

Sermon Notes on Mt. 20:1-16, Septuagesima Sunday

1. This text must be preached with great care. This parable is not about labor and management in the kingdom of power but about salvation by grace in the kingdom of heaven here on this earth. God has ordained that in the kingdom of power here on this earth people are paid for their work. See Lk. 10:7 and I Cor. 9:14. Even pastors are paid for their labors. But God has also ordained that in the kingdom of heaven (the church on earth and the church in heaven) people inherit eternal life only by grace through faith in Christ. Eph. 2:8-9. The redeemed thief on the cross inherits the same as the Apostle Paul.
2. Mt. 20:1-16 cannot be understood correctly unless one includes Mt. 19:16-30. 19:30 and 20:16 are almost identical. Read them. A rich young man came to Jesus asking about salvation. Jesus put him to the test. He failed because his money, his works, his worthiness meant too much to him. Now read 19:23-26. The disciples were astonished. They ask: "Who, then, can be saved?" Jesus says that with men, all of them, it is impossible. That disturbed the disciples. Peter, in vs. 27, says: "Look at what we've done. What shall we get?" The disciples had the same problem as the rich young man. They were clinging to their own works and worthiness. Then Jesus speaks about those who have followed Him in the regeneration (see Tit. 3:5). That means the way of salvation wholly by grace. Note that in vs. 29 He says "for My name's sake. For Jesus' sake" to confess one's unworthiness but also to trust only in His gracious salvation. Then Jesus says in vs. 29 that such a person will "inherit" not "earn" eternal life. Then comes the final word: "Many who are first will be last and the last shall be first." The rich man, and even the disciples, were putting themselves first. They wanted to earn heaven by their works and worthiness. No, says Jesus, only those who consider themselves last, beggars, unworthy of salvation, will be first. Remember He said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Until his death Martin Luther considered himself a beggar before God, one whose only right is to believe in the name of Jesus. Jn. 1:12.
3. Our text, the parable at Mt. 20:1-16 makes clear what Mt. 19:16-30 stated. It is not a parable of earthly labor and management. In earthly management people are paid for the amount they work. But not so in the kingdom of heaven. In fact there are no wages in the kingdom of heaven. Salvation is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast. Eph. 2:8-9. Christians thank the Lord because He is good and merciful. When we earn something we do not give thanks. We are thankful only for gifts, things we do not deserve.
4. Note that in vss. 1, 3, 5 and 6 the owner of the vineyard took the initiative. God found me. I did not find Him. He called me to the faith. I earned or deserve nothing. Vs. 8 denotes the final judgment. Note that those hired last are called first. Then the others are called too. They begin to grumble. In vss. 10-12 they complain. They say they deserve more than those hired last. These represent the envious, self-righteous, who base salvation on their own merit, works and worthiness. In vs. 15 Jesus says: "Is your eye evil because I am good?" What does that mean? It means that the self-righteous and envious unbelievers are angry with God because salvation is by grace and not by their works. That is terrible.
5. Then comes the final sentence: "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." The repentant beggar who pleads only the blood of Jesus Christ which forgives his sin will be saved. All others are last.
6. Fahling says: "Since in the Lord's kingdom work is our duty and grace our reward, there should be neither envy in our hearts with respect to those who are received into the heavenly kingdom although they came to Christ only in the eleventh hour, while we have served Him all our lives, nor a gainseeking exhibition of our good works before God. The attainment of salvation is the same for both saint and sinner." The inheritance is always a gift of grace in all cases, not a wage.

Theme: WITH MEN THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE BUT WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE

Introduction: Our text cannot be understood correctly unless we study Mt. 19:16-30 first. A rich young man wanted to know how to get to heaven. He thought he was on the way to heaven but was not. His riches stood in the way. The disciples were surprised. They too had wrong ideas. After some discussion Jesus says: "Many first will be last and last first (19:30). Then He speaks our text which ends with "The last will be first and the first last." Let's talk about that.

#### I-SALVATION IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH MEN.

A-Sinful human nature deludes itself. The rich young man came to Jesus expecting to be told by Jesus: "You are just fine!" But he was not. He deluded himself. Jesus proved that to him when the young man could not give up his riches. He based his relationship with God on himself and his money. Then Jesus spoke to the disciples. They were deluded too. They said: "Well, then, who can be saved?" They were not certain. They were deluded. Think of what St. Paul said at Php. 3:2-11. Before Paul was converted he trusted in his circumcision, he trusted in the fact that he was an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee who thought he kept the Law perfectly. But he learned that all of this was only rubbish. "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." Is. 64:6. The laborers in the vineyard in our text deluded themselves. The parable is about the kingdom of heaven, about how we are saved. These laborers wanted to be paid on the basis of their work.

B-The reason for this delusion. Why were the rich young man, the disciples, Paul and laborers in the vineyard wrong and deluded? Because salvation is a gift, not by the works of man. Eph. 2:8-9. Later on Peter confessed that salvation is not by gold or silver. I Pet.1:18. Later on John learned that only the blood of Jesus can wash away our sin. I Jn. 1:7. In our parable the laborers were actually called evil (vs. 15) because they were deluded. The unbeliever walks in the darkness of unbelief. He is still dead in his trespasses and sin.

#### II-SALVATION IS POSSIBLE WITH GOD.

A-God can turn man away from his delusion. Sometimes we think that the troubles of this life are our great problem. That is not so. Our great problem is unbelief, the idea that we can save ourselves. We put ourselves first but that makes us last. On the road to Damascus Jesus turned Paul away from his delusion. He made Paul see that all of his righteousness was only dung. More and more the disciples learned that only Jesus could turn them from unbelief to faith, from sin to righteousness. God can and does turn man away from fear, guilt, hopelessness, self-righteousness to repent of his sin. Only the goodness of God leads man to repentance.

B-Salvation is a gift of grace not an earned wage. The point of our text, our parable, is that one enters the kingdom of heaven already now only because of God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ. The unhappy laborers were dissatisfied because they wanted it on their own terms. They put themselves first but that made them last. God wants us to see that we are last, lost and condemned creatures who confess this. When we confess our sins and say: "Lord you know that I can do nothing but sin. Have mercy on me. For Jesus' sake forgive me all my sins," when we do that we put ourselves last. The last shall be first and the first last. The repentant sinner who confesses his sin but trusts in the merits and worthiness of Christ is actually first. But the impenitent man who thinks he is good enough without the gift of Christ is actually last.

Conclusion: We all must confess that often we are like the rich young man or like the doubting disciples or like the laborers in the vineyard. Let us repent of our sins and trust only in Jesus Christ.