

In chapter nineteen of Matthew—right before our Gospel reading today—a rich young man asked Jesus, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And as the story continues, we find he thought he was doing a pretty decent job as a human—many of us do—and He wanted Jesus’ affirmation. That is often the care we want from Jesus—and from the Church—a blessing on what we are already doing.

He wanted to hear what Jesus said to Nathanael, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” But Jesus only said that once. And even Nathanael doesn’t leave the conversation unscathed.

But Jesus has something else to say to this rich young man. He said, “Go and sell all of your possessions, give them to the poor, and then come and follow me. And you will have treasures in heaven.”

So much for the affirmation he was seeking. And I fear He would say something very much like that to us as well—if we think we are pretty good humans—if we think we have done enough to deserve His blessing.

Give up all your idols—whatever they are—and come follow me. But this wealthy young man couldn’t do it. He wouldn’t give up the temporal for the eternal. The cost seemed too great.

As the Disciples watched this conflicted man walk away, Peter had a thought. He was always thinking about something—although not always the right thing. The rich young man refused to sacrifice anything for the kingdom. But Peter had chosen a different path. And so, he said to Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?”

And Jesus says these amazing words, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also 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 lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

There is so much here. And as Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you...” He is encouraging us to stop, slow down, and listen. Let these words grab your attention.

There will be a new world. And as that new world begins—Jesus will sit on a glorious throne judging the world. The Twelve will sit with Him that day. And all those who have followed Jesus—sacrificially followed—will receive a great reward.

And yet, His final words turn the whole thing upside down, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” Jesus says this at the end of chapter nineteen, and then again at the end of our reading. These sayings serve as bookends to the story in the middle. And they clearly reveal that we don’t get this idea of eternal rewards quite right.

Hearing Peter’s question, there is something right and something wrong about his perspective. Peter is always interesting—but it doesn’t mean he grasps the scope of the kingdom of heaven just yet.

Jesus talks about rewards at Judgment Day in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6. And again in Matthew 10 in Jesus’ Missionary Discourse. Peter is right to expect some eternal

reward for those who believe and follow Jesus. But we need to grasp this rightly. Let me give you two quick points.

First, although God grants rewards, Jesus never tells us that we *earn* rewards. He never presents our obedience as something God repays. If we serve God hoping for blessings in the hereafter, this is a business transaction, not faith. At worst, such obedience is selfish and manipulative. It is often selective, as well. We do what we think is best—and expect God to reward us for it. But that is not how any of this works.

Second, we must remember that life with Christ is our chief reward. And all of the best rewards are like that. They are found in right relationships, rather than possessions or personal gain.

Jesus doesn't promise us a mansion. That's not what the line in John 14 means, as Jesus says He goes to prepare a place for us. "In my Father's house are many rooms." Admittedly, *mansion* is the word in the King James Version, but it's not right.

This place is a reference to eternity with Christ. The dwelling place of God will be with us. And our dwelling places will be with Him. That's the eternity we seek—to be with Him. That's the place that is prepared. And that is the only reward we need. It is easy to lust after rewards—things we think we deserve from God—recognition and credit—wealth and happiness—revenge on our enemies. Therefore, Jesus warns us, "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

This is cryptic. And sadly, instead of exploring this idea, the Church either ignores it or domesticates it. It becomes a joke about who is first at the Church potluck. Funny, but not quite what this text means. So, what does it mean?

Remember that all we have talked about so far is the context for our Gospel reading. The story is *The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard*. It has also been called *The Parable of the Eccentric Employer*. This idea, "The first will be last," is so important that Jesus dedicates a parable to it.

I won't retell the whole story. We heard it in the reading. Remember, we should always look for the unusual in the parables. What is that one surprising detail that should garner our attention?

And here, it is odd that the master of the house would hire day laborers late in the day, work them for an hour, pay them first, and pay them in full—the same as those who worked the whole day. Now, this is a parable, not a historical account. Some suggest that every parable must have happened in real history—otherwise it wouldn't be true. But that is not my view. The parable is true—but at a more foundational level than just an accurate retelling of something that happened.

And the order of the parable is perfect—serving to reveal our hearts. Jesus invites Peter—Jesus invites us—to see ourselves through the eyes of the first workers to be hired—the ones who labored all day—the ones who expect to be generously rewarded.

They labored for twelve hours in the scorching summer heat. And they rejoiced to see more workers join them throughout the day. There was a lot to do. At the end of the day—at the end of the world—they watched as the foreman distributed pay.

