

Date: September 6, 2009

Title: Laboring for the Lord

Scripture: Matt. 20:1-16

Matthew 20:1-16 (NLT) ¹ “For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work. ³ “At nine o’clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. ⁴ So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. ⁵ So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o’clock he did the same thing. ⁶ “At five o’clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, ‘Why haven’t you been working today?’ ⁷ “They replied, ‘Because no one hired us.’ “The landowner told them, ‘Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.’ ⁸ “That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. ⁹ When those hired at five o’clock were paid, each received a full day’s wage. ¹⁰ When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day’s wage. ¹¹ When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, ¹² ‘Those people worked only one hour, and yet you’ve paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.’ ¹³ “He answered one of them, ‘Friend, I haven’t been unfair! Didn’t you agree to work all day for the usual wage? ¹⁴ Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. ¹⁵ Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?’ ¹⁶ “So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last.”

Well, it has happened again: one more summer has come and gone. It is just amazing to me how fast that seems to happen these days. I’m not sure if you all do this but since I was a kid I have thought of summer as the period of time from Memorial Day through Labor Day with the Fourth of July as sort of the summit of the summer.

Labor day began back in the 1880s as a way for the political leaders of the country to show support for the Labor movements of the time. A lot has changed in 100+ years but we are still a country that takes pride in the labor we offer at our various places of employment, even if the character of much of our labor has changed a great deal.

But even though the character of our much of our labor has changed, people are still spending large amounts of their time in this country at their places of employment and most of us rely heavily upon our ability to make

a living. When, for what ever reason, we can't do this, it creates a lot of stress in our lives.

I suspect in Jesus' time there was this same stress when a person was not employed. If a person didn't work it was not a sure thing that they were going to eat. So, the workers in the parable Jesus told were likely happy to find work that day. They knew what a days wage was and were happy to work for that pay. You can almost imagine that the men who were hired first would have felt blessed to get work first thing in the day. Those men who were not working might have been stressing come 9 or 10:00 when they hadn't yet found work. By noon, we can imagine that the men would likely have just about given up on the prospect of work and thought about going home for the day. So when they received even a partial days wage all who were working would have felt blessed that day.

But the harmony of the blessing was all shattered when it came time to get paid. It would have been fine if the other workers' salaries would have been prorated, but this generous landowner paid everyone a full day's wage; even those who only worked a few hours. In just a few minutes, the satisfaction of a days pay for a days work was replaced with jealousy and envy and the coins jingling in their pockets were no longer a cause for celebration but for anger and bitterness.

And we can sort of get where they are coming from, can't we? It hardly seems fair, does it? Yet this is one of the many parables Jesus used to illustrate the Kingdom of Heaven. So what was Jesus getting at here? Was he saying:

- Generous landowners are often times not too bright so you never know what to expect from life?

Or was he saying:

- There is no need to take the first job that comes because you might get lucky and get a job in the afternoon that pays as much as a full days wage?

I suspect there have been many who have tried to interpret this parable in many different ways, and this morning I'm going to add to the multitude.

To start with I'm going to say that I believe the landowner in the parable represents God. And since Jesus mentioned the Kingdom of God, I'm going to say that the vineyard represents God's Kingdom. Now, sometimes scripture portrays the Kingdom of God as a banquet to which we are all

invited. At a banquet, we would be sitting with others having a good time, but in this parable if we are the laborers, we are invited to labor in the Kingdom of God. In this parable, we might be like the laborers standing around living our lives somewhat aimlessly until God comes to us and invites us to come work in the Kingdom.

Let's stop right there and think about this. If you were, hypothetically, invited to come work for a company, wouldn't you expect something for your work; at least some type of compensation for your work? You would, wouldn't you? So it only follows that if you are invited to come labor in the Kingdom of God you probably expect some compensation for your work. In this case, you might not be expecting money or fame or status, but you are likely going to expect some form of compensation.

What are some of these expectations?

- How about to be called Children of God (1John 3:1)
- Or, how about that Christ will be with us always (Hebrews 13:5)
- Or, perhaps if I tithe, God will bless me more than I can imagine. (Malachi 3:10)

These are all Biblically based expectations and there are a whole lot more I could have listed. But I'm pretty sure that nowhere in the scriptures does it say that if we labor in the Kingdom of God we will get more than our brothers and sisters. Nowhere do I read the Word of God to say that if I work longer and harder than my brothers and sisters I will get more than they do. Our minds can easily go there to be sure, but I don't think it is scriptural. I think we could say that the more we work for God, the more we get from life, but as soon as we start comparing what we are doing with what someone else is doing we are no longer working for God.

