

Sermon: We have left everything to follow you, what will we have?

Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

Introduction

Think about how we started our Christian walk. Did we start out with great enthusiasm with our youth group and friends? Did we have an experience of God which warmed our heart? Did we receive Jesus at an evangelism rally or did you grow up learning about Jesus and thought, He was so wonderful, I want to know Him more?

However you came to the decision to give your life, heart and soul to Jesus, can we still recall how wonderful discovering Jesus was? It's amazing how things look while they are fresh and new to us. Think about bread as an example - we can feel its freshness, its smell is wonderful and creates a hunger for more. But it doesn't take long before the bread dries out, hardens, losing its freshness and becomes stale. Other things by contrast have the opposite effect, they start off weak, with not much colour or body, but age, experience and maturity adds to them like a good wine, the older the wine becomes the more beautiful the taste becomes. For some, age can weary, for others, age can improve. As we journey in faith are we becoming weary in our commitment and faith or are we maturing beautifully?

In ministry I have witnessed many who have been in church since before they were born and served in almost every role within the church there is. They have sacrificed much over the years and sadly in their later years they have started to falter in their walk, becoming weary and no longer as close to Jesus as they once were. The years have wearied them and they have lost the joy of serving and have become discouraged, disconnected with God's Word and even started doubting and disbelieving the doctrines of faith. After starting the race so well, they are in danger of never crossing the finishing line in glory but despondency.

I want to begin with a question, does God's grace melt our heart and fill us with devotion to love and serve Him with grateful thanks and praise or has our devotion to God wained, feeling less enthusiastic for His word, His ways and His church? This is a challenging question and it requires an honest answer. Jesus teaches a parable today which challenges us to look at our own heart and see what motivates us for the kingdom, because if Jesus is not the sole motivation, we may not see the race through to victory.

Context

As you know the Scriptures were not written with chapters and verse numbers, these were added much later. These chapter breaks and verse numbers are really helpful but unfortunately they can at times create unnatural breaks between chapters and passages which lead to confusion. Today is a good example. Chapter 20 begins with a parable but in what context was it meant? To help us we need read what went before. Chapter 19 covers the account of the rich young ruler who enthusiastically asked Jesus, 'What must I do to gain eternal life?' (**Matt 19:16**). How this young man began with such enthusiasm, seeking Jesus and asking the question about his salvation. If only more people had this young man's enthusiasm to seek Jesus with this question, hell would be less crowded! Unfortunately like many people today, he becomes less interested when he discovers there is a cost to following Jesus. For Jesus requires full commitment not a casual or half hearted relationship. The rich young ruler weighed up the cost and considered, Jesus just isn't worth the cost, for he was not prepared to give up or change his lifestyle to follow Jesus, so walks away sad forfeiting the very thing he sought, (**Matt 19:22**). What is so shocking to our sensitivities is Jesus let him walk away, He didn't run after him, He simply

let him walk away, lost for all eternity. Now I can hear many thinking, he may have come back to Jesus later! This is a possibility but sadly we never hear from this young man again in Scripture, and Jesus only says, 'How hard it is for a someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven **(Matt 19:24)**.

We maybe astounded and astonished at these events, but so where the disciples. It was Peter who said to Jesus, 'We have left everything to follow you, what then will there be for us?' **(Matt 19:27)**. Jesus words conclude chapter 19 saying in response, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" **(Matt 19:30)**. As Peter was wondering about this, its clear he is still thinking in worldly terms, considering the rewards he would be given, because of what he has left behind to follow Jesus. He was looking for rewards for his works. Now we have a context for the parable.

Jesus uses a parable about a landowner going out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agrees to pay those seeking work a denarius for their services. A labourers pay was notoriously low and less than a denarii for a days work. As the landowner agrees to pay above the average wage, the assumption is they had negotiated with the landowner for a higher price to work his fields.

Grape vines are planted in the spring and pruned during the summer and harvested in late September. The landowner went out early to hire harvesters because there is a small window of opportunity to gather in the harvest before the seasonal rains arrive. Many in harvest time are working against the clock. There was not enough to gather in the grapes so he goes into the market place to hire those seeking work. As the parable continues, we hear of the landowner returning to the market place later that morning as he still needs more labourers. This time there is no negotiation, he simply tells them to go into his vineyard and he will pay them whatever is right. As the day has started these labourers were thinking we had better take this offer as we are unlikely to get another one.

So plentiful is the harvest the landowner returns every couple of hours throughout the day. Each time he returns to the market square to hire labourers there still people waiting to find work. He offers those still hanging around work and makes the same offer as before, set to work in my vineyard and "I will give you whatever is right" **(Matt 20:4)**. Even in the last hour the landowner is still seeking labourers. Presumably by the late afternoon, the market place is left with the oldest, the infirm and unfit all those who weren't deemed as unfit for employment, so there they sit idle in the market place, hungry, in need and rejected. However the generous landowner hires even these and promise to pay them what is right. They don't negotiate or bargain but rejoice they have been given work.

At the end of the day all the labourers are gathered together, standing inline, ready to receive their wages. The landowner begins with those who have only worked for one hour. Paying them first he works his way up the line. To their great surprise those who were hired last and only worked for one hour were given a denarius. Remember this was above a days wage for an unskilled labourer.

Those who were hired first were looking down the line watching with great delight, those who were hired last received the very generous gift of a denarii. These poor, old and unskilled labourers were now dancing with great joy and delight at their good fortune. Naturally the labourers who were hired first at the start of the day started to get excited wondering how much they were going to receive, after all they have toiled all day under the hot sun. They began rubbing their hands together wondering how much this generous landowner was about to give them! As the landowner approaches them, their delight soon turns sour when they receive their pay, for they also received one denarii.

