

What Shall We Have Therefore

The Parable of the Penny a Day-Matthew 20.

We must note first the chain of events with which this parable is connected. They begin in 19:16 when the rich young ruler comes running eagerly to Jesus, asking what he must do to have eternal life. He was clearly what would outwardly be considered a faithful and religious man. We gather this from his statement regarding the commandments: "All these have I kept from my youth up"-- coupled with the information that Jesus was moved with love toward him.

Two interpretations of his question suggest themselves. Either he came with a feeling of gratified self-confidence, seeking and expecting Jesus' commendation and assurance that he was an acceptable servant of God, or else--and this seems more likely--or else he had found that an outward compliance with all the commandments had not brought him peace, that he recognized within himself that he did "lack something yet," but knew not what it was. He may even have vaguely realized that as long as his treasure and his heart were divided between earthly and heavenly things, he could never have peace.

Whichever may have been the case, Jesus immediately defined the cause and correction of the basic problem (19:21)--"Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor, and follow me." Whether this answer was a surprise to the young man, or whether it was the one thing he expected and feared to hear, he could not then bring himself to face it, and he sadly went away. Jesus, in pity and love for him, remarked to his disciples, "how hard" - how, naturally speaking, impossible--"it was for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God." Riches--possessing more than the basic necessities--are such a snare and handicap in the way of life. They make it so hard for a man to deny himself, and take up the cross and follow Jesus in true and selfless humility.

The disciples had seen the young man come, heard the conversation, and seen him go. Peter, speaking for the rest, said to Jesus: "Behold we have forsaken all, and followed thee: what shall we have, therefore?" It was a natural thought and a natural question. The mind usually turns to oneself and one's own welfare in relation to any circumstance that confronts them. Jesus' mind was filled with selfless pity for the young man who was turning his back on God's greatest treasure because he had the misfortune of being rich, but Peter's mind turned to a comparison with himself, and what he was going to get.

Jesus' reply is Divine and beautiful. First is the warm and comforting assurance that this faithful little band who had left all and followed him would sit on 12 thrones with him in his Kingdom. And he broadens the promise to include all, in whatever age and circumstance they may be, who forsake all worldly things for him. Then he adds, in gentle spirit rebuke of Peter's question, and gentle instruction in the more excellent way--"But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first." Then follows this parable, which he closes (v. 16) with the same words with which it opens--"So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen."

The events that follow the parable complete the frame and background of the picture it presents. First, in vs. 17-19, Jesus took the disciples privately aside and solemnly informed them of his approaching betrayal and crucifixion. They are at this time on their last journey from Galilee to Jerusalem.

The next incident (vs. 20-28) shows the great need for the lessons the parable teaches. Heedless of the imminent burden and suffering of which he spoke to them, James and John, with their mother, come to ask the highest places of honor in his Kingdom. This concern over self - how deeply it is ingrained in human nature! Jesus constantly labored to show them the true picture of life's meaning and purpose - "the first shall be last, and the last first." Could he have put it any more plainly or forcefully? But still it is so hard for us to get these teachings through our minds, and to adjust our lives to them. It does not just mean we must choose to be last as a calculated method of getting to be first. It goes far deeper than that. That is just a higher and more refined form of self-seeking. We must cease completely from any desire for position or importance, realizing that all such desire stands in the way of peace with God.

"Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall have rest unto your souls."

"What shall WE have, therefore?" must completely cease to be our basic motive. Jesus' final words on the subject, after the incident of the request of James and John, carry the deepest lesson - "Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." He came to teach the cramped ugliness of the natural way of self-seeking, and the beauty of selfless giving, even unto death.

"What shall WE have, therefore?" does not just apply to possessions and positions. It cuts into the roots of every personal desire - every form of self-satisfaction - every gratification to self and pride. Every instance of hurt feelings or offended pride is an outcropping of this universal disease. "He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

In this day of seeing through a glass darkly, we can never fully comprehend the depths of these Divine teachings that reverse all human standards, but we can and must, by the heavenly light of the Word, gradually approach closer to a comprehension of their marvellous and unearthly wisdom and beauty.

To the two brothers, eager for glory, faithful and devoted, but having so much to learn of the way of life, Jesus said, "Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?" And how confidently they replied, "we are able." He knew what lay before them.

When the other 10 heard of their request, they were indignant at James and John. Would our reaction have been the same? How much they - and we - need to learn about the selfless way of godliness that is illustrated by this Divine parable! Once again Jesus points out that God's ways are entirely different from man's - "The princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, but it shall not be so among you - whosoever will be chief, let him be your servant"

Obedience to this command is very easy to counterfeit, but very hard to fulfil. There is no dearth of proud humility, but rare indeed is the true servant who serves just for the joy of serving, with no motive of self-gratification or self-esteem. The body of Christ is forbidden the normal human framework of authority and discipline. Therefore if there is not Divine and superlative love among its members, all its functions break down in anarchy.

