The parable of the workers

Matthew 20:1-34

Key verse 16 **“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”**

In last week’s passage, we learned about the young man who failed to follow Jesus because of his love for money. Peter and other disciples might have felt superior to the young man who loved money more than Jesus and went away sad. Unlike the young man, Peter gave up everything to follow Jesus. Jesus gave him a great promise of eternal life in heaven and abundant blessing in this life as well. But he also gave him a warning not to be proud by saying, **“But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”** In connection with Jesus’ warning, Jesus teaches us the parable of the workers in the vineyard to let his disciples have a right attitude as Kingdom workers to the end.

1. The last will be first, and the first will be last(1-16)

Look at verse 1. **“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.”** Here, the land owner represents God. He hires workers to work in his vineyard. This parable teaches us mainly about God’s character. In this first part, we can learn two things about God.

First, God takes the initiative to hire workers for his kingdom. The landowner went to the market place early in the morning, most probably at 6:00. There he found some and sent them to his vineyard making an agreement to pay them a denarius for the day. Here, we can imagine that this landowner was wealthy with a vast estate. The vineyard must have been very fertile, growing and producing abundant fruits. We don’t know if the landowner was hiring people for the planting or harvesting. Anyhow, there is always plenty of work to do in the vineyard such as planting, fertilising soil, pruning vines, picking grapes and fermenting grapes to make wines. There must be some workers who supported the field workers through delicious food and snacks as well. The landowner tried to fill up his vineyard with many workers, fitting them into the roles and tasks according to their skills and desires. After hiring some workers in the early morning, we see that the landowner continued to go out during the day--again at nine, noon, three and five pm. This is the zeal of God who invites the kingdom workers diligently as Jesus stated in John 5:17, **“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”** On the other hand,we see that unemployed people were doing nothing in the marketplace when the landowner came there at different times of day. The landowner asked them a question in verse 6, **‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ““‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.** They needed a job to work for a living, but no one gave them an opportunity. They wasted time meaninglessly doing nothing on the street. It was a great loss in the eyes of the landowner and he picked them up immediately and sent them to the vineyard to work even for an hour.

Spiritually speaking, the unemployed people are those who do not have work to do for the Kingdom of God. The world we live in is God’s vineyard. God is diligently hiring his kingdom workers all around the world to fulfill his will on earth as it is in heaven until the day of Jesus’ second coming. God knows that we ourselves have no power to initiate the kingdom work. so, he comes and gives us an opportunity to join in his kingdom work. That’s why we are all here in response to God’s calling. The zeal of God to reach out his hands to unemployed people all around the world will never end. It is a great blessing for those who receive God’s invitation to join in the kingdom work. The job we have on earth provides us food and shelter. We feel that our life is meaningful while we work and we have a bond of co-working relations with fellow workers. Therefore people strive for the success of their career to live a better life on earth. However, all these things will perish one day. All people on earth must have jobs to do for God’s kingdom which will secure their eternal destiny. Jesus said in John 6:27, **“Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”** The kingdom workers are not going to waste time anymore. Instead, they will receive God’s rewards a hundred times as much and will receive eternal life as Jesus promised.

Now, we are in God's vineyard. There is plenty of work for God’s kingdom. We can’t waste our time doing nothing for God’s vineyard. Let us join in planting, fertilizing and harvesting work diligently as God gathered us here together to do his work with the hope of eternal reward in the kingdom of heaven.

Second, God is generous and compassionate. In this parable, we see somewhat unusual acts from the landowner. Obviously he was rich, having many servants and formen to run his vineyard business.Landowners usually entrust hiring to their foremen, who select only the best workers, and send the others away empty-handed. But this landowner got up early and went out personally to hire workers for his vineyard. He could have also hired an exact number of employees for the day at once when he went to the marketplace at 6 am but he went at nine, noon, three and five. In terms of HR management, the owner’s way of hiring is obviously wrong and inefficient for his farming business.

Then, let us think about further in regards to the landowners’ motive behind the hiring process. The landowner was more interested in hiring the jobless people than making a profit from his farm. It was his compassion for those who were wandering without a job. In Jesus’ days, people were very poor and many people actually were not able to afford three meals a day. In particular, people who came to the labor market for a day to work were really poor. They didn’t have regular jobs, and it was up to the mercy of employers for them to be picked up to work for a day so that they could provide food for their family. Usually people who were picked up at 6 am were strong, experienced and skilled. As time passed by, all the capable workers were chosen, but weak and incapable people remained unemployed continuously. Think about people who were still waiting for work till 5pm. They were desperate to work. But they actually had almost no hope left. It must be a great pain in their hearts to return home empty-handed.

I somewhat understand the atmosphere of the labor market. I also had an experience of going early in the morning to the labor market for a day to work when I was a first year university student. There were more workers than hiring people and my appearance was not really appealing to them. Some were picked and some were left as time went by. I was getting frustrated when the only few workers were left at 8:00 am. At the last moment, however, one person came to me and asked “Can you come and work for me?” I answered “Yes, Sir!” I was so happy and thankful for giving me an opportunity to work.