Have you ever been pleased with a purchase you have made, whether its been a pair of shoes, a coat, a car or holiday and you were delighted with it, until you discovered someone you know also bought the same thing as you and got it half price! How the joy goes out of the purchase! Why should our joy turn sour, what robs us of the joy? It all originates in our heart and what our eye is fixed on. Why should someone else get what I have for less when I have paid all this. We can feel cheated and loose our joy.

Remember these labourers were so pleased with themselves at the start of the day, they had negotiated a good wage for their services, but their good fortune soon turned sour as they became angry and grumbled, complaining to the landowner that he was being unfair. When we lose our gratitude we lose grace and when we grumble we have lost our focus. The attitude towards the landowner turned to bitter resentment. How jealous they became of those who only worked one hour and received the same reward, how cheated they felt! The question is where they right to feel this way? This is what Jesus was asking Peter.

Think for a moment about the thief on the cross who lived a life of sin and grief, which led to his arrest and crucifixion. He was crucified next to Jesus and after recognising who Jesus is, asked Him to remember him when He comes into His Kingdom. To which Jesus says, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise' (**Luke 23:43**).

Are you amazed and astounded at the grace of God, who would let a sinner into heaven last minute or does this offend our sensitivities? Compare the thief with the rich young ruler who Jesus let walk away, do we find God's grace offensive? Do we think God should have allowed the rich young ruler into the kingdom and excluded the murderer? How we respond may reveal what Jesus was wanting Peter to see about his own heart.

This is where we enter the inward struggle between God's grace and our self righteousness and self justification, let me explain.....The rich young ruler counted the cost, he was offered the way to salvation but he thought the sacrifice was far too costly to bear, he considered how much he was about to lose financially, his status, friends, reputation and privileges which we know can disappear when wealth is gone. The rich young ruler didn't think Jesus was worth giving up everything for. His wealth was not the issue but his love of mammon. God will not compete with another & become second best.

If our focus is on what I will have to give up to follow Jesus our focus is in the wrong direction. The right view is surely on who God is and what He has done for us. Shouldn't we be more astounded that no one deserves his Kingdom but His grace even extended to a thief on the cross. This shows clearly we are not saved by our good works as many self righteous people think today, but by God's amazing grace. The rich young ruler was given the choice we all have but he turned Jesus down.

In our human nature some resent that a thief can enter the kingdom of God last minute when they have never contributed anything to God's works while others have worked so hard for many years without any greater reward. If this is our thinking, we have seriously missed the point of the gospel. If this is our natural response, our heart reflects is merely mirroring that of the older brother of the prodigal son. When the younger son returned home after his wild living, squandering his inheritance and seeking forgiveness, the older brother refuses to go in and join the celebrations. The father comes out to speak with the older son and reminds him why we are doing this, as he says, 'But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found' (**Luke 15:32**). We all need to be reminded of the true gospel.

If our focus is on works and looking for rewards, we will become frustrated and grow bitter with our work. We will grow weary and tired, discouraged and despondent and possibly even angry and grumble against God. We must be careful this bitter root has soil to take root and grow in. We must keep our focus and heart right and we can only do these things by meditating on the Word of God and seeking God in prayer, reminding ourselves of the gospel again and who we are before Almighty God.

The truth of the gospel is that none of us deserve to enter into God's kingdom (**Rom 3**). It is only through His grace and mercy any of us can enter. If we resent the thief on the cross entering the kingdom of God, we have not realised the depth of our own iniquity before God (**Rom 6**). If this truth rubs us up the wrong way or makes us uncomfortable, we may have a case of self righteous indigestion!! For we don't deserve heavens rewards either, we are in danger of harbouring a dry religiosity like that of the Pharisee when Jesus was in Simon's house when the woman washed Jesus feet with her hair saying, 'Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven - as her great love has been shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little' (**Luke 7:47**). Could it be we think we have been forgiven little and don't see ourselves as sinners? Remember it was the Pharisee who prayed, 'God I thank you that I am not like other people - robbers, evil doers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector' (**Luke 18: 11**). This Pharisee did not leave right with God.

I began with the question has our love and devotion for God and serving Him wained? Have we become weary and discouraged? This becomes evident begin to get frustrated with the work we are have to do. This is the point of the parable. The landowner (who represents God), says these words, "I am not being unfair to you, friend.....Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

If we have understood the gospel, our heart should grow more in grace and be amazed that God has called us to work for His kingdom, to help others come to know Jesus for themselves, as their Lord and saviour. As the parable of the generous king (**Matt 18:21-35**) our desire should be to see those who have debts which can never be repaid find the grace of God who wipes out all debts for those who come before Him in humbly in repentance and faith. 'For a broken and contrite heart God will not despise' (**Psa 51:17**). This is the work to which we are called to as a church, not to serve the community but to lead them to salvation. But we will resent the gospel if we don't have the right heart. Did you notice, the parable ends with the same words which concluded chapter 19 where Jesus says, 'So the last will be first and the first will be last' (**Matt 20:16**). The systems of the heavenly kingdom are going to be very different to the world systems where the poor are neglected and the rich honoured.

Summary

The Father knows the needs of the labourers and He paid them according to their need and not their greed for **no one** received less than he hoped for, **all** received far more than they expected. No matter when the labourers were brought in, **all** should have been eternally grateful. Our attitude like bread may begin fresh, tender and tasty but soon passes its best, so we have to seek fresh manna every day. If we are feeling weary, tired and we sense resentment, or bitterness growing in our heart, with the work we are doing for God, we must repent and give our lives fresh to God again (**Eph 4:31**). We must remember it is a great privilege to serve God in His work, for we can never repay the great debt we owed and if our work helps introduce others to the generous King who will clear the debts (sins) from others, is this not what the kingdom work is all about? **Amen.**