"For the Kingdom of heaven is like a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard." "Early in the morning" - "Together with the dawn" is the literal translation. So often this thought of early, break-of-day activity occurs in relation to the works of God!

There are many beautiful allusions in Scripture to the vineyard symbol. The Vineyard is the community of the Truth, the Household of God - first as portrayed in natural Israel, then in spiritual:

"My beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill."

"I am the Vine and ye are the branches."

"My beloved is as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of Engedi."

"Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: Thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it."

"I had planted thee a noble vine, a wholly right seed."

A vineyard is a place of labor and productiveness, where work is required and fruit is expected.

"And when he had agreed with the laborers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard."

A penny was the normal wage for a day's work. There has always been discussion as to just what the "penny" in this parable symbolizes. Various things have been suggested - eternal life, resurrection, forgiveness, justification - but none seem to fit completely. Perhaps the conception that fits best is justice - though not just bare, literal justice, but rather true, eternal, allwise justice, tempered with love and mercy, in harmony with the highest conceptions of Divine justice. The householder said: "Whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive." The important point, however, would appear to be that it was a fair remuneration, agreed to willingly by the first-hired laborers. It is around that fact that the lesson principally revolves. It was just, fair, and mutually agreeable.

We note that, with the first laborers, the agreement was made before the work was begun. It was a legal contract. The later ones accepted in faith the householder's assurance of fairness.

We may possibly see in this aspect a contrast between law and grace - works and faith - the Mosaic and Christian dispensations. In this sense the parable would teach the Jews that their legal contract and priority of service were no guarantees of pre-eminence - "the last shall be first." And it would be a warning to them not to murmur at God's gracious gifts to the despised Gentiles who came into the Vineyard later, but rather to forget petty self-interest and expand their hearts in joyfulness that others were so richly blessed.

This aspect is strengthened by two interesting features. First - It was the third hour of the day when the Gospel was first preached in the Name of the risen Christ, on Pentecost (Acts 2:15). It was the sixth hour of the day when Peter was shown the vision of the great sheet containing the unclean animals-teaching him that God was extending the Gospel call to the Gentiles (Acts 10:9). It was the ninth hour of the day when the angel appeared to Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, to assure him that his prayer had been heard, and to tell him what to do to be saved (Acts 10:3). (The other feature concerns the word translated "supposed" in v. 10, which we can look at when we reach that point.)

Finally the householder goes out at the eleventh hour and finds some laborers standing idle, and he asks them - "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" The answer is significant - "Because no man hath hired us." Some have attempted to use this parable to prove that though an individual puts off service to God until the last hour, he may still be accepted equally with the day-long laborers. But these men had not been given the invitation before. Their reason was - "Because no man hath hired us."

When the day was finished and the work done, the laborers were all called together to be given their hire, beginning with the last. The last were paid the full amount that had been agreed

upon with the first. The instructive aspect of the parable now begins to unfold, and we see its relation to the rich young man and the question of the disciples. The rewards of God's service are all gifts. No matter how much or how little He may give to any - all is unmerited grace and mercy and more than is deserved. The very best is - at his best - but an unprofitable servant -

"Say ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, We are unprofitable servants"- (Luke 17:10), - and who ever begins to approach to the doing of all things commanded?

"But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more, and they likewise received every man a penny." "They supposed" - the word is 'nomizo,' from 'nomos' - "law." The thought seems to be, not just that they anticipated more, but that they considered they were entitled to more. And, naturally thinking, if we were in the same position we would immediately exclaim that it was not fair and just to give the last, who had only worked one cool hour, the same as those who - as they truly said - had borne the burden and heat of the day. How universal is this spirit in the world! No matter how well anyone is treated, they complain bitterly if another appears to be treated slightly better.

But this thought only betrays the selfishness and envy of the natural mind. Jesus sums it up in the words of the householder - "Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" The first men had had the opportunity of working a day and receiving a day's wages. They had agreed beforehand and had received a full and just recompense. Their ground of objection was solely that someone else had been treated with kindness, and men who had no opportunity to work all day had received a day's wages. Instead of being glad that others had been treated so well, they were envious and bitter. When we look at it in the light that Jesus, through the words of the householder, presents it, we can see how evil and small was their reaction to his kindness to the others.

But it is when we translate it into spiritual things that we perceive the enormity of the evil of this attitude of envy. And let us not think that we are free from this danger. Let us not say that we would never take such a selfish attitude. In the parable it is put in a very obvious and striking way to drive the lesson home, but in the realities of life it is far more subtle and deceptive. Who of us can claim to have learned that one eternal, needful lesson - to forget ourselves, and to derive all our joy and comfort from the blessing and happiness of others? Who of us is big enough to spontaneously rejoice when we see others favored at our expense?

