

Jesus Turns the World Around

Matthew 20:1-16

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INI - SDG

November 23, 2001, the day after thanksgiving. I was home from college trying to sleep in when my mother woke me up at 7am. She wanted me to go to Best Buy to get a TV that was on sale. I tried to tell her that by the time I got there they would all be gone, but she wanted me to go anyway. Of course, I was last in line and of course there was nothing left. How nice for me if the manager had saved some for those who came last.

This wouldn't seem fair to those who were first in line, but that is exactly what Jesus is doing in our text. It's the people at the end of the line, exactly those whom the world thinks shouldn't get anything who receive it all.

This parable is sandwiched between the saying "The last first and the first last." Jesus turns the whole line around, and not just the line but the whole world. Everything Jesus does is contrary to the way the world thinks it should be done. We who are standing at the end of the line are so grateful for it.

Matthew 20:1-16 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

Kingdom of heaven is explained by Jeffery Gibbs as "God invades earth in Jesus to reestablish his rule." God does come with his power and might to invade the world, but not in the way we expect. No swords, no tanks, no armies of heaven but he goes out to call laborers into the vineyard.

The rule of heaven is not some esoteric dream where Jesus comes down and bodily sits on a throne and in a palace. It is the sinfulness of man which is constantly seeking a political solution to a spiritual problem.

Even today, there are many Christians who think that we can make America better by getting the right political leaders unto office. Political leaders may help or hinder a bit here or there, but ultimately the government reflects the will of the people. The will of the people today is a total rejection of Christ and his goodness. The kingdom of Christ does not come, and Jesus does not rule, through elected politicians. He rules through the laborers in the vineyard, that is the preaching of the gospel.

This is one way that the first are the last and the last first. Jesus turns everything upside down. It is not the powerful kings and presidents who fulfill God's will. It is not the power of armies and might through which God's kingdom comes. Rather it is those whom the world thinks of as nothing through whom God's kingdom comes.

India is very much opposed to Christian missionaries. In a sense they are right to fear them. God through men and women forgotten by the world preaching his word, will pluck and harvest the fruit of human souls who languish in spiritual darkness desiring to hear and know his grace.

Even in our own land many oppose any hint of God's word. They do not want the ten commandments outside a courthouse. They fear prayer in school, in games, and in the government. Just this week there was an article about how a county in California voted to have a month celebrating the role Christianity played in the history of our nation. That county board was immediately and viciously attacked, and there were tears of joy when the county reversed its decision. They are right to fear even a stone statue with God's word written on it. It is through his word and laborers preaching that Word that God invades the hearts of men and women.

Early in the morning God, the landowner, rises desiring to harvest all the fruit for himself, immediately calling every worker he can find to participate in the harvest.

2 "Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 "and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. 5 "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and

did likewise. 6 "And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' 7 "They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.'

The landowner is not content with the laborers that he found early in the morning. Again, and again he comes seeking more laborers to come and help in the harvest. Even when there is only an hour left, he does not stop his fervent desire to get men out into the field.

The hours here are according to Jewish time, that is normal in the book of Matthew. Zero hour begins at dawn, 3rd hour is 9am, 6th hour is noon, 9th hour is 3pm. Every three hours God goes out seeking more and more workers. He is not slack. He himself laborers diligently, although his labor is hunting down more and more laborers to go and harvest the fruit. Finally, with only an hour left he does not wait the three hours but goes again to the market one hour before sunset.

It this point it would be easy to throw in the towel. It would be easy to say there is only an hour left, there is not much that can be done. But God is not willing that any fruit should be left on the vines. If they can even pick a handful of souls before the night that is still a handful to be saved.

2 Peter 3:9 [God is] not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

Here again the first are last and the last first. For the master who in a human setting would often take his ease while demanding harder work from the laborers, is more fervent in his work than the laborers, seeking, calling, sending, more and more workers into the vineyard.

It is incumbent upon those who would serve such a fervent master that they also serve with the same passion. Not because the master is standing over you with a whip, for that is not the way of God in Christ Jesus, but because he is such a master.

8 "So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.' 9 "And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.

A denarius was a full day's wage. God's unmatched grace is already seen in that his kingdom comes not through force but through the preaching of the gospel. His grace is seen in his earnest desire even fervor to harvest every fruit, to bring every soul to the knowledge of salvation. Now greatest of all it is seen in this that the reward is not based on the work, but freely given to all.

How hard it is for us to believe that God's grace is freely given to all without regard to works. We who know and confess every Sunday that salvation is freely given by God's grace still have trouble remembering this. We tend to think, but I'm not like those sinners over there. We think I have done nothing surely God is going to give me nothing.

Yet here comes the master and gives a denarius to all. He gives salvation to all. He gives a full day's wage to those who worked only an hour. It is given not because they deserve it but because of the master's generosity. We have lots of farmers and businessmen here who could tell us that this is no way to run a business. Yet that is what God does in Christ Jesu. Again, he turns the world upside down.

10 "But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. 11 "And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, 12 "saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.' 13 "But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 'Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' 16 "So the last

will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

This parable highlights the grace of God which is opposite everything we would expect. These men had the opportunity to witness throughout the whole day the unbelievable grace of God. They saw him pay the last workers a full day's wage. Instead of rejoicing in this grace of God, all they care about is that they think they deserve more. Their greed for earthly treasure has blinded them to the grace of God.

We've talked about Jonah for the last two weeks now. Jonah is a perfect example for today's lesson as well. Jonah had a front row seat to one of the most spectacular displays of God's grace. He saw God forgive even Nineveh when they repented. Jonah had this opportunity but missed it. Sitting up there above Nineveh, blinded by his hatred and his desire to see Nineveh get "what was coming to them," he missed the glory of God's grace and forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

In our Psalm this morning the Psalmist proclaims "**Psalm 27:4 One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD,**"

To dwell in the house of the Lord is to live daily in his word. To behold the beauty of the Lord is to search his word for His grace and forgiveness. Jesus reminds us:

John 5:39 You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.

1 Peter 1:10 Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you

The scriptures give witness to the glory of God in Christ Jesus. How often are we distracted from the glory of the Lord, because of our greed, or because we are too focused on what we think we deserve, or like Jonah because of our anger and resentment of others to cloud our eyes to the love of Christ.

Instead of spending our lives focused on what we think we deserve we should, like the psalmist spend our lives focused on the overwhelming abundance of our Lord's grace and mercy.

"One thing I have desired." Amen