In this parable, the landowner was truly gracious and generous to all workers. He didn’t judge or measure workers according to human standards. No matter who the workers were, the landowner kept coming to the market place and gave them opportunities to work out of compassion.

Look at verse 8 **“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’”**

It was time to settle the account for the workers at 6 pm. The workers who were hired at 5:00 pm came first and each received a denarius. Legally speaking, they should only receive one-twelfth of a denarius, for they worked only one hour out of twelve. They never expected to receive a full denarius. But the landowner, out of his generosity, gave them a full denarius. The workers were overjoyed. They jumped and danced and shouted, “Thank you, Landowner!”

Look at verses 10-12. **“So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’”**

Their grumbling seems reasonable. From their point of view, they worked harder and suffered more in the heat of the day and deserved a greater reward.

How did the landowner respond? Look at verse 13 **“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?** Objectively speaking, the landowner was not unfair. The owner would be unfair if he had not made a salary agreement with the workers. The workers made an agreement to receive one denarius before they started working and the owner paid them what he promised. The problem was that they compared their wage and work hours with those of the workers who came late. Those early hands must have felt thankful to the owner when they were hired at first. But as soon as they saw that their wage was equal to that of the late workers, they became complaining, unhappy, and self-righteous. They thought that they deserved many rewards and the landowner should recognize their hard work and compensate more than what others received. Unlike their expectation, the landowner equally distributed the wages to all workers and the first workers stood against the landowner with a grumbling heart.

Look at verse 14-15 **“Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’**

Here, “I” repeated 5 times to emphasize the motive and the right of the landowner who used his money to the workers. The reasons for the landowner’s generosity were completely in the landowner himself. He kept a promise to give what they agreed to receive. He wanted to give the one who was hired last the same as he gave to the first out of his generosity. The landowner rebuked them for their jealousy and resentment of the landowner’s generosity towards others. Jesus concludes the parable with a short comment in verse 16 **“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”**

Seeing the young man who went away sad in the previous chapter, Peter boastfully asked a question **“We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”** Jesus’ motive to teach this parable was to give the disciples a warning not to be self-righteous, complaining and forgetful of God’s grace. These are the characteristics of the workers who were hired first. As Jesus said in 19, **But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first,** Jesus knew that many people who had been invited to the kingdom work in the early stage, had a possibility to become like the first group of workers. They forget God’s grace of calling and salvation as time passes by. They want to be recognized and rewarded by what they do. They measure their lives with their own measurement and feel lost or unhappy with God compared with others. On the other hand, the workers who were hired last are like the people who came to know Christ later than the first workers. However, they had joy to serve God and their heart was full of thankfulness and bliss for God’s generosity. They saw God’s grace and mercy upon their lives rather than what others had done. Brother Andy is like one of these workers. God’s grace of forgiveness and calling were well revealed in his life testimony on thanksgiving Sunday.

Every Sunday he gives his worship to God with a humble attitude. He is eager to learn of God’s words through weekly Bible studies with many questions and I sense that the living words of God touch his heart. Although I started my journey in Christ earlier than him, I am greatly challenged by his pure and humble attitude toward God. I teach him the Bible but actually he teaches me a greater lesson about what my heart toward God should be.

God invited us to his kingdom work, and he will reward us with heavenly treasures. Through the course of our life’s journey, we must be on our guard against comparing spirit, self-righteousness, complaining and hardened-heart. We must remember David’s prayer in psalm 51:12 **“Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”** Christian joy comes from remembering God’s grace of salvation, and it sustains our spiritual life. I believe that many of us had this joy when we came to Christ first. May God restore our joy in Christ and make us thankful and humble kingdom workers.

1. Jesus is the suffering Messiah (17-34)

In verses 17-19, Jesus foretold about his suffering, death and resurrection. This was the third time he mentioned his tasks to fulfill his messianic work. Jesus kept repeating this because he knew they were not really following him for the reward of heaven. They wanted something in this world. In verses 20-28, the mother of John and James asked a favor from Jesus to have them sit at his right and at his left when Jesus’ Kingdom would come. Jesus has been telling and teaching about heavenly rewards and about the attitude of the kingdom workers. But they were really slow to understand Jesus’ teaching and they were still bound in earthly hope and ambition. Jesus taught again in verse 26-28 that the kingdom workers must be slaves to others, taking the lowly position to serve others as Jesus did. In verses 29-34, Jesus continued his work to heal the two blind men when they pleaded with Jesus, **“Have mercy on us the Son of David”!** They knew how to come to ask Jesus’ favor. Jesus responded to them out of compassion and healed them immediately.

We learned three different stories in this chapter but this passage clearly shows who Jesus is. Jesus, as God's only Son, humbly worked to fulfill God’s will as the servant, giving people the opportunities to come and join in God’s vineyard. Let us live and work in God’s vineyard as joyful, thankful and humble kingdom workers.