

LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

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Lesson: Matthew 20:1-16

The Lord had just returned from the province of Galilee, in the north of Palestine. He had entered into the land of Judah and had drawn a large crowd of people around Him as He began to preach and teach.

Among these people were some who belonged to the Jewish sect called the Pharisees. They prided themselves on their great learning. They knew all that was taught in the Scriptures, which in those days was the Old Testament. But they had little, if any, love of applying the teachings of the Word in their life. They thought that by their possession of the Word they would go to heaven. In fact they believed that it was only the Jewish nation that belonged to the kingdom of God.

So blind were they with their pride in these things that when the Lord came preaching and teaching about the kingdom of heaven, they did not even recognize that He was the Savior of whom their Scriptures prophesied.

Because the Lord taught that the kingdom of heaven was open to all who had a love of God and tried to live a good life, the Pharisees often tried to make the Lord say things which were against the teaching of the Word. But how could they, since He was the one from whom the Word had come?

The parable you have read as the lesson was part of what they heard the Lord teach that great crowd. In the parable the Lord was showing that the kingdom of God, or the vineyard, was not just for one group of people, but for all who were willing to do what was right.

The reason the Lord used parables, which are earthly stories with heavenly meanings, was because He wanted His hearers to understand the meaning for themselves. The Lord's love is so wonderful that He never compels anyone to believe in Him or His teachings. Neither does He ever condemn anyone, not even the hard-hearted Pharisees. If they saw the meaning of the parable, then they were free to make a change in their thinking and in their life, without feeling that they had been made to do so.

Those in the parable who complained to the householder about the last laborers receiving the same pay as them were indeed the Pharisees. For the Jewish nation had had the Word, which taught about Jehovah and the kingdom of God, from the time of Abraham, while the other laborers, who were

called at different times from the marketplace, were the Gentiles, who were other people who were not of the Jewish religion.

If the Pharisees saw this meaning, they would begin to realize that their complaint about others belonging to the kingdom of God was in fact a complaint against God Himself. This they would see from the words spoken by the householder: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own? Is thine eye evil because I am good?" (Matthew 20:15). They knew from the Scriptures that the vineyard was the kingdom of God, and that there was none good but one, and that is God.

They would also see that it was only the first laborers who had to be offered payment for working in the vineyard, while the rest were willing to work for what was right.

Many of the Gentiles had wanted to do what was right; they wished to live good lives; but they did not have the truth to guide them. But now the Lord had come, who called Himself "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," so they would be able to receive the truth, and thereby put into act the good they longed to do. They could become workers in His vineyard.

But what, for our own lives, do we gather from this parable and from the meaning that we have seen?

First of all, it should teach us to remember always that the Word and the Church are the Lord's. We should indeed be grateful to the Lord for the wonderful teachings of His Word, that He has made known at His Second Coming, and also for the New Church that has been established by Him. If we are truly grateful for these things, then we will realize that the Word has been given to teach us how to live, how to be of use to others. We only really belong to His Church when we are willing to obey His commandments and love one another as He has loved us.

We should, therefore, seek to know the way in which the Lord loves us, in order that we may know in what way we can love one another. When we do this, we begin to see that the whole of the parable applies to ourselves; it is telling us about what takes place in our own life.

Our mind is like a house. It has been given to us by the Lord Himself. From Him alone do we have the ability to receive knowledges, to think and to will what is good. Our memory, with its store of knowledges, is like a marketplace in which laborers are waiting to be useful.

The first laborers called into the vineyard are like the knowledges which tell us what we ought to do. From this knowledge we have to compel ourselves to put the good of others before our own. This does not come easily, and we expect a

little reward. When we have done something for others, we begin to feel that we deserve a little “thank you” (or maybe a big one). At least we have made a start, we have tried to be useful, we have had a little thought about others. But it must not be allowed to stop there, or pride will soon take over.

Let us not forget the other laborers waiting in the marketplace. We must try a little harder. This time we should begin to ask ourselves why we should think about others—why our life should not be for ourselves alone—why we should not expect a pat on the back for everything we do. It will take time to understand the answers to these questions, but the effort will be worthwhile.

To think about doing what is right for the sake of what is right is a little higher than just doing things because it is our duty to do them. We are then not just acting from knowledge alone, we are beginning to use our thinking faculty, and we are beginning to see the reason for our actions. If we persevere in this, it will not be long before we find real joy and delight in doing things for others—a joy and delight in all we do. Our happiness will come because we have brought happiness to others. We will begin to see that our life is from the Lord who wills our happiness forever. Therefore this ought to be our love, our life, also.

We have come a long way now from just doing things because we were told to do them. The whole of our life has been changed. In the words of the householder, in the parable, “the last shall become first, and the first last” (Matthew 20:16).

Love is now in the first place, and we use all our knowledge as a servant.

Many are the knowledges that must be *called* into our mind; they are necessary things for our life; but the joy of service to others must be *chosen* as the way of that life. *Amen.*