

“I Will Give You Righteousness”

Matthew 20:1-16

I told you a couple weeks ago about how Matthew has a style of writing where he organizes the events of Christ’s life in such a way that various sections of the book have a front end and a back end which mirror each other, and at the center is the main point on which he is focusing. This is a common style of writing in the ancient world called a “chiasm” – named for the Greek letter Chi, which looks like an X. In Matthew 18, he began a new Chiasm with the disciples having a debate about “who is the greatest?” Then, last week, we heard the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant with the man who was forgiven 10,000 talents but would not forgive the man who owed him 100 denarii.

This Chiasm of Matthew goes all the way up to the end of chapter 20 and will end with the mother of James and John asking Jesus that he allow one of them to sit on His right and one on His left in His kingdom. She wants her sons to be placed in positions of greatness above everybody else.

Everything that goes on in between can be seen as a larger discussion of what true greatness is according to the Kingdom. And in this section of Matthew, repentance and forgiveness are major themes. And at the center of this, where the X meets in this chiasm, we find parents bringing their children to be blessed by Jesus, the disciples telling the parents to keep their children away from Jesus, and Jesus

says, “Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them, for to such belong the kingdom of heaven” [Mt. 19:14].

This brings us to the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning and hired workers – offering a denarius for their work and they agree. And he sent them out; he “apostled” them into his vineyard. An apostle is “one who is sent.” Jesus is talking to His apostles. Jesus has been speaking of the office of the ministry, the office of the keys – and how having this authority to free people from their sins or hold them accountable for their sins does not give apostles (or pastors or anybody) the authority to “lord it over the people.” That is not greatness in the kingdom of heaven.

And just because He is speaking directly to the 12, this does not mean that these things don’t have application to all who are followers of Jesus, but in this parable, Jesus is speaking specifically to the 12, because this is part of the greater narrative answering their question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Is it the one who can “lord it over” you, or force my will upon you, or is it the one who can work the hardest – bear the greatest burden of the day? Or is it the one who receives the gift of righteousness with the faith of a little child?

So the master of the house keeps going out in the 3rd hour and the 6th hour and the 9th hour and “apostles” more workers into his vineyard saying, “You go into the vineyard . . . and whatever is ‘right’ I will give you.” This is the same word used throughout Scripture for being “justified” or “righteous” in the sight of God. “Go into my vineyard and I will give you righteousness.”

Then in the 11th hour (5:00 in the afternoon) he finds others standing around, not working and “apostles” them into his vineyard. Keep in mind that Jesus has told His apostles on numerous occasions that in the Kingdom of God “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.”

At the end of the day, the master takes the last to be hired and makes them first in line to receive the “righteousness” (the “justification”) that was promised to them. And they receive the fullness of what was promised to the ones who had been working since 6:00 AM. Those first workers who are now waiting at the end of the line are getting excited that they will be getting more. After all, according to how the world thinks, according to how our sinful nature thinks, it would be just and right for them to get more than the ones who only worked one hour. They had done so much more work. They endured the heat of the day.

Here’s the thing; if you are a worker in the vineyard; whether you have been called late or were called early, it is not about you or what extra you will get out of it. Your calling is to work. Now, I find great joy in the “extra” I do get. There is extra, and I feel sorry for those who do not understand or appreciate the joy of serving; the joy of sacrificing your time; the joy of sacrificial giving.

But that is not what Jesus is focusing on. Jesus says that at the end of the day (on the Last Day) whether you were called early or called late, you will be given (what is right) righteousness.

So when the first workers “only” receive one denarius – the same as the last workers, they grumble about it. “These last ones only worked one hour and you have made them equal to us. Who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat?”

In these words, we see the problem. Whether we are talking about apostles or pastors or teachers or mothers or fathers sitting in the pews, at the end of the day, we are all equal in the righteousness we have been given. We have all been forgiven the unpayable debt – not 10,000 talents, but the unpayable debt of sin through the cross of Jesus.

The issue is that we don't like being made equal. We like to have our works outshine and be considered worth more than the work of others – not realizing how great our debt of sin truly is.

The master replied (and the English just kills the meaning), "I am doing you no wrong." Literally, he says, "I am not unjustifying you. I did not 'unrighteous' you" by giving you what you need to live forever. Why do you think you need to stick your toe in the door and earn something more? I choose to give to the last worker the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to give the good things which belong to me? You have been forgiven 10,000 talents of debt, why does it bother you that the master forgives the debt of others. Even though you may think you have worked longer and harder than others, what have you done to earn this grace?

As we have seen these past few weeks throughout this Chiasm, we are called to think differently. God's grace is completely undeserved. I am a poor, miserable sinner who does not deserve to eat at the master's table. He has given me my righteousness, the same as you. What is the point in arguing about which of us is greatest in the kingdom of God. Jesus' message is simple: Receive this grace; receive this mercy; receive it with the faith of a little child; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. Amen.