

Matthew 20:1-16

March 29, 2017

“I am called ... because of Jesus ... it is the Call of Grace”

-a mother asked her seven-year-old daughter if she would shine her mother's shoes, to help with the housework

-the daughter agreed and returned a half hour later, proudly presenting the freshly shined shoes

-her mother was so pleased that she reached into her purse and gave her daughter a dollar

-that evening the mother found her shoes at the foot of her bed with a note ... and the dollar

-the note said, thanks, mom, but I did it for love

-in the kingdom of God, why do we do what we do in service to God?

-do we do it to earn a wage?

-are we trying to reap personal glory?

-to show ourselves better than others?

-why do you do what you do for God?

-what motivates your service in his kingdom?

-what motivates your tithes and offerings?

-Malachi 3:10 says: “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

-we read it and start to think this is a recipe for riches

-if I do this, God will do that

- if I give more money to church, I will have business success and two new cars in my garage
- if you think about it, that would be doing the right thing for the wrong reason, and selfishness has stained what you did
 - that kind of thinking appeals to our fleshly, selfish desires
 - it turns Gospel giving into a business deal - "If you do this, God will do that"
- striking a deal with God is totally contrary to the Gospel
 - it smacks of manipulation, the thought that God can be manipulated into doing this or that through my activity
- in a word, it is idolatry
 - the pagan Canaanite religions that surrounded God's OT people worshiped their gods that way
 - if you do something to make Baal happy, they he will be nice to you
 - if you are enduring hard times, it's because Baal is not pleased with you
 - now, Baal may be gone from the horizon and we may not worship false gods
 - but that same kind of thinking is still around
 - it is the gospel of prosperity
 - it is Joel Osteen and others who continue to delude their followers with promises that God didn't make
 - we start think that faithful service will earn God's reward
 - that if I want to improve my lot in life, I need to be more faithful and obedient
 - a faithful Christian suffers with pain every day
 - the doctors can give him no relief, nothing works

- he prays and prays but heaven seems silent and God seems far away
- he begins to wonder ... have I been faithful enough?
 - have I done something to offend God?
 - am I not trying hard enough or praying hard enough?
- understand what's going on here ... stinking thinking
 - either God doesn't really love me as Scripture says
 - or I haven't done enough to earn his favour
 - either way, the conscience becomes burdened and a person despairs of God's grace
- another person works hard for the Lord and gives regularly, but his lot in life is still small
 - he starts to wonder if he is getting enough personal "bang for his buck" that he has placed in the offering plate
 - he's not getting much return for his investment
- then there's the 75 year old man who is avidly supporting a Sunday School outreach program
 - he has no children or grandchildren that will benefit from it
 - he will derive no personal benefit from his gifts and service
- yet something inspires him
 - it is the gracious love of God for him in Christ
 - he has seen God giving to him out of pure grace and he wants to be like that
- we need to break free from the continuing error that what we receive from God is due to our good works and not his grace

... any good works that manage to come out of me are really his doing and not mine

-our text tonight is one of the Holy Week parable that Jesus gives us to help us see what the kingdom of heaven is like

-it is a tough one to understand

-you're faithful, you work hard all day, yours is the epitome of a Christian life

-but guess what, it doesn't make any difference

-your reward at the end of the day will be the same as the slob next to you

-it's not fair

-to understand it, you have to look at the context

-what brought about the occasion of the parable?

-what happened right before it?

-a young man had come up to Jesus to ask, "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

-“If you want to enter life, obey the commandments”

-ok, which ones ...

-all these I have kept, what do I still lack?

-“If you want to be perfect ... go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me”

-Matthew tells us that he went away sad ...

-he was rich ... he was young ... he was sad ... why?

-sad because he had great wealth

-sad because his wealth wouldn't get him into heaven

-sad because his good works wouldn't get him into heaven

-sad because he couldn't be perfect

-now, Jesus' disciples were watching all this, listening and taking it all in
-so they had to ask *the question*, “who then can be saved?”
 -if there really are some things money can’t buy
 -and if heaven is one of them
 -if our good works don’t get us to heaven
 -if we can’t be perfect
 -then it’s impossible
 -lock the doors
 -last one out, turn out the lights
 -go home

-in the midst of their puzzlement, Jesus says, “with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”

-Peter wasn’t listening to that last part
-he was distracted by something else Jesus said
 -he had heard Jesus say, “If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me”

