

The Laborers: Matthew 20:1-16

The Welfare Mentality

John W. Ritenbaugh

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Today, we are going to be taking a very thorough look at a parable that I feel can give us a great deal of understanding in regard to our attitude toward God, toward our calling, and why we are doing what we are doing as a Christian.

From time to time, I have used the term “welfare mentality” to describe the present-day attitude by a number of people in our culture. These people have developed a mindset that because they ‘are,’ because they exist (maybe this is an oversimplification), they are entitled to more than reality would allow. This mindset greatly hinders their success in life.

For example, the Constitution of the United States (to the best of my knowledge) shows only three broad entitlements given by the government of the United States. They are the well-known, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” We are entitled to those things. The Bill of Rights, then, expands on those three.

Now, during the couple of hundred years that the United States has existed, these in turn have been expanded into other entitlements, especially in the last 50-75 years, a whole handful of social welfare entitlements that include Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and other welfare and disability payments. All of us take advantage of entitlements on our income tax forms, such as the deductions we get for mortgage interest on our houses. That is an entitlement that the government gives to us. And now, the government is talking about health care legislation (1994), which has interesting ramifications to it.

My concern is not with the entitlements themselves, but the attitude that these entitlements have helped to promote, because they not only play a role in lessening people’s personal responsibility for taking care of and providing for their own, but they promote a sense of “I am owed this because I am.”

This attitude promotes a great deal of discontent, which is almost always accompanied by complaining, self-pity, and in extreme cases rebellion and defrauding the government in order to bend the system to take advantage of anything that they consider to be a loophole.

I am not overly concerned about the entitlements themselves. However, there is a parable that includes the sense of entitlement—one big entitlement—which it could be possible for us to have.

I am more concerned with the attitude that motivates the conduct, because if the attitude is right, then it is likely we are going to have a much greater chance to do what is right; a lot less likely to be led into sin. We are going to be more content, and above all, we are going to have the right understanding of the approach toward salvation and our own labors in the Lord.

You know that we have had a great deal taught to us about works. And, there have been many criticisms of the Worldwide Church of God, and of Herbert W. Armstrong because the emphasis upon works.

This parable is a teaching from Christ to help us to have the right balance to see that works are necessary even though one cannot be saved by them.

Let us look at a couple examples of Israel and see what happens to people when they begin to feel that they are entitled to something. Turn to Numbers 11.

Numbers 11:1-6 Now when the people complained, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of the LORD burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp. Then the people cried out to Moses, and when Moses prayed to the LORD, the fire was quenched. So he called the name of the place Taberah, because the fire of the LORD had burned among them.

Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!"

Understand: They were not without something to eat that was really good for them. In another place the Bible calls this "angel's food." If angels really eat, that food does them really well! They do not die. This is just a little joke, but you see, the Israelites felt that they were entitled to something better than that.

Numbers 11:10 Then Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, everyone at the door of his tent; and the anger of the LORD was greatly aroused; Moses also was displeased.

Now, this is just one example. Something like this happened before. Turn to Exodus 16. Incidentally, this happened exactly one month to the day after leaving Egypt.

Exodus 16:2-3 Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the children of Israel said to them, "Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! . . .

You mean to tell me they forgot the pain already? And now, they were entitled to more?

Exodus 16:3-4 . . . For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not."

Now, I want us to leave this, and go back to the earlier chapters of Exodus because I want to show you what preceded this, and why I am sure that God was displeased. Turn back to Exodus 3.

Exodus 3:7 And the LORD said: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows."

Did God know they were hungry? Did He know they were in chains? And oppressed? Did God know everything about their lives, what they needed? Yes, He did.

Exodus 3:8-9 “So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.”

And so, He tells Moses, “I’m going to send you to those people.” Look at verses 16-17:

Exodus 3:16-17 “Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, ‘The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared to me, saying, “I have surely visited you and seen what is done to you in Egypt; and I have said I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.’”

Turn to Exodus 4.

Exodus 4:29 Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel.

These were the representatives of the people before Moses and Aaron.