Jesus says the two basic Divine commands are - "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart" . AND "THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF" (Matt. 22:36-40). If we can accomplish the first part with all our heart, then all our own inner needs are satisfied. We then possess within ourselves everything that is worthwhile possessing, for to love truly and completely is to have, and if we have God we have everything. One with the inner assurance of possessing everything is freed from selfishness and smallness. He does not say, in anxious self-concern: "What shall WE have, therefore?" He has learned to rest content in his glorious heritage - "ALL THINGS are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's!"

He is then ready for the second great half of the way of life - "and thy neighbour as thyself." He is overwhelmed with the dazzling revelation of the freely available abundance of spiritual wealth - he has no fear that there will not be enough to go around. He does not feel compelled to seek a guarantee of a chief place in the Kingdom .

"Grant us that we may sit on thy right and left hand." When Jesus was about to leave his disciples, he said (John 14:28)- "If ye loved me, ye would rejoice because I said, I go to the

Father." They thought they loved him, but they did not yet understand the SELFLESSNESS of love,"IF ye loved me, ye would rejoice ." "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself ." "These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto US, who have borne the burden and the heat." "These many years do I serve thee, yet thou never gavest ME a kid." "What shall WE have, therefore?"

"But he answered one of them and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong . . Is thine eye evil, because I am good? . . So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen."

There is the heart of the parable. When the secrets of all hearts are made manifest, then nothing will be counted as anything that was not done for the sake of love. What a tremendous rearranging of all present values and positions there will be, when all inner motives are revealed, and first shall be last, and last first, and many of the called will not be chosen at all -all because they have not learned the lesson of love and largeness of heart that this parable teaches!

To them the goodman of the house says -"Take that thine is, and GO THY WAY." "Go thy way" -Depart from me. If we selfishly take our stand upon the claims of justice, we are lost. If we question the extension of mercy to others; if we are too small to sincerely rejoice with them when others seem to be more abundantly blessed than ourselves (and perhaps, it seems, for less cause), then we stand with these unlovely murmurers who are told to take what is theirs and go their way - paid in full for their ill-humored service - leaving the fruits of love and mercy to those they despised as "these last."

There is another gross misconception into which these murmurers fell, which further reveals the smallness and falseness of their outlook. It is illustrated in Jesus' remark at Jacob's well:

"My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me." As it was prophetically recorded of him in Psalms -"I DELIGHT to do Thy will; O my God!"

Do we remember the very first instruction given by God to Moses when he went to the top of Sinai for 40 days and nights? -"Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring Me an offering: of every man that giveth it willingly with the heart ye shall take My offering." This was in preparation for the building of the Tabernacle. We know that the Tabernacle symbolized the Household of God in whom He dwells by His Spirit -"Ye are the Temple of the living God."

It had to be "willingly" -"with the heart," to be accepted. They had to realize the privilege and blessing and JOY of service. Those typified by the murmurers in the vineyard missed this point completely, in their self-centered ignorance. They thought they were doing God a favor. They thought they were earning something! They failed entirely to realize that they had been given the greatest blessing of the longest and earliest joy of service in the vineyard. Instead of petty, self-pitying envy, their hearts should have been uplifted and enlarged with a gratitude that would overflow in the joy of seeing unearned blessings showered upon others, regardless of how little their opportunity of service.

As we have seen from the disciples' conduct immediately following the parable, the lessons did not at the time make a very deep impression. But this, too, has an element of comfort in it, both as regards the effect of our efforts in relation to others, and - what is more to the point - our own development in the way of godliness. There is never any justification for discouragement -

"In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand, for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that; or whether they both shall be alike good."

Though Jesus was passing through the valley of the shadow of death, his disciples - obsessed with their own desires - were dull of hearing and unimpressed by the weight of impending events. But the time was to come when all these lessons would be remembered, and pondered, and taught to others. When we read the epistles of Peter and John, we begin to realize how these men grew in grace and knowledge and spiritual stature.

This Jesus would know as he spoke these things to them which were mysteries at the time, for by the wisdom and guidance of the Spirit he had chosen these men for the great work before them. These parables were the means by which he taught them these deep spiritual lessons, which later bore such beautiful fruit. Where is John, the son of thunder, who pressed to the front with the request that he be given the pre-eminence - where is this John, when we read his marvellous epistles of love? - "He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God."

What fuller and deeper exposition of life could there be than that? What greater ambition? What higher pre-eminence? And with Peter, it is no longer, "What shalt WE have, therefore?" but, "All of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility. Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, casting all your care upon Him, for He careth for you."

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