Others lounged around all day, labored one hour, and then collected a full day's wages. When those who worked the whole day received nothing more, it seemed so unjust. They had

longer hours, poorer working conditions, and seemingly, they gained nothing for it. It seemed so unfair.

We would probably grumble too. Jesus' story stirs our emotions and our sense of equity. And I hope at this point we are ready to hear His explanation, "Friend...am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"

Very literally, in Greek, He says, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" That's a poignant question. If we have been disciples of Jesus Christ for a long time, it is easy to think, "I have put in so many volunteer hours. I have put thousands in the offering. I taught Sunday school. I served on a board. I memorized the Catechism. I sacrificed so much for the cause of Christ. I deserve a greater reward in eternity."

But God's generosity provokes our sense of entitlement. And His reward actually takes two forms. Especially on judgment day, God gives gifts we do not deserve. And He withholds punishments we do deserve. Sadly, many take God's generosity for granted—so that His amazing grace has become boring grace. It is boring because we no longer think of ourselves as sinners—or at least not as great sinners.

We think we are rather good, compared to most. If we commit sins, they are the ordinary kind. We don't really deserve punishment. How can God be upset with us decent, hardworking people? We should be rewarded with eternal blessings for our faithfulness.

But Jesus says no. God is not obligated to forgive anyone—let alone everyone. He is not obligated to reward your above-average life. Eternity is not earned by being a better person than your neighbor who blasts his music all night or doesn't mow his lawn.

So if God welcomes us into eternal life at all—if He does rescue us—it is an act of free grace. The credit is all His. God is gracious—but not because He owes grace to anyone. God doesn't owe us an eternal inheritance—or an eternal reward. It is all pure gift. And as we see grace as grace, we are starting down the right path.

In the parable, everyone gets the same thing. And the details all have meaning. The workers are God's people. The vineyard is His Church. The denarius represents life. That is what money is for. And here it represents eternal life. It isn't a bigger and better mansion in the great beyond. Eternal life is to be with Christ—as the author of life.

It's hard for us to think that the thief on the cross will receive the same reward as Peter and James and John. This is so unfair. They worked harder. They gave more. They were martyred.

They deserve more. But more of what? What more could we need than eternal life with Christ? He graciously gives us all things—all that we need when His kingdom comes.

So this story corrects those who think God owes them something. It also celebrates Jesus' surprising generosity. Some people encounter Jesus very briefly at the end. Some start in the Church, stumble throughout their lives, and return before the end. Some trust in Jesus their entire lives.

But everyone who trusts in Christ—who stands firm in Christ—receives His grace and mercy. We all receive the same reward—which is also the highest reward—eternity with Christ Himself—sins forgiven—the New Jerusalem—the tree of life—all in a kingdom that has no end.

Now, let me make two brief qualifications. This parable is not an excuse to go live like the devil—with plans to make things right before the end. *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* in Matthew 25 dispels such a notion. Go read it, if this is your plan.

You don't know your last day. There are very few death-bed conversions. And to rebel against God your whole life, and plan to embrace His grace at the end, goes against the whole tone of the New Testament. So if this is your plan, don't fool yourself.

The Prophet Isaiah gets this just right for all of us. He says, "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

This parable is also not an excuse to live like the rich young ruler. Let's not think so highly of ourselves—especially before God. With just a question, or a word, or a parable, Jesus can unmask our sin. What if Jesus were to say to you, "Go give all that you have to the poor, and come and follow me"? Would we do what He commands? We are not as righteous as we think. We don't deserve His grace—much less a reward.

It is as Jesus says in Luke 17, "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" Again, "The last will be first, and the first last." This pokes at our pride. And that's a good thing. And it is a promise for the humble. Ultimately, there will be no essential distinctions between believers when Jesus brings His reign down out of heaven to us.

So all of our prideful comparisons are stripped away from the hearts and minds of believers, even now. Human beings with their prestige and self-importance play no part whatsoever in achieving eternal salvation. No good works, no decisions, no list of volunteer hours.

We simply trust Jesus. Only the righteousness of Christ is sufficient to save. We live in His grace and mercy. We follow where He leads. And we wait for *the regeneration*—the resurrection—the new creation—that is coming so very soon.

Faith alone is the necessary qualification. And He gives us faith as well—in His Word read, preached, and heard, and in the blessed Sacrament of the Altar. All comparisons with other believers fall apart. We shouldn't be comparing our spiritual value with one another. All His people are valuable.

True believers—all who meet that day in faith—will inherit the same eternal life. This is the way of the kingdom of heaven. And it's very good news. And in this way, "The last will be first, and the first last." In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+