

LECTURE VIII

"The Laborers Paid; or, Humility in Regard to our Merits"

by
Edward N. Kirk
D.D.

Matt. 20:1-16 [NKJV]: *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said unto them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. 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?' 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.' 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.' And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, 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.' But he answered one of them and 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. It is not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good? So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."*

Luke 17:7-10 [NKJV]: *"And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"*

We shall find these two passages to have the same scope. The first compares the administration of Christ's kingdom on earth to a farmer employing laborers. (In eastern countries, and even in Europe, the custom still remains of farmers going into the markets to hire reapers who have assembled from neighboring and even remote districts.) This man goes out at several distinct hours engaging men to work in his vineyard. Some are hired at the very first working hour at a fixed--and probably the ordinary--price of a penny or denarius a day, which is equal to fifteen cents. The others leave the rate of wages to the option of their employer. In the evening the steward is ordered to bring them together that they may receive their compensation. Beginning at those hired only an hour before, he pays them the denarius, and so goes through the whole company paying all the same. This surprises and offends those who have been working twelve hours, that they should receive the same compensation with those who had labored only one hour, and that in the cooler hour of the evening. The employer replies to them that he did them

no injustice, that he had a right to pay the others as much as he pleased without consulting them, and that his generosity should not excite their envy.

The other parable refers to the customs of society concerning a man who serves another. If he were employed as a farm-laborer and a house-servant, he would not expect when returning from the field to be served by his employer, but would wait on him.

These simple stories or parables have caused much difficulty to commentators, especially the former. And the reason of it I suppose to be, that the shade of feeling they are designed to expose is one of the most subtle of all those that hinder the progress of spiritual life; having an aim somewhat similar to those of the Prodigal Son and the Pharisee and Publican, yet striking even a deeper vein than they. The doctrine they exhibit is this: ***In the Gospel, gratuity is more prominent than rewards.***

The Gospel does not exclude the idea of rewards, but presents it in a modified form; and earnestly guards the heart against selfish emulation [rivalry], boasting or claiming, in reference to others, and against dealing with God on a *quid pro quo* or hireling principle. I would now allude to one or two expositions.

It has been maintained by some that this parable presents "*A vindication of rewards by merit.*" But see what difficulties attend this. That merit should be rewarded is a truism belonging to the light of nature. Even heathen philosophy contains it. Rewarding according to merit is the grand principle of natural justice, which it did not require a teacher from heaven to explain. If that were all Christ meant to teach, no parable would have been necessary, for it is a principle of nature that every man reaps as he sows; and our Lord is not here teaching a truth of nature but a truth of grace--and one somewhat difficult for the human mind to receive and retain, a fundamental principle of the new dispensation from heaven. He was teaching this difficult truth: that the first are last and the last first; that some men will get a penny for one hour's labor while for twelve hours' labor others will get no more.

Here is no natural justice surely. But in order to reconcile with this explanation the fact that they all received a penny apiece, it has been said that the laborers hired last accomplished as much as the first. It is sufficient to say that nothing would be more important to state in the parable than that, and that the omission of such an indispensable point from the parable would be fatal to it if it were intended to teach that men are rewarded according to their merit.

Others have attempted to remove this difficulty by affirming that the labor of the last was more valuable than that of the first, and that thus the parable was intended to teach that quality is as important as quantity in laboring for God. But why then does not the employer vindicate himself on that obvious ground? No such thing is said. He throws himself back on principles more remote--on his absolute proprietorship and his rights. Will is one thing, justice another. The defence here set up is, sovereign will and the right to exercise it. "Have I not a right to do what I will with my own?"

It has been an utter perversion of this parable to apply the eleventh hour laborers to *conversions late in life* as the main point. To be so it would be necessary that all such persons could say, "we are unemployed because no man has offered us employment." We are not converted sooner because we have not heard the Gospel. Whatever encouragement it gives to those who may have entered into the service late, it gives no encouragement to entering it late. The scope of the

parable is not found there. That is merely a part of its drapery.

Some have applied it to the Jews, as a warning to them against despising Gentile converts. Then there ought to have been only two invitations instead of four or five. But this narrows the subject to a degree that is insufferable and utterly removes the parable from the occasion of its delivery. It was not the envious, conceited Jews whom the Lord here addressed but his Christian disciples, who had not manifested any contempt for Gentile converts of whom they as yet knew nothing.

Some consider the parable "*a warning against remissness.*" Then prominence should have been given to the fact that the earliest hired were remiss. But nothing of the kind appears. The ground of vindication is totally different from this. If it were their want [lack] of diligence that caused their wages to be no more than those of the other workmen, the lord of the vineyard would have assigned that reason instead of putting it on the ground of sovereignty--"have I not a right to do what I will with my own?"