Exodus 4:30 And Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. . . .

Now, we just saw an encapsulation of part of what he said, and so, I think we can safely be assured that Aaron delivered to them what God said.

Exodus 4:30-31 . . . Then he did the signs in the sight of the people. So the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel and that He had looked on their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshiped.

God made Israel an offer to free them from their bondage, to take them to the Promised Land. They knew where the Promised Land was; they knew what Aaron was talking about; they knew what had been promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But, God nowhere promised them that they would go first class, in luxury, provided with all the embellishments of several course meals with a wide variety of foods that they, evidently, only a little later, felt entitled to.

That is the way human nature works! Human nature does not change. It is the same today in the twentieth century as it was here in the fifteenth century BC Human nature makes a deal—enters into an agreement—and then, if it feels that the deal is not as good as it originally thought, it seeks to change the rules on the basis that it is entitled to more than it is getting.

We can see that God does not like that.

God nowhere made the promise that was any greater than what we see written here. “I will take you out, I will bring you to the land.”

Now, there might be something that is *implied* there, but it is not stated. They made the deal on the basis of what we see stated here.

This is important to you and me, because we have made a deal with God, too. We have made the covenant—agreement—with Him. They entered into an agreement with God.

Let us look at a psalm that talks about the principle that is involved here. Turn to Psalm 15. First of all, David asked the question, “Who can abide in Your tabernacle, God? Who may dwell on Your holy hill?” Who is going to be in Your Kingdom? And then, he begins to describe the character of these people. And it says in verse 4:

Psalm 15:4 In whose eyes a vile person is despised [he does not associate with these people], but he honors those who fear the LORD; He who swears to his own hurt and does not change.

This is important because of what God is looking for. He is looking for people of integrity, people who are going to make sacrifices in order to keep their word; people whose wallet is less important than the honor of their word.

These kind of people will be thoughtful, they will be careful; they are going to think things through as best as they possibly can before they enter into an agreement. And what these people will do for a community, by their very actions—the way they conduct things—will promote stability. It is going to be solid, because they are somebody who can be depended upon. These are not people who are going to be jamming the courts with all kinds of mean-spirited needless litigation, because they will go to the person who they made a deal with, and if it cannot be resolved, more likely than not, they will take it on the chin.

Jesus spoke about this too. It was part of the Sermon on the Mount. It is pretty important. Turn to Matthew 5.

Matthew 5:33-37 "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

The story behind this is that there in Jesus' day, the Jews were advising clever and ingenious ways of slipping out of keeping their word. They would enter into an agreement, and then say, “I didn't really mean that. You see, when I swore, I had my fingers crossed behind my back.”

That might seem a bit silly, but that is kind of like what they were doing.

Jesus' advice, here, is telling the Christian that every word is uttered before God. So, in order to avoid the proclivity of human nature to back out when things do not go as planned, Jesus is saying in effect, “Think things through; do not swear at all; let your word be your bond.”

Not too long ago, maybe July 4, Evelyn and I watched the movie, “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” the story of George M. Cohan. He had an association with a man whose name was Sam Harris. This was a long, profitable association. They made a great deal of money together. I am sure they had their hard times as well, but there came a time when they felt it necessary to dissolve their partnership. And it comes out in the movie that they never had any other agreement other than a handshake. They both kept their word. I am sure that is why it was so successful. And when the time came to part ways, they did so without any animosity, or anger; they just went their ways. It was a good example of the way things could be done if there are people of integrity involved.

Living with such an approach to life has produced quite a number of notable personalities in the Bible. Richard recently wrote an article about Jephtha and his daughter. Did he keep his word? Did he swear to his own hurt? Now there was a young lady with character! She did not go to her dad and say, “Well, I didn’t enter into this!” But, she went along with her father’s vow to God. He kept his word, and she went along with it—quite the example! Like a female Isaac!

Isaac did not commit himself to go to Mount Moriah to have his throat cut. But, he submitted to his father anyway. Do you see the kind of mind that these people had?

