

Parable of the Vineyard

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[0 : 00] Loving Lord, look with mercy upon us now as we seek thee together in thy word, for it is thine, it is holy, inspired and infallible.

And we believe, O Lord, that thou speakest day by day, hour by hour unto thy people, through thy Holy Spirit, through which this, thy Holy Word, was inspired to be written down at the first.

Grant, therefore, that word and spirit alike may work together in our hearts and bear good fruit we beseech thee as we think on the things thou hast taught us.

Grant us, O Lord, therefore, a blessing this evening from the word of God, that as we go out from these doors this evening, we would not go out merely the same as we came in, but richer and fuller, blessed by the word of God, the bread of life, and acknowledging that it was good for us to have been with one another and with Jesus.

So in his name, bless the word open before us and forgive us for all our sin for Jesus' sake. Amen.

At the human level, and I stress the human level, when we look at the parable which we read this evening from Matthew chapter 20 of the laborers in the vineyard, I'm sure many of us, if not most of us, instinctively feel that, well, you know, maybe the long-term laborers do have a point.

[1 : 32] I know you're supposed to think that, and you're not supposed to think that. You're meant to think, oh, no, of course, they were absolutely bad and absolutely wrong, and they didn't have a leg to stand on, and so on.

And spiritually, that's, of course, how we take it, but humanly speaking, maybe I'm the only person, but I imagine quite a few of us think, well, actually, you know, they had a bit of a point. And if even they had been paid first and gone away happy with their money, then there wouldn't have been the scene that was created afterwards.

They've slogged away for longer. After all, shouldn't they rightly get more, even if at the beginning of the day they were quite happy with the contract that they arranged?

A denarius, of course, was a day's wage for a laborer in those days. Day laboring was a precarious business. If you didn't work, you didn't eat, and you couldn't hire yourself out for a week at a time or a month at a time.

You worked day by day by day, and it was a very precarious business. To grant, then, the disgruntled laborers their point, which by nature we might be inclined to do, if we were to do that, that, however, would be to miss the point entirely that Jesus is trying to make.

[2 : 51] In terms of the parable, gainful employment is a good thing. A fair day's wage paid promptly for a fair day's work is a good and healthy thing for both employer and employee alike.

And the precariousness of day laboring is one reason why both the Old Testament and the New are so specific that you've got to pay on the nail. You don't keep back your laborer's wages overnight and say he'll pay you in the morning, because that means that he and his family don't eat that night, and so on.

So the Bible is very strong on right employment legislation, and what we might call industrial relations. It is a good and healthy thing, a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, promptly paid.

To sit idle in the marketplace all day because no one has hired you was not, then, to be blessed with a nice relaxing day in the sunshine, taking your ease, then saunter in for an hour's work and a full day's pay.

No, it was rather to be burdened with the painful knowledge of a day wasted, of health and laboring strength unused and going to waste, of an evening when your children would go to bed hungry with no supper, of the feeling sick to the pit of your stomach because in the early morning you had hurried down to the marketplace, knowing that employers tended to hire at the very beginning of the day, and then finding you were too late.

[4 : 32] He had gone, and the smart early birds had gone with him. Hired first thing. In the world's terms, although there's no such thing as it, of course, what we might call the lucky ones.

So you wander about maybe from one village to another looking for work. How else, for example, although it's speculation to an extent, how else do we explain that suddenly the boss keeps finding these new people in the marketplace that weren't there before?

Where were they before? When he came along, were they just sleeping in their beds? No day laborer who depended on the day's wage to feed himself or his family is going to be lying in bed all day.

So where were they? We speculate, though I think with some justification, you wandered about from one village or one prospective employer to another looking for work.

But nobody's hiring. And you come back to your own village where you started from that morning, only to find that the boss, the only one who is hiring that day, has been back three more times.

[5 : 40] And you missed him every time. Taking groups of workers with him off to his vineyard. They were going to get paid.

They were going to work. And because you were off looking vigorously and diligently for work, you missed them all. You could just about weep with frustration.

So you sit down in the square with the other losers that missed out that day, wondering how you're going to face the wife and kids that night with nothing.

When the boss comes back one more time. But it's early evening now, and any work you can do for him now will just be a pittance work. But he's still hiring, so off you go with the others, and you do your best.

