

Preparation for Heaven, part 3

It's All About the Process

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, July 18th, 2010

Two weeks ago we observed how loving and serving one's country can prepare a person for heaven. Last week our topic was the parable of the 10 virgins and their lamps, and the point was made that the oil for the lamps, which represents the goodness of love, is something each of us has to get for ourselves from the Lord, it can't simply be transferred from one person to another out of pure mercy. Filling our lamps with oil is one of the ways we prepare to enter into heaven.

Today we are considering another fascinating parable as told in the Gospel of Matthew – about 6 different groups of workers, all hired at different times of the day, who at the end of the day were all paid the same for their work. Like the parable of the 10 virgins, there's something about this that just doesn't seem right, or in this case fair. How could someone who works only one hour get paid the same as someone who works 12 – in fact a really long, hard day in the heat?

It may remind us of the parable of the prodigal son, whose brother was jealous when he finally came home, since *he* had served his father well all his life, but when the son who had wasted his life *and his father's inheritance* returned home, his father gave *him* a big party.

We hear stories like this and we naturally say, – so, it pays to be lazy, then? Or we can do whatever we want as long as we turn it around in the end?

People who believe in salvation as an event rather than a process tend to use stories like this to confirm their belief. In effect, they say, it doesn't matter what you do as long as *some day* you come to your senses and accept the Lord before you die.

Well, there's a certain truth to that but it's not the real meaning of the parable of the workers – or of the prodigal son, or of any other story of salvation, including the one about the thief who was crucified with Jesus. Rather the point of all these stories is that we have to look more deeply – beyond the outward appearance – to understand the truth about preparation for heaven.

So let's see what's really going on with this parable of the 6 groups of workers.

First of all, it never says any of them were lazy. But some of them, for whatever reason, were not hired until late in the day. And were the late hires offered the same money as the early ones? No. They were offered “whatever is right.” And so they went to work. It was only at the end of the day that everyone was surprised to find they were all paid the same. And when the first workers complained about this the landowner famously said, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? *Or is your eye evil because I am good?*” (Matthew 20:13-15).

Of course this does make sense on the literal level. A contract's a contract, no matter what may be done for somebody else. And it's OK to be generous! But the truth is, there's a whole lot more to this story on the level of spiritual life, and that is what we will be exploring today.

As a first step in that direction, consider the *attitude* – insofar as we can tell it – of the late hires in the story. It clearly says that they were willing to work, and to work *for whatever was right*.

Now keep in mind that this is a parable ~ a fictional story contrived for the sake of some implied meaning. And it falls in a certain context which of course has a beginning and an end. The beginning, in this case, is a dialogue with a wealthy man who comes to the Lord asking “what good thing” he should do to obtain eternal life (Matt. 19:16). So the Lord reviews the *second table* of the Ten Commandments – in general the ones that teach about our relationships with other people. When the fellow says he has kept all these commandments the Lord then tells him he must “sell what he has and give to the poor,” and that then he will have treasure in heaven, and that then he should come, and follow Him (v 21).

Next there is a short discussion in which the Lord points out how hard it is for the rich to enter heaven, and Peter (good old Peter) says, “See, we *have* left all and followed You. Therefore what shall *we* have?” (V. 27). And the Lord reassures him about the great blessings that await all who reject the things of this world for His sake, “But,” He says, “many who are first will be last, and the last first” (v. 30). THIS is where the parable of the workers begins.

And how does the parable *end*? It ends just as it began: “So the last *will* be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 20:16).

From this context it is pretty easy to see that the whole story is about the inversion of the order and priorities of life – beginning with a deep concern for worldly things and ending with the greatest concern for heavenly things. Thus it summarizes in a way the whole process of regeneration: our first states are worldly and self-centered, but in the end these become the last, or least important, completely subordinate to higher, spiritual loves. Again, in the beginning we are not particularly concerned with spiritual things at all; indeed, they are the *last things* on our minds. But in the end they become first, claiming the highest priority in our lives.

More particularly, every item and character in the story, and every time of the day represents some specific aspect of our inner, spiritual lives, and the events of the story detail the progression of our states as we are regenerated.

We begin with the landowner, or in the old King James, the householder, and his vineyard. Clearly this man is the Lord, and the vineyard is His church, specifically the church as it relates to the truths of faith which produce the fruit of a good and faithful life. But what the landowner owns, or the householder holds, is the human mind where this church can grow – in fact a mind that needs cultivating, nurturing, pruning and in general a lot of work.

So the man starts early in the morning and hires laborers to do this work. The laborers are like servants, having the same general meaning in Scripture, so they represent the things in the human mind that serve our spiritual development, and these things are all the various forms of knowledge that come from the Word. Without knowledge we can't really be productive, naturally or spiritually, but it is knowledge from *the Word* that especially serves us spiritually. And where is this knowledge stored? – Of course, in the memory, where it “sits” or “stands,” waiting to be called upon for the work of regeneration. The memory is the marketplace. And yes, the knowledge may be idle, it may be *unemployed* for a long time until it is prompted to a particular use.