How about Daniel? He apparently committed himself to praying in such a place where he could be seen. And, even though his life was on the line, that if somebody prayed to some other god—that did not stop Daniel from following through with what he was going to do. He is listed there among the three most righteous men who ever lived—Noah, Daniel, and Job. He kept his word.

There is an interesting example I want us to look at. It is found in II Samuel 15. In many cases, many people have never heard of this man, Ittai the Gittite. Here, David was fleeing for his life, because of Absalom’s rebellion.

II Samuel 15:18-20 Then all his [David’s] servants passed before him; and all the Cherethites, all the Pelethites, and all the Gittites, six hundred men who had followed him from Gath, passed before the king [Absalom]. Then the king [David] said to Ittai the Gittite, “Why are you also going with us? Return and remain with the king. For you are a foreigner and also an exile from your own place. In fact, you came only yesterday.” . . .

We can take this two ways: He literally only signed on just the day before; or David could simply mean for only a little while. David was willing to break this man’s oath to be loyal to, and to serve him.

II Samuel 15:20-21 . . . “Should I make you wander up and down with us today, since I go I know not where? Return, and take your brethren back. Mercy and truth be with you.” But Ittai answered the king and said, “As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be.”

Did you ever hear words like this before? How about Ruth? “Wherever you go, I will go.”

II Samuel 15:22 So David said to Ittai, “Go, and cross over.” Then Ittai the Gittite and all his men and all the little ones who were with him crossed over.

By the way, Ittai became one of David’s Three Great Men—a foreigner—a non-Israelite.

You see? These kind of people do not have a welfare mentality. He did not say to David, “Yeah, I’m entitled to leave; the going’s getting rough here; it’s not what I signed up for; goodbye, David.” He did not do that. His loyalty did not pass to another.

Now with that background, turn to Matthew 20.

Matthew 20:1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard."

That phrase, there, “The kingdom of heaven is like” means, “This teaching I am about to give you, is like the situation of.” There is a similarity here. There is something we can learn from this that is very valuable.

This parable, except for the method of payment, describes a common practice of the day, which was especially used during the harvest season. I know that some of you are familiar with this because it takes place in your own city. (I have seen this at work in Los Angeles. I am sure that if it is taking place there it is taking place in other large cities as well.)

Matthew 20:2 “Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.”

A denarius—not sure of the equivalence—but for today, let us just say that it is the minimum wage. That is not really very much to keep a person and his family.

Matthew 20:3-7 “And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to 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.'”

Now at this time, there were two general classes of workers: the slaves or servants; and free men. These were hired laborers, which mean that they were free men. And, among those who were free, they were the lowest class of worker. They may have had some skills, but it says nothing at all at how skilled they were. They were just simply in the lowest class in terms of the amount of money they earned.

Now, in the case of a slave, or a servant, that person’s fortunes rose or fell with the family. Generally, a slave’s existence was not as precarious as these people we are talking about here. Servants were generally taken care of. If the family was making money, then the slave/servant was going to be well taken care of. But the freemen—these hired laborers—had to watch out for himself. And if he did not generate any income, then there was no income for the family. The slave could count on the master of the house being the one concerned with generating income. But the hired laborer had to be concerned for himself.

I think we can see here, just from what has been described so far, that they were not lazing away the day. They were not lazy people. You do not wait around 11 hours unless you were somewhat desperate to make some money and hope during that whole time that somebody will come along and

hire you for the day/hour. These people were willing to work—no question at all—they just needed a job.

Now, the marketplace here was the equivalent of a labor exchange. A man or landowner would come in the morning, and if there were people standing around with their tools waiting to go to work, he walk up to them, and point them out, offer them their wage for the day, and after acceptance, take them back with him. That is exactly what happened here.

Turn back to Deuteronomy 24.

Deuteronomy 24:14-15 "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to the LORD, and it be sin to you."