But time-wise, you can only put in less than an hour. Because after all, if it's the 11th hour when he hired, that's 5 o'clock in the afternoon. By the time you actually get to the vineyard, even if you work your back off till the quitting time, then you've got less than an hour to put in.

[6 : 46] But you do your best. Then they call you for your pay. Imagine the delight and astonishment when you get a full day's pay.

There must be some mistake, surely. But no, no mistake. Off you go with your wages, wishing you could have served this generous employer for longer.

You're ready to just about do anything for him now, such as your sheer gratitude, relief, that you can actually face the family tonight, and yet joyful disbelief. You can't believe this has happened.

You see, for all that the so-called, to use the world's terms, lucky ones, were hired right at the beginning of the day and worked hard but happily the entire day, secure in the knowledge of their wage at the end of it, to them, it was not opportunity, just slog, just something they had to do, something they had to get through.

They'd rather not have had to do it at all. They reckoned the so-called lucky ones were those who labored only an hour but got the full pay. But that was not how it felt to those unemployed till the last minute.

[8 : 05] To them, it was an agony of disappointment and gut-wrenching shame for 11 out of 12 hours, an emptiness, a sense of failure, of defeat.

then, joy at the last. To the all-day laborers, the last-minuters got a bargain. But that was because they saw their own hard work as a negative thing and not as a God-intended all-day blessing.

In the eyes of such a negative viewpoint as the all-day laborers would have had, the last-minute guy gets the best of both worlds.

And if the parable is telling us of the kingdom of God, which it almost certainly is, then the worldly mind probably calculates that the best of both worlds is to sin your little heart out to the last minute, then convert on your deathbed and sail into the kingdom by the skin of your teeth where you'll have the same reward as the lifelong believers.

Brilliant. Excellent. Wonderful. Except that it fails to appreciate the corrosive effect of sin on the heart.

[9 : 32] The heart that might in its 20s be conducive to the things of the gospel. After a quarter or half century of godlessness and unbelief is not in the same condition and has not the same ability to respond to Christ as it might have done in the freshness of youth.

In this respect the heart or spirit is no different from the body. It is by no means impossible but the corrosive effect of sin must be reckoned with.

We said it's no different from the body. Use the body as an example. Think for example of say a 23 year old royal marine who leaves the forces after five years as a marine commando does so at the peak of physical health and fitness he can undertake any amount of stamina sapping exercise and grueling overnight marches in his mind he's as good as any other marine and he can go back to it any time he wants because he's just as good as they are and he's probably right.

But after say 25 years of junk food pub drinking and daytime TV the by then 48 year old ex-marine is no longer able to do what he once did.

He thinks he can but the ability is no longer there. The six pack has become a pot belly. The biceps are rather flabby.

[11 : 14] The stamina is no longer what it was. Even if he wants to do it he no longer can. but in reality he doesn't want to anyway because his mind has changed.

Think of a flashy sports car with the well-oiled and finely-tuned engine which will quite simply not be the same machine if it is left out in the rain on the moor for 20 years.

You can't just go back with the ignition keys and expect to be able to turn the engine and it will start from nothing. rust and rot to set in. Corrosion has done its work just through being left alone and kept away from what at one time could have been so good for it.

That same flashy sports car has been gently driven around not too harshly not too roughly and tanked up with the petrol and the oil and the MOTs all kept up the scratch it will be in perfectly good condition 20 years later but the one that has been left out in the moor won't be.

It has been kept away from the kind of maintenance that would have been so beneficial to it. No matter what you are dealing with whether it is cars or physique the body the mind or the soul you can't plan for how you are going to feel in 30 years time leaving it to the last minute is never a good plan no matter what you are dealing with the idea of having the time of your life and then converting on your deathbed as if we knew when our deathbed would be is always a bad and an unsafe idea even if we knew we would live for 30 years you can't plan for how you are going to be we can't know that our mind will not have changed altogether or that we will still have control of our mind or our faculties and our chance will have gone if the desire isn't there now or isn't there yet