But when that happens, when the end comes into view, knowledge provides the means.

Now the early morning is the beginning of our regeneration, the dawn, if you will, or our spiritual life. The third, sixth, ninth and eleventh hours all represent the progressive states of that life as we work through the heat of the day (representing our temptations) right on into the evening when we stop and rest. Isn't it interesting, by the way, that there are six states mentioned in this parable, roughly corresponding to the six days of creation?

The third, sixth and ninth hours are especially interesting symbolically because they are all multiples of three, as is twelve, which, while not mentioned here is implied. And three represents what is full or complete, in this case a fullness of knowledge of the truth needed for our spiritual growth. Yes, the Lord gives us everything we need. But He gives it in stages as we can receive it, first a little, then more, and finally a lot.

Note, too, that at first there is a defined contract: you work all day and you will be paid 1 denarius (the typical rate for a day's work in New Testament times). And it's true, isn't it, that in the early stages of our regeneration we need that assurance of reward. It's what we call a mediate good, a means to the end: not a bribe exactly, but an incentive that appeals to our literal minds and our sense of our own importance. "Yeah, I'll do it, but I need to know *what I'm going to get out of it.*" Or, as the young star athlete said in the movie, "Show me the money!"

Of course in this case the money isn't just money but *it, too*, represents something. Remember, we're talking about spiritual life, not natural life, that is, "what we must do to gain eternal life." A denarius was a silver coin, and as such it stands for a deeper understanding or *perception* of truth – not just knowledge, but something to be gained by the *application* of knowledge in the work of daily life. In fact this is interior truth, and because the reference is to ONE denarius, and the number, one, represents the unifying principle of goodness or love, this payment represents the truth derived from good, that is, from *doing* what is good though the proper use of knowledge. And it is represented as payment or reward because it IS spiritually rewarding! It is our *compensation* for giving up the things of the world.

Those hired at the third, sixth, ninth and eleventh hours needed no other incentive than that they would be paid "whatever is right." They were eager and willing to work for an *unspecified* reward. So they represent the truths of our memory that we apply not so much for the reward but for the sake of the use. Practically speaking you might think that by the 11th hour out of twelve all the workers that were left would have given up and gone home, but in the parable they were still there, still ready to work. Why? – Because in the progressive stages of regeneration we learn things like patience and self-sacrifice, and the older and wiser we get the more we appreciate that every bit of our knowledge sooner or later may be called upon to serve the Lord. So we stand ready right up to the 11th hour, to do that the moment we get the opportunity.

Finally it's time to be paid. The steward gives the reward – beginning with the last first. Here again, you might think that he would be discreet and pay the first men first, so that they would be gone, and not be jealous seeing the others paid the same. But remember, this is a parable, and besides, in real life they would compare notes later, anyway. The point, in fact, is to *make the point* that the reward is the same for all who are willing to co-operate with the Lord. But what does THAT mean?

Well, it means what it says. The reward is the same for everybody, and the reason is because *inwardly considered the work done by everybody is the same* – that work in the spiritual sense not being physical labor but the labor of love, the *affection* or *desire* to serve.

You see, the Lord doesn't just look at the work of our hands, He looks at the intentions of our hearts; He judges us according to our loves. Another way of saying this is that He doesn't judge us by the quality or the quantity of what we produce, but by the will and the effort we make.

Of course outwardly, naturally, the more good we can do the better. But inwardly, spiritually, it is not the product that counts, but the process. After all the things of this world WILL pass away; a thousand years from now in the spiritual world no one is going to care whether we worked one hour or twelve – or for that matter whether we LIVED for one YEAR or twelve or a hundred. And no one is going to care whether we accomplished much or little in the physical world. We will be judged by what we love, and how we love, and whether we are willing to use our knowledge when called upon to serve the Lord and our neighbors more than ourselves.

In short, the reward of heaven is not for what we've done but for what we've become, and it is nothing more nor less than the experience itself of knowing and understanding how to be genuinely good.

There is an old saying: "Life is a journey, not a destination." So, too, it's a process, not an event. And the reward, truly, for engaging in that process wholeheartedly, any time the Lord calls, is neither much nor a little of any outward things but the delight itself – we might say *the singular delight* – associated with the process.

So again, how is it that "the last will be first and the first last," or that "many are called, but few are chosen"? The Lord is very clear throughout His Word that those who try to put themselves first will be last in the kingdom of heaven, and that those who think of themselves last – for the sake of others – will be first. But beyond this we ALL start out thinking of ourselves first and others last, and the whole business of life is to turn that around.

Calling, an expression of the voice or understanding, has to do with truth; choosing, however, has to do with good and depends entirely on a person's response to the truth. We are all called; it is up to us to decide whether we can be chosen, whether we are willing to do the work, to engage in the process – not to produce more than anyone else, least of all in any certain time frame, but *to be good, to be reformed and regenerated by the Lord, no matter how long it takes.*

Amen.

Lessons: Joel 2:1-2 & 12-19
A Call to Repentance

Matthew 20:1-16
Apocalypse Explained #194:selection