

MSB265

# **MORE Seed and Bread**

BRIEF BIBLICAL MESSAGES FROM

## **THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY**

Otis Q. Sellers, Founder - David R. Hetteema, Director

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# **THE PARABLE OF THE LABORERS**

By M.B. Hammond

Jesus taught the common people with many parables while He was here on earth. One of those parables was the "parable of the laborers," which refers to the parable Christ spoke to His disciples in Matthew 20:1-16. Jesus made an important point, but just what was it?

To understand this parable it is necessary to examine the discussion which immediately precedes it, In the conversation with the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-22), Christ had questioned him and he claimed he was righteous for having followed all the laws mentioned, but he was unable to divest himself of his wealth, causing Jesus to say, **Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God** (Matt. 19:23-24, NAS). His disciples were astonished saying, "**Then who can be saved?**," because they fully expected that the rich ones had some inside track with God, as they had the poor ones to believe.

Jesus then said to His disciples, **Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration (resurrection), when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall 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 farms for My name's sake shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal (eonian) life. But many who are first shall be last; and the last, first** (Matt. 19:28-30, NAS). The last statement is repeated in Matthew 20:16 and this is a key to the understanding we desire.

The parable is an explanation, though cryptic, of how the personal sacrifice of His disciples would be well rewarded. Christ's disciples were among the poor "sinners" in Israel as the Pharisees (the Jews) called all (tax-gatherers and harlots) who were not of their elevated position (rich/self-righteous). These men (the Jewish leaders) were first, or pre-eminent among the Israelites of that day, and though not Levites, they usurped for themselves the position of lawgivers. So Christ was explaining that in the Kingdom, the positions are reversed with the Pharisees at the end of the line; not the front with the disciples of Christ. It confused the disciples. However, Christ was emphasizing that the positions of service involving authority and power were not based on the fortunes of birth, but on His own criteria.

The idea of God rewarding men on the basis of His own choice is thus inherent in the parable's subject. As in the story of Job, God can act or be silent; likewise, He can make a choice and no man can complain that God is unfair, for His choice is always righteous.

This asserts the right of God to rule in His creation. A little later in Matthew 20, the mother of the sons of Zebedee (James and John) came to Jesus to request the special placing of her sons one on His right, and the other on His left. Christ answered her, saying, **You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink? ... My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right hand and on My left, this is not mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father** (Matt. 20:22-23, NAS). The other disciples were angry about this and Jesus explained to them saying, **You know that the rulers of the Gentiles (nations) lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life (soul) a ransom for many** (Matt 20:25-28, NAS). Thus, Christ clarified that His Kingdom will be a "righteous Kingdom" in which the leaders (we call "public servants") will truly be the servants of God for the peoples. Even so we note that whatever a man's position of service might be, in a righteous Kingdom, that service is intended for the good of those served, since God is always righteous, and His choice is always based on His love for His creation. Since love is that attitude and/or behavior that seeks the greatest good for the object of the love, so God will extend this love in a manifest manner to all the nations in the Kingdom.

With that background let us examine the subject material. The parable begins with, **For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out in the morning** (sunrise, about 6 a.m.) **to hire laborers for his vineyard.**

**And when he agreed with the laborers for a denarius (a day's pay) for the**

**day, he sent them to his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour (9 a.m.) and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, 'You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you. And so they went out (Matt. 20:1-4, NAS).** For this to be a parable, it is necessary to find what parallelisms Christ was making. The landowner appears to be Jesus Christ, Himself, the expression of God; the vineyard seems to be the world of Christ's day in the Judean scene. The "pay" for working in the vineyard represents the reward for workers on God's behalf. He was not judging their diligence or their claim to leadership. Now the question is: "Who are the laborers?" Are they the common people of the Jews, the followers of Christ, or the scribes and Pharisees who had usurped the position as lawgivers over the rightful heirs, the Levitical priesthood? Are the members of the different groups related in some way to the time they came to serve in the vineyard? Since these laborers are not specifically harvesting the produce of the vineyard, it is doubtful that this is an eschatological (last days) parable; so what does their duration of labor symbolize? The day's wage (a denarius [a penny, KJV]) agreed upon could be the reward that relates to resurrection to life in the Kingdom. Such a reward is very valuable, but the denarius is simply a symbol of God's reward. These groups are all expected to see resurrection, but their service will be given by Christ.

The parable goes on to say, **Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour (12 noon and 3 p.m.) and did the same thing. And about the eleventh hour (about 5 p.m.) he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one hired us. He said to them, 'You too go into the vineyard. And when evening had come (about 6 p.m.) 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. And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. And when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius. And when they received it they grumbled at the landowner, saying 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have born the burden and the scorching heat of the day (Matt. 20:5-12, NAS).**

This part of the story poses more questions. Are the time markers related to the position of service? Was the landowner testing the laborers? Is the payment some kind of a judgment? If the laborers are servants (slaves) of God in service to the Jewish nation as priests and teachers of the law, then their labor could be likened to the tending of the vineyard (the nation of Israel and the people of the world), and hence to the distribution and teaching of the law (Isa. 2:2-6).

In Exodus 19:6 God had proclaimed that the Israelites would be "a nation of priests." Here, the landowner had an agreement to pay the first group a denarius, while the latter groups have the implied promise that the landowner would reward them justly according to his own estimation. If he was testing them, we have the problem of "what is just?" Since God is righteous, the element of faith is now evident.

The parable continues with the landowner having responded to the laborers complaint: **But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend (comrade) I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way, but I desire to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious (evil) because I am generous (good)? Thus the last shall be first and the first last.** (Matt. 20:13-16, NAS). The landowner was well within his legal rights to reward the last man hired with equal pay to the first man hired, even though the last man only worked one hour, not 12 hours like the first. The landowner said he desired to give this reward. So it is with God, who rewards men by His good pleasure (grace). The term "friend" is also used by Christ of Judas when He was being betrayed (Matt. 26:50), and may suggest an antagonistic relationship. The landowner told the complaining man to take what he had earned and to go his way; he had agreed to the landowner's wage and should have been satisfied. The workers all received the same reward, regardless of the duration of service. Whether a man had served God on a covenant basis or otherwise, the reward was the same: life in the Kingdom and a position as Christ established. Those Pharisees who thought their diligent work in maintaining the law might give them a "better place in the Kingdom" had this parable to deal with.

We think the laborers represent the servants of the Kingdom, and the day's wage stands for the reward which is to live and serve in the Kingdom. The idea of time markers related to the duration of the Kingdom seems far fetched and was discarded. That the owner was testing the laborers is not a likely scenario either, since there is no simple evidence of alternate reward/punishment. So the question is: "Why does the owner reward all the laborers the same?" We see here the difference between faith and works. The first workers had an agreement to work for a fixed amount, and they were paid according to their works. The latter workers all labored without a specific commitment, but only trusting in the fairness of the owner. So in grace God rewards them all the same; that reward is life in the Kingdom. Jesus told his disciples that they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Such would be their reward. The rich men, the scribes and Pharisees would all be among the least of the servants of the Kingdom. Their complaints would not change Christ's determination about the order of service in the Kingdom.

The works of the law, like the works of faith, depend on the graciousness of God, even the Lord Jesus Christ. We know that, in the Dispensation of Grace, God always acts in grace which is a love and favor to the undeserving.

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