[13 : 36] I'm not saying people can't convert much later in life and from lives of much deeper sin and degradation they can and they do and from lives of indifference but if the desire isn't there now or isn't there yet we can't pretend that it will be safe to leave it for 20 years or more ecclesiastes tells us remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth while the evil days come not nor the years draw nigh when thou shalt say I have no pleasure in them to give one more example when I was young I used to attend a lot of football matches mostly Pataudry Stadium but lots of other places in the country too what always seemed a strange thing to me in my football daft youth was that the great big gates at the walls of football stadiums unlike the narrow little turnstiles that you had to go through to come in these great big gates were opened up when there was still a good half hour of the match to go so that people who needed or wanted to could leave early if they wanted to maybe to catch an earlier bus or whatever but I always used to think this was stupid why would the football ground authorities do this people could wander in off the street and see the last half hour for free why this is bad business this doesn't work in their interest maybe some folk did walk in off the street and watch the last half hour for free but in all the years that I followed the football and there were several of them never once never once home or away did I ever see anyone actually doing it plenty of people made use of the big open gates to leave early but none ever came in late for free and logically why would they to me it seemed an obvious bargain but not to those on the outside if you supported the home team you'd be there for the whole game you'd pay your money and relish the whole experience and the atmosphere and all that went into it if you supported the away team you've already spent a considerable amount of money traveling on the train or the bus or whatever to be there you're not going to sit out in the bus park for three quarters of the game and then come in for the last half hour just for the sake of not having to pay your gate money doesn't make sense if you care enough to want to see the game you care enough to want to see it all for those to see for those of us to see the facilities in case something exciting happened on the field if you don't care nothing's going to drag you down there just to walk through the big open gates for half an hour of free football to those who don't care about the game they've got better things to do than sneak in for half an hour free to them it wasn't a bargain to them it was just a waste of time if you want it you want it all if you don't want it you don't want any of it there's nothing that will persuade you that it's a bargain at all for the laborers in the vineyard who grumbled they saw their labor as something

negative as having given something up having lost something to earn that day's wage and for those who see following

Christ as essentially losing something or giving something up it will be no more tempting to follow Christ at 60 than at 16 but for those who see in Christ a wonderful opportunity to gain love protection salvation and joy both here and in eternity there will be no desire to put off the joy even a day longer and if they find Christ their only regret will be for all the long years they wasted without him and when you come to Christ as many of you know all the years that went before seem wasted and seem long I was 20 when I was converted now from the position of midlife or middle age that looks pretty young but when you're 20 it doesn't feel young when you're young 16 feels sort of middle age and quite mature and 18 well you're fully grown up and you know everything there is to know and by the time you're 19 well you're aging a bit and somebody who's 24 well they're practically a pensioner and if you're thinking about 30 well you're talking about nursing homes by then when you're young you think this is it and you think that your life as it is is what it's really about people who are old don't really know anything you know it your contemporaries know it when you are young 20 seems ancient and all the years that went before without

Christ seem absolutely wasted to come to Christ when you do no matter what age you are yes it might seem the rest of the world and the rest of your life is wasted by comparison but what Jesus does is he gives you a new lease of life I love to tell a story of one of our own members who's now no longer with us the Lord has taken her I trust to glory now we're a small congregation in locks but this lady some of you may know of came forward to the Lord's table at the age of 92 and at the time she was attending one end of the day and I in my youthful arrogance thought well fair enough you know she's pretty old she can't manage much more than that come forward she did at 92 and having come forward suddenly there was an explosion of energy and life and interest it was the morning it was the evening it was the prayer meeting it was the ladies fellowship she couldn't get enough finally by the time she reached 102 she wasn't out every week at the prayer meeting it was falling away a bit by then but she stayed with the lord and with the lord house and with the inward and outward relationship with the lord and tokens of that until she died at 104 at 92 most people probably thought well she doesn't go long now she had 12 years with the lord it's more than some people ever get in a lifetime when they come forward much much younger none of us knows how long we shall be spared for my point friends is that whatever age you come at however wasted the previous years might seem to have been in spiritual terms the lord gives a new lease of life in this world before we ever start thinking about the world to come and that is true whatever age you are I speculated earlier about the laborers who were hired at the 11th hour who I speculate would have gone home thinking if only we had learned of this employer days ago hours ago months ago we would have worked for him every day if we could we would have gone down to the marketplace in the middle of the night just to make sure we be hired first thing in the morning we couldn't get enough of him we couldn't do enough for him that's how they know you need and Christ has what you need in your life when we embrace Christ at whatever age it may be yes it will be stepping out into an unknown future that may be something that might have held back some people for all I know over this past weekend who maybe came very close to coming forward who maybe wrestled within and struggled and considered whether or not they should and they never quite got the courage to go maybe that held you back