We can accept neither of these explanations. The manifest design of the parable is to inculcate [1] humility in estimating our own good deeds, [2] charity in looking upon the rewards bestowed on others, and [3] confiding submission in putting ourselves, our good deeds, and our compensation into the hands of God our Redeemer. To inculcate these practical principles the theory taught in the parable is, ***that the rewards of heaven, while according with justice, are modified by grace.***

Peter, having seen the rich young ruler refuse to become poor for Christ's sake and having heard Christ declare that the rich can hardly enter the kingdom of heaven, replied by inquiring what reward they should have who had left all for him. The answer was that they should have great rewards. But at the same time they who had done much and forsaken much for Christ must be warned of the danger of contemplating their sacrifices in a self-complacent [self-satisfied/smug] spirit. A mercenary spirit might come in there to mar much good and make the first last.

To warn them against pride and to check the hireling spirit was the design of this parable. And by forgetting that, all the embarrassment of interpreting it has been created. It was not a warning to the unhappy young man who refused to follow Jesus, for he had gone sorrowful away. It was not addressed to the self-righteous Pharisees nor to the heedless multitude, but to the faithful disciples. It was to show them that while the spirit of self-renunciation and zeal would be rewarded, there was something still higher than that reward--it was to possess the spirit of humility and of unreserved submission and confidence.

Peter's spirit was right and his inquiry was legitimate, and yet the tendency of looking much in that direction is dangerous. Humility is the only grace that seems to live out of the reach of danger. It is the safeguard and shield of all the other graces as well as the inheritor of the richest blessings. The evil involved in his inquiry was that it put his relations to the Saviour on a mercenary footing, that of wages--so much work, so much pay. There was rather too eager a looking for recompense, a somewhat selfish grasping at the rewards of obedience. And there was also some degree of self-complacency in comparing his noble self-renunciation with that man's avarice. All this needed to be corrected. And it is corrected by these parables, which are not a prophecy of what will be but a warning against the tendency of certain dispositions--against pride, the want of charity, and imagining a merit in their sacrifices.

None of the other explanations of this parable which I have mentioned meet the occasion in any degree. This does. It shows that pride will destroy love. [It] will even lead us to murmur against our righteous sovereign and bounteous benefactor, to envy towards our more favored brethren, and an opposition to the very grace by which we are saved.

I conceive then that the laborers represent not persons but principles; and all other explanations make the parable so unnatural that their advocates have been compelled to resort, as we see, to violent alterations and forced accommodations of the text. Either they make all rewards in heaven to be equal, by making the penny apiece the burden of the parable; or they make the patriarchs murmur in heaven at seeing the Gentiles blessed, by making it refer to the Jews particularly; or they throw away the very moral of the story as given by our teacher, which is that self-denial with all its importance is not as great, as difficult, or as noble a grace as humility.

In this view the parable of the servant returning from the field inculcates the same lesson in a different aspect of it. The eager grasping after our reward, the exact measurement of our merits, is an inconsistency with the dispensation of grace. If we stand on wages, then we may get only the wages of grace itself, for there are such. But if we always count ourselves unprofitable servants at the best, having done nothing more than our duty, [and] if after plowing we are willing to come and still serve in the house until our gracious Lord is ready to have us repose and refresh ourselves at his table, then we shall be truly first, while least in our own estimation. And there is no other way of being first in the kingdom of heaven.

The ground we have gone over is then this. We have objected to the explanation which makes the parable a vindication of the justice of God in rewarding men. For if there is here any vindication, it is not of equal rewards for equal labor but for unequal--of paying as much for one hour as twelve. And then it is asserted in other parts of the Scriptures that the rewards of heaven are to be very various in degree. One star will differ from another in the glorious firmament. The first shall be last. We object also to applying the parable to eleventh-hour conversions as in any degree a special point of its doctrine.

But the occasion of its deliverance, the maxims which precede and follow it, and its whole drift lead us to suppose that it presents these laborers not as resembling us in our work or our rewards, but rather to illustrate these principles: that the rewards of grace are gratuitous even when promised; and that grace will bestow many rewards that are not promised; that there is nowhere any room for boasting, confirming the great principle afterward so strongly presented by Paul in his letters to the churches in Rome and Galatia--"Now to him who works is the reward not reckoned of grace but of debt. But to him who works not but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

At the best we are unprofitable servants, and should ever feel it. In the Saviour's account of the last judgment he describes the righteous as wondering what they have ever done that can be so rewarded. Their spirit is in direct contrast with that of the men who had been first hired. "Lord, when . . . saw we thee hungry and gave thee no meat?"

