he went out and found others standing.

He said to them, Why do you stand here idle all day? They said to him, Because no one has hired us. The reason they're still standing there is because they've been passed over by everyone who is hiring day laborers that day, which doesn't speak well to their employability.

[3 : 42] And if that is the case, they're probably on the ropes financially as well. In point of fact, they are so grateful to receive any work, there isn't even any conversation about what sort of compensation they're going to get.

The first workers, in verse two, negotiate for a denarius, which is fair. The next batch of workers, they're more flexible. They agree to whatever is right. The eleventh hour workers are so surprised that they're even being given work, they don't negotiate at all.

They get the call, they go out into the vineyard, glad that they are no longer idle. And the parable is intentionally vague about what has prevented them from being hired, I think, so that we don't miss the point, which is that there is no category which prevents us from entering into the work of the kingdom when the master calls us and invites us to work.

And the welcome of these bottom-of-the-barrel workers teaches us at least three things. First, it reveals there is an abundant harvest which needs as many workers as possible.

All who are willing to work are welcome. Now, we can tell it's an abundant harvest because the master doesn't go out just once or twice, but actually five times here. Now, we could take this as a slight on the master's planning abilities, doesn't know the workforce he needs, but since we know that this master is God, there's obviously another explanation.

[5 : 14] In Matthew 9, Jesus told his disciples, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest. Here in Matthew 20, we're getting a picture of what that looks like and the motley crew that comes with it.

Now, I don't know about you, but sometimes this abundance can be a difficult thing to believe. Laboring in the vineyard of the lower mainland occasionally feels more like an exercise in perseverance rather than a bountiful harvest.

And I should qualify that as Jesus teaches us about this abundant harvest, he is not teaching a naive triumphalism that glosses over the struggles we have as we yearn for the full inbreaking of his kingdom.

Rather, receiving this teaching about abundance, we need to humbly confess with Paul that we see dimly that we only know in part, even as we have been fully known. To confess this, to acknowledge there is a bountiful harvest which we might not personally see, is to acknowledge and submit to the very power of God at work in the world.

We are invited to participate in it. In that, there is tremendous hope. There is an abundant harvest. And within that abundance, we come to our second point.

[6 : 41] When we see the master hiring 11th hour workers, not only do we learn there is an abundant harvest, but we learn that work gives us dignity and value. Another way to say it would be, work for the master fulfills our true purpose and affirms our shared human identity.

In the vineyard, there are all kinds of workers, differing circumstances, differing abilities. They join the harvest at different times. But to be made in the image of God and to be given the task of working on behalf of him in the harvest is to be told by the master, you matter to me.

And if we see this, it means that we as laborers also need to be very careful about the poisonous attitude of the first workers in the parable, who see the wage which the last receive and begin to grumble, thinking they deserve more.

The parable functions, at least in part, as a warning to the first disciples, Peter and the other 11. They actually are the first to follow Christ and begin vineyard work in the kingdom of heaven.

But though they are first, if not careful, they could end up last. And by extension, also us. There have been, there are, there will be many whom the master calls that we might deem weak or ineffectual, theologically confused, morally corrupt, liturgically feeble, musically barbarous.

[8 : 20] And while these things might actually be the case, seeing it should never cause us to look down on the least of these. For to such belong the kingdom of heaven. To see a brother or sister struggling, where we are strong, and to begrudge them their place in the kingdom of God, is to spurn the very grace upon which we ourselves rely, and betrays an even deeper weakness.

We see this pointedly in the question of the master in verse 15. He replies to the ungrateful worker, am I not allowed to do what I choose with what is mine? In pride, the first run the danger of becoming last.

But the inverse of that is also true. If you look around you and feel as though you are the weak one, lacking in maturity, constantly battling the same sins, struggling to understand matters of faith, everyone else just seems to take for granted.

Do not give in to spiritual despair. You are precious. You belong. The master has called you to work in the vineyard too.

And you will receive your reward. The antidote to both of these poisons, pride and despair, is to take our eyes off ourselves, stop the comparisons, and instead look to Christ.

[9 : 50] We see this poignantly at the end of the Gospel of John. Peter, having been reconciled to his Lord, and confessing three times his love for Jesus, then turns and sees the beloved disciple John following after them.

And he asks Jesus, will this man get more than me? And Jesus replies with such a beautiful mix of tenderness and authority.

If it is my will, he remain until I come. What is it to you? Follow me. To work in the vineyard is to follow after Jesus.

And in that, we receive our purpose, heavenly work for our time in this world. It gives our lives an unassailable dignity. Not only do we wear the name Christian, but also the name Saint.

And the reason this is so brings us to our third and our final point this morning. Jesus' parable speaks about an abundant harvest where all kinds of people are called into the work, set apart for an eternal reward.

[11 : 05] But at the center of this parable, the heart of it, is the profound generosity of the master of the house, whose willingness to use all manner of workers means that those with the greatest of need will also be provided for and treated equally.

And that is incredible good news. The kingdom of heaven is not built under the Herculean feats of mankind's elite, but instead on the self-giving, self-emptying, unabashedly generous love of a perfect God who gave himself even to the point of death upon a cross.

Because of him, we can be freed from the slavery of materialism, which reduces us to what we can produce. And because of him, we are set free to work for a master who rewards us perfectly according to our need.

And this is the church's economy. To him be the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.