I do not know and when you come to Christ and when you profess faith in him yes it will be stepping out into an unknown future but that's the adventure that's the great thing about it we don't know what God may want to do with us we don't know where he may want to send us we don't know what he may require of us but he does promise to be with us the question is do you trust him to hold you and help you through it all to provide everything you need to catch you when you start to sink think about the earlier passage we read Peter coming out of the boat and yes he begins to sink but he doesn't perish there Christ reaches out and catches him you have to trust Jesus to catch you when you begin to sink when you begin to fall he does not promise acknowledge me and you'll never stumble believe in me you'll never fall you'll never have problems you'll never have difficulties you'll never be ashamed of yourself as a

[23 : 36] Christian you'll be sin free and trouble free if only you become a Christian he never promises that at all but what he does promise is to be with us what he does promise is as Deuteronomy says that underneath are the everlasting arms fall and he will catch you he will lay hold upon you when you sink and pull you back up again and he may say why did you doubt ye of

little faith but he this life how will you ever trust him for eternity we think of Peter and the disciples in the boat the boat is familiar these guys are fishermen they've been doing it all their lives this won't be the first storm they've ever experienced on Galilee the boat is familiar the boat is what you've known all your life but the boat is in trouble and you don't honestly know if the and there's

Jesus on the sea Lord if it's you tell me to come to you on the sea come he says now what do you do because the gospel invitation comes from our Lord through the mouths of his preachers and through the pages of his word day by day and sabbath by sabbath and year by year the Lord says come and there's you in the boat that you've come what do you stay in the boat and maybe sink do you get out of the boat and maybe still sink but at least if you get out of the boat and come to him you're answering Jesus call or get out of the boat and experience what you've never experienced before aside from our Lord nobody about Peter that I know of ever walked on water he experienced what he never experienced before nearly cost him his life but

Jesus was there to catch him you can stay in the boat and you don't know what will happen to it or you can get out of the boat and you don't know what will happen to you then well it seems a pretty good deal in that sense if the Lord is saying come to me there one place of safety there's one that you know will not let you down what do you do Jesus calls us in our youth in the familiar boats of our middle years or in the eleventh hour still sitting in the marketplace the boat need not go down the long hot day need not be wasted because here's the master calling for laborers or walking on the water and calling you out you can stay in the boat you can stay in the marketplace and if you do you'll miss out or you can rise up and climb out and follow

Jesus wherever he leads whatever your age whatever has happened to you in the past whatever he may require of you in the future whatever it takes and you know it'll be worth it let us pray our merciful and gracious Lord thou knowest that so much of our lives have been spent in that which we know has not profited perhaps not through idleness Lord it may be through great busyness and great activity and great sincerity maybe we're like the laborers who've wandered from village to village looking for work that couldn't be found and missed opportunity after opportunity to labor for the master but now

Lord thou comest unto us and thou callest and invitest us to labor for thee at this stage when our lives perhaps seem so much water to have flowed under the bridge so many things to have happened and maybe in middle age we think Lord I wish I'd met you twenty years ago or Lord I wish you'd come to me in my health and strength and prime but what can I do now still he wants laborers for the vineyard servants for himself and the last generosity there is none to gainsay his kindness and love to all alike he is no man's debtor therefore Lord enable us to come unto thee and to know that thou lovest us with an everlasting love yea with tender mercies thou dost call us and we pray thee now in this our time of thanksgiving to acknowledge that whilst there is yet life there is yet hope that though we may be amongst those who have missed an opportunity this time around yet if we be spared another shall come another opportunity and another day let us be for that day better prepared more intent more ready when thou comest again and

[29 : 19] Lord if we be thine already and with thankful hearts acknowledge what thou hast done for us over this past time in these last few days enable us O Lord not to consider our labor for thee a negative thing but rather O Lord a joy and a privilege that when we see other laborers coming in other fellow servants and fellow soldiers of the cross joining us at all the different hours of life's little day that we may rejoice that we may know that their glorious reward is the same as all those who in every age have labored for thee for it is mercy thou hast had upon us do thou likewise have mercy we pray upon all so hear us this evening grant us thy grace hear our petitions and answer us in peace and bless thy word that we have considered and continue with us now tonight for we ask it in Jesus name and for his sake Amen