Do you all remember that board game, Chutes and Ladders? You spin the little dial and according to what your number is, you move forward that many spaces. If you land on a ladder square, you automatically move up the board closer to the goal. If you land on a chute square, you automatically slide down the chute further away from the goal.

So imagine that we are all in this game of Chutes and Ladders and Jesus is in front of us encouraging us to keep up our strength and to persevere. As long as we keep our eye on Him we are moving up the rungs of ladders toward our goal. But as soon as we look to one side or other to see how others are being blessed compared to us, we automatically go down a very

long chute. Comparing ourselves to others and coveting what others have never takes us where God wants to lead us.

This notion of keeping one's eyes strictly on God and one's self seems to beg the question, *What is it that motivates you to do the work you do?* The answer to this question might seem obvious: When you have bills to pay and food to buy, you work to get money. Ok, if you are working to make a living, you are working to make money, but is it possible that there might be something else? I think that what Jesus is trying to tell us is that when God's Kingdom is fully realized there will still be work for each of us to do, but we won't be concerned about who is getting paid what for doing what; we will instead be doing what we are doing simply for the glory of God.

Then, let me ask you this: Do you suppose the underlying motivation for the work you do now could be the glory of God? I'm not asking if it could be done, I know that it **can** be done. What I'm asking here is, *could the underlying motivation for the work **you** do be the glory of God?* Can you imagine what it might be like if from the moment you step into your place of employment until you get back in your car to go home, you labor not just for a paycheck, but even more so for the glory of God. How about when you are mowing the lawn or doing the dishes; can you envision that more than obligation or duty or "somebody's gotta do it" your motivation could be instead, "I want to glorify God with this task." Do you think this sort of attitude might change your life?

I remember one of the men I worked with on the concrete crew used to sing Christian songs under his breath as he picked up concrete rubble that needed to be thrown away. He was a few years younger than me and I know that his back would bother him from time to time, but he very rarely complained about how hard the work was or how he wished he could do something else. He just worked like it was God's sidewalk or driveway we were replacing. And I guess, if you really think about it, it was.

The Apostle Paul seemed to be saying the same thing in his letter to the Ephesians. In the 6th chapter; verses 5-8 he wrote:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ. **6** Try to please them all the time, not just when they are watching you. As slaves of Christ, do the will of God with all your heart. **7** Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. **8** Remember that the Lord will reward each one of us for the good we do, whether we are slaves or free. Eph 6:5-8 (NLT)

Paul is telling us that if we will work as if we are working for God, we will be rewarded for the good that we do. The reward might not be what we are expecting and it might not come when we expect it, but we can trust the reward that comes from the Lord will be sufficiently worth the effort we put forth.

And what if we broaden this out a little further and you ask yourself: *what is the underlying motivation not just for the work I do but for why I live my life?* I mean, what if we could live every day as if God had come to us that very day and invited us individually to come into the Kingdom to labor and to live and to love accordingly?

I truly believe that this sort of attitude and motivation for life might just change everything. It might not change your job, or the grumpy person you have to work with or live with, or the reliability of the car you have to drive but living life as if everything is for God changes how you experience your life. Can you imagine doing everything you do whether it is facing a challenge or living into a blessing, all for the glory of God? Can you see the difference that would make in your life?

I have to say that if I was going to do this I'd really have to work at it; it would take practice for me, but I can imagine how much more fulfilling life might be if I were able to live without concern for where I was going or where I might end up at the end of the day. And as I do this, I can imagine the Holy Spirit filling me with energy and enthusiasm, and Jesus leading me to where Almighty God wants me to go.

We are all invited to labor and live this way in the Vineyard of God. We may not get the same blessing that someone else gets. We may be asked to give up more than someone else is asked to give up. We may be asked to endure more hardship than someone else has to endure, but in the eternity of our Lord, none of that will matter because we know that eternity lived with Father, Son and Holy Spirit is worth anything we have to give up or endure here on this earth.

This is Labor Day weekend. As we worship here together, and as we take time away from what we normally do every week, let us commit our lives to the glory of God alone. No comparing, no coveting – just living for the glory of God! Amen.