It is evident that the Saviour attached great importance to the maxim "the first shall be last and the last first." It is put at the beginning of this parable and then repeated at the end, a case without parallel in his teaching. And whatever therefore fails to explain that fails to explain the parable. It does not mean that the first in privilege shall be last in reward. If it was designed as a continuation of his answer to the inquiry, "what shall we have who have forsaken all," it must

meet the state of mind involved in that inquiry, which was partly a spirit of trustful reliance upon the promise of God that he would compensate for all sacrifices made in his cause. But there was mingled with it too much self-complacency and too eager a regard to recompense for service. Therefore the maxim of our Lord must mean that even the most advanced in sacrifices and toils for him may come short of others who are more honored in God's sight, [that is,] they who have combined with their sacrifices and toils a self-abasing and unpretending spirit.

These first hired had an envious, murmuring spirit in connection with their diligence. They misapprehended justice and contested with grace. They murmured at their employer and envied their fellow-laborers. It cannot be questioned, I think, that the parable was designed to reprove that spirit, and that the strength of it lies in the reply, "Friend," or sir, "I do thee no wrong." In giving thee a penny I meet the claims of justice and keep my word. "Didst thou not agree with me for a penny? Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil because I am good?" Is it not envy that sees only wrong in my kindness to others?

We must then hold the doctrine of rewards in a modest, humble spirit. There are rewards offered by the Gospel. How glorious is that here promised to Peter: "Verily I say unto you, that ye who have followed me in the regeneration, when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel; shall receive a hundred fold, and shall inherit everlasting life." And it is right that we should be greatly affected by such promises. Moses had respect to the recompense of reward. Our Redeemer, "for the joy set before him, endured the cross." The Gospel abounds in promises conditioned on certain actions, if they include a right spirit. It must be our duty to be appropriately affected by these promised blessings, that is, to desire them earnestly.

But nothing is more characteristic of the Gospel than that it is the broad sphere in which SOVEREIGN GOODNESS acts. Justice has its full operation in this dispensation, but in a subordinate sphere. "Grace reigns by righteousness through Jesus Christ." It was to answer no claim of ours that Christ came into the world, that the Holy Spirit descended, that he enters any of our poor hearts [and] that he continues there to the end, that our sins are forgiven, our petitions for favors answered, and our souls saved. "Salvation is by grace, through faith." "Of his own will begat he us." "Of him, and through him, and to him are all things." "The *gift* of God is eternal life."

Now, if our minds should be fixed wholly upon rewards and our good deeds and attainments, pride must come in. Paul had attained to a very definite anticipation of the crown of life. Yet how he glories in exalting his Redeemer, in ascribing all to grace. How foolish it seems to him to tell what he had done and suffered, even when the sacred cause he loved demanded that he should. There is a full manifestation of the free action of the divine will even in nature. God has made us what we are, has placed us where we are. Therefore we are warned never to boast of our endowments, our position, or our achievements as though we had not received them all from God. "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might. Let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me."

To say nothing here of the spirit of self-righteousness (which makes men hope for heaven through their own goodness), there is abundant opportunity for pride to work in the heart even after it has renounced its own righteousness and submitted to the righteousness of God. It rises in the heart of the convert who has just made a few attainments, has given up a little for his Redeemer,

and made some apparent progress even beyond older disciples. He is now ready to be flattered, jealous of being overlooked, pleased with himself, ready to wonder at his superiority to many others, thinks his own prospects very bright and those of the greater part of the Church, at least, questionable. A more advanced believer is exposed to this subtle snare when he has made some decided progress, accomplished some important service, made some severe sacrifice to duty or enjoyed some especial communion with God. In fact, every Christian is exposed to some degree or form of it. And therefore it is important that we hold such views of our demerit and of the perfect freedom of divine grace that we shall not give place to this insinuating self-flattery.

One effect of pride is presented to our view in the suggestion that the servant might be disposed to look to his own comfort when returning from the field, instead of attending to the work that belonged to his office. So we may sometimes feel that we have done so much as to make us more willing to repose than to continue our labors. Thus it makes us relax our efforts by an over-estimate of the importance of that which we have done. God has indeed been pleased to attach certain expressions of his approbation to our good actions. But we must never forget that we are indebted to his grace for our good intentions and the execution of them, that a man cannot be profitable to God as to a fellow man, [and] that all rewards are themselves really gratuitous.

