

THE HOUSEHOLDER AND THE SERVANTS

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 20:1-16

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a penny 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; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the laborers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong; didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy ways I will give unto the last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first and the first last: for many are called, but few chosen.

The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest.

The parable of the householder and the laborers is regarded by most commentators as one of the most difficult of Christ's parables to interpret. John Calvin saw in it a warning that those who have begun their Christian course well should not be overconfident. Saint Irenaeus thought that the various bands of laborers were the Old Testament prophets and saints, and the eleventh hour laborers the apostles. Others have thought that the first laborers called were the Jews, the last Gentiles. Perhaps the most popular interpretation is that the parable refers to the different periods of life in which a man may accept Christ -- in infancy, youth, middle age, or on his death bed. There are some elements in the parable which may be used in support of all these theories of interpretation. But none of the, to the mind of your speaker, is completely adequate.

Just before Jesus began the recital of this parable, Peter came to him a little proudly (for the rich young ruler had just departed, unwilling to give up his possessions for the sake of the kingdom) and reminded Jesus that the apostles had left all and followed him. What would their reward be? Jesus promised that they should sit on twelve thrones with him, judging the twelve tribes of Israel; that every one who had denied himself for the gospel's sake should receive an hundred fold and inherit everlasting life. And then Jesus added, seemingly as a sort of warning: "But many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first," and launches into the parable which begins chapter 20 of the book of Matthew.

It is significant that the laborers were hired "into his vineyard," that is, into the church and kingdom of the household, Christ. They were the ones who would sow and reap, plant and tend and prune, within the church; in other words, they were the ministry or priesthood of the church. The apostles were not the first ones to be sent

into the vineyard, nor were they the last. The gospel had been preached on earth by ministers of Christ from the days of Adam. Abel offered sacrifices which were after the similitude of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, without spot or blemish. Hebrews 11:5,6 tells us that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, by faith pleased God. If faith is to be a saving principle -- which it unquestionably was in Enoch's case -- it must be centered in Jesus Christ and his redemption.

We are told in 2 Peter 2:5 that Noah was a "preacher of righteousness," and in Romans 1:16-17 that righteousness is revealed in the gospel. Noah must have preached the gospel of Christ, for it was those who were disobedient to this gospel to whom Jesus preached after his death in the flesh, when he went to the spirits in prison, according to 1 Peter 3:18-20. Galatians 3:8 says that the gospel was preached unto Abraham. This was the same gospel which was later preached to the Gentiles "that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ:" (Gal.3:14) for the covenant made by God with Abraham was made "in Christ." (3:17) The law of Moses was "added to" this gospel and this covenant (verse 19) because of transgression, but it was this same Christ who gave the law of Moses. Moses chose "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt." (Heb. 11 25,26) Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:4 that Israel in the wilderness "drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ." If they drank of Christ the water they drank must have been Christ's gospel.

With this background another statement of Jesus takes on new significance. In the 4th chapter of John he says to his apostles: "He that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal; that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together. And herein is that saying true, One soweth and another reapeth. I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labor; other men labored, and ye are entered into their labors."

The interpretation of the parable should now be clear. In all ages of the world's history -- in all hours of the world's day -- God has called certain men to labor in his vineyard. In each of the several dispensations he has called men through angelic ministry -- as he called Abraham, Moses, and John the Baptist, or as he announced the advent of his Son in the meridian of time. The eleventh hour, or the closing days of the world's history just before the final judgment, were likewise to be ushered in by angelic ministry, according to Revelation 14:6,7: "And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, Saying with a loud voice, Fear God and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come." It is the belief of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints that this eleventh hour dispensation was ushered in by the angel flying through the midst of heaven, who called and commissioned Joseph Smith to preach again the everlasting gospel which was preached by Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist, and Christ in preparation for the hour of his judgment.

Notice that the parable of the householder and the laborers could not have to do with the time of life in which a man accepts the gospel. The call was not simply to go into the vineyard, but to work in the vineyard. There is no mention in the parable of any man receiving a call to go work in the vineyard more than once. Each time the householder went back to the market place in the different hours of the day, he found "others" standing there -- men who had not been there before, but had just come on the scene of activity. Each went into the vineyard to do the work of sowing and reaping and planting and pruning. That work is not ended by death, but continues as those called to minister continue their labors among the spirits in prison who never had opportunity to hear the gospel in this life.

Each group of laborers which goes out, builds on the foundation of those who have gone before, and reaps what others have sown. Who can say that the work of one is more important than the work of another? Yet in the day of harvest, all the workmen shall be gathered together as the eleventh hour ends, and each will receive his wages -- eternal life in God's kingdom, and he that sowed and he that reaped shall rejoice together.

We are living in the eleventh hour of the parable. The workers have been called and commissioned to go forth and prune the Lord's vineyard for the last time. We who have thus been called repeat the invitation and the warning which has been given so many times, in so many different dispensations of the world's history, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of God is at hand."