-so he got to thinking
 -I’ve left everything
 -I’m following you
 -yes, I still have my boat, but I can sell that
-he rubs his hands together … what do I get in return for my faithfulness?
-so, it’s time for a lesson
 -yes, Peter, it is true, great is your reward in heaven
 -yes, those who have sacrificed for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life

-then Jesus gives a warning

-but many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first

-then he tells our parable, and ends it with the same words, “so the last will be first and the first will be last”

-Jesus gives us a warning sign here, because there is a danger here

-if your focus is on what's in it for me, then it's no longer on God

-if your focus is on what reward you might get, then your heart has ceased to be Christ centred and has again become self centred

-having said that, this is a hard parable

-it challenges us to consider what Paul writes about in the epistle tonight ... the contrast between the wisdom of men and the foolishness of God

-we are so conditioned to getting what we deserve

-do the crime, do the time

-work hard, get ahead

-when the criminal gets off, we cry out against the justice system

-it's not fair

-when the little guy who works hard gets trampled, we put it on social media and let the pressure of the mob make things right

-so, as our parable unfolds, it's not fair

-we look at ourselves in the kingdom of God

-we reflect on how good we've been and on all we've done for the Lord

-we start to think, “he’s going to own me big time some day”

-and all the while the concept of grace slides away

-we forget that we are unworthy servants

-in Luke 17:7-10, Jesus says, “Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'”

-in relationship with God, is what he does for us given in payment for our work?

-I earned it, it’s mine and he better give it to me or else ...

-I guess there’s kind of nobody to complain to is there?

-should doing what God’s law requires earn any special favour

-do we get a bonus just for doing what we’re supposed to do?

-but then when you think about it a little bit more, you and I haven’t been all that faithful, have we?

-we haven’t done what we’re supposed to do

-Paul gives us an insight in Romans

-in Romans 11:32 he says, “For God has bound all men

over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.”

-in Romans 3:9-11 he explains it this way: “What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God."

-when we are we tempted to think that our piety gives us special claim on God’s favour, we start to look down on the latecomers

-we look with loveless eyes on our modern day publicans and sinners

-we scorn those who don’t seem to work as hard in the kingdom

-how about if we rename our parable tonight “the parable of the thief on the cross”

-the same eternal salvation awaits both the one who has come to faith in the last hour of his life and the one who has lived a life of service as Christ’s disciple

-Peter and James and John followed Jesus for three years;

-the thief on the cross maybe three hours

-did the angels sing when the thief repented?

-was there joy in heaven over this thief who came to the kingdom at the last hour?

-why then would we complain?

-why would we be jealous?

- there is the same reward awaiting all God's children in God's kingdom
 - does this shock and startle us?
 - an equal reward for even the poorest and least worthy, right up there with the apostles and saints and martyrs
- no, it doesn't make sense and no, it doesn't sound fair
 - but this is what God is like
- if God is gracious to someone else who is less worthy than we are, does that diminish how gracious he is to us?
 - will God have to give you less because he's giving someone else more?
- if you think so, then your God must be small, and it's your own jealousy talking
- don't you realize how fortunate it is for us that God does not deal with us on the basis of strict justice?
- Portia, in the Merchant of Venice understood it when she said to Shylock, who is ruthlessly demanding his pound of flesh:
*Though justice be thy plea, consider this
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy.*
- let's cut to the chase
- how can those who worked hard and those who didn't work hard, stand equal before God?
 - two very simple and clear reasons, and we better have a handle on both of them
- 1. -whether you have worked hard or not, your forgiveness and

life and salvation depend on the grace of God and not on
 the sweat of your brow
 -all alike together under sin
 -all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are
 justified freely by his grace

2. -whatever you have accomplished for God and his kingdom and whatever future work you may do, who really did it?
 -was it just you or do God's grace and Spirit in you get the credit?
 -the hymn writer says, "The good in me to thee I trace ..."
 -what does that imply?
 -it implies that any time I do anything commendable or praiseworthy or pleasing to God, it's not me that does it, it's God's Spirit in me
 -that's what Paul is getting at when he says: "*I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*"
 -he goes on to call himself the chief of sinners and then says,
 "*But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*"
 -anything good or worthwhile or God-pleasing or kingdom building has been the result of God's power in him, and not his own strength

-what moves and energizes and enables our service in God's vineyard?

-let me conclude with this: "*For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. ... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*

-our God in his grace has called you into his vineyard

-it is a gracious place to serve

-it is a loving master whom we serve

-from him and through him and to him are all things

-to him be the glory forever. Amen.