And we must be fully reconciled to these facts or we can have no real piety. The spirit of a believer is in no respects that of a hireling, although it was once objected to Christianity that it promoted a mercenary spirit. Romanism is the very embodiment of the spirit of traffic. It deals with the quantity of good works, overlooking their quality. It makes an open account with heaven and strikes a balance in favor of the Church. It charges money for pardons and money for salvation. The whole of this spirit is hateful, even though it be not carried so far as that fearful system carries it. "What shall we have if we do so much and sacrifice so much?" It is well to look at the glorious things promised and to strive for our crown. But if we stick too closely to the idea of reward, we are in danger of over-estimating the excellence of our actions, and especially their merit.

And then there is a solemn import in the words of our Saviour, "the first shall be last and the last first; for many are called but few chosen." What are the rewards of the Gospel? The answer to that will illustrate the meaning of this phraseology. If these rewards consisted of money or lands or merely stations of power, we might not so easily comprehend the paramount importance of humility. But the rewards of heaven are chiefly of two kinds, one of which we may call subjective, or the expansion, enlargement and completion of personal qualities. In this sense principles are more to be rewarded than actions. And therefore humility, as it is the opposite to pride, envy, and discontent, is indispensable for enjoying the highest blessedness of heaven.

And then, of those rewards which are objective, God's love and communion with him are the highest. But nothing is more essential to a creature's communion with God than the profoundest humility. "I dwell," says Jehovah, "with him who is contrite and of a humble spirit." We may then be first in everything else, but we shall be last in the favor of God if we lose that meek and lowly spirit which in his sight is of great price. The first shall be last. We have seen men fall by pride and nations perish by exalting themselves. "When Ephraim spake trembling, he exalted himself in Israel; but when he offended in Baal, he died" [Hos. 13:1].

"Many are called but few chosen." Of the many who are called into the kingdom of God, few

enter so profoundly into the peculiar spirit of this wonderful dispensation as to appreciate the prominence of grace in it. Few receive the amazing grace of God with that deep and permanent sense of their unworthiness and their ill-desert which enables them to bear the consciousness of exaltation, the joy and the hopes imparted by the Gospel, without any increase of self-esteem, any pride or envy. Few are chosen, approved as in the highest class. This was said directly to Peter, and he ultimately profited by it.

The practical lesson then which comes out of this parable is *to guard against a proud and a mercenary spirit*. Especially should we look well to our conception of the kind of rewards we expect to receive. Too few indeed direct their thoughts sufficiently to "the recompense of reward." And yet, without having the subject in our thoughts sufficiently to draw the affections strongly toward heaven, we may be indulging a conception of some kind of reward which is entirely foreign to that perfect state of existence. If we definitely conceive of the blessedness of heaven as consisting in the approbation of God, communion with him, and the perfection of love and humility in our own hearts, we shall bestow our chief care upon the culture of those excellencies of character which most please God and most fit us for the blessed society of heaven. This will guard us against anything like a mercenary spirit or a mere outward working for wages.

Let us keep constantly in view our own unworthiness and demerit. We have incurred the wrath of God. He found us at enmity with him. . . . Never then can we murmur at what a beneficent Redeemer bestows as being below our deserts. Never shall we boast of our attainments or our achievements.

Let us be careful not to make favorable comparisons of our own labors and sacrifices with those of our brethren. Peter fell into that fault and received the rebuke couched in the parable of the laborers.

Let us remember that salvation is wholly of grace from beginning to end. There is a holding out of rewards to quicken our diligence. But they are not, as the old divines would say, rewards of condignity¹, but of congruity. They are not payments of wages, not a just award of rights, but distributions of grace. What then if we should find others whom we imagine to be inferior to ourselves in any respect placed above us, or rewarded with the same amount as we? There will be no envy nor grudging, no unhallowed emulation, but a sincere rejoicing that our God is so gracious and that our fellowmen are so much blessed.

Love is the chief grace and humility is its bodyguard. Love is so valuable that Christ puts the highest price on the most trivial act which expresses it: "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my disciples, ye did it unto me." The slightest shade of the feeling of personal merit prevents our full appreciation of God's kindness to us, and our perfect reconciliation to the various allotments of Providence here, and to the various distribution of the rewards of heaven. "Have I not a right?" will be the eternal challenge from the throne. "Yea, Lord," will be the eternal response of all that dwell around it.

Lecture VIII, "The Laborers Paid; or, Humility in Regard to our Merits," by Edward N. Kirk, *Lectures on the Parables of our Saviour* (New York: R. Craighead, Printer, 1857). **Note:** The text

¹ Merit earned through good works while in a state of grace, and having a just claim on such rewards as heavenly glory.

has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs divided.