Here is instruction from God; this kind of person received pay every day. These people were entirely at the mercy of chance employment, and records of the day showed that they were often living in semi-starvation; it is hard for them to make money. If the worker did not work, or make any money, and did not get paid that day, his family did not eat. It is highly unlikely that anybody with a family and receiving only minimum wage was going to have any money set aside. And, they tended to put in a long day, usually 12 hours for that money.

Now, the landowner in the story kept coming back to hire more men. The reason for that is not spelled out, so we have to understand that it is not important for understanding the parable, except maybe one area. It is interesting to note that a deal was struck only with one group—"You do this, and I will pay this amount..." Everybody else realizing that they were not going to be putting in an entire day, they trusted the integrity of the landowner for what they might receive.

At this point, it is good to consider what precipitated or motivated this parable. We find that in Matthew 19. It was primarily Peter's question. This is the occasion where Jesus had the rich young ruler coming running up to Him, asking Him what good thing he had to do to have eternal life.

Matthew 19:23-26 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Just hang onto that thought; it is important to the parable.

Let us consider III John 2 where John said, "Brethren, I wish above all things that you prosper and be in good health, even as your soul prospers." That is an expression of God through the apostle John. God is interested in our prosperity. That is what this parable is about. It has to do with people prospering. There is more to it than that.

In Genesis 39:2 we find Joseph was a prosperous man. And also, he was a godly man. Remember this in light of what Jesus said about how hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Joseph was both a prosperous man, and a godly man.

When we look at Job 1:3, we find that he was the greatest man of the East at that time. This is given in context of what he owned. I would have to say that the meaning in there is that he was the *richest* man of the East.

Genesis 13 tells us that Abraham was exceedingly rich. I mean, if God tells you something like that, that man was wealthy—exceedingly rich.

What about David? We generally do not think of him as being wealthy, but I believe I mentioned this before, how *True Magazine* back in the 1950s calculated David's wealth on the basis of what His personal offering was for the building of the Temple, at about 20 billion dollars. That is pretty rich in 1950 dollars! Imagine what that is in today's money! It would make Sam Walton's family appear as paupers! And yet, David was a godly man.

But Jesus said it is very difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Yet, here we have a parable about poor people.

Jesus joins into this in Matthew 6:24, warning His people about the mammon of this world. Again in Matthew 6:21, He says to make sure that your treasure is in heaven, and not on earth where moth and rust corrupts. Paul warns us in I Timothy 6:9-10 that riches are a temptation and a snare. There are plenty of warnings in the Bible.

It would seem we have a dichotomy, here. On the one hand, some of the most godly men have been wealthy men, while Jesus is telling us how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

Turn to Mark 10. I want you to read this one. It is the same episode, The Rich Young Ruler.

Mark 10:23 Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!"

I have gone through all of this about wealthy men, God's attitude, and Jesus' teaching, to help us understand that we are obviously dealing with an attitude. Prosperity of and by itself is neutral. Such men as Joseph, Abraham, Job, and David, were wealthy, but their trust was in God. And that is what motivated them in their life, not the powers and security of this world's wealth.

Now, also contained in these verses is something that you have to understand from other portions of the Bible and that is: The ***generally held belief*** that prosperity testifies that God is blessing the person because he is righteous. If they are well off, then it is because God is blessing them, because they are righteous.

Not so!

What Jesus is doing here is cautioning us that this is not an absolute. Even though God tells us that if you obey, you will be blessed, we must understand that of and by itself that does not signify that God is the One doing the blessing. Some people are very talented at making money. So we cannot assume that because they appear to be being physically blessed, that God is doing the blessing. It takes more evidence than that to reach a proper evaluation.

So, Jesus is cautioning that we should be careful about that attitude because we can very easily be intimidated by people of wealth or fame, because we respect their power, fame, and popularity. It can have an intimidating effect upon us.

We are dealing with an attitude. Attitudes are important because they are triggers—they precipitate conduct. Often human nature can mask underlying attitudes. Conduct can often reveal those underlying attitudes. In the thing regarding the rich young man, what was it that precipitated Jesus' judgment that the man was trusting in money? He could not give it up. And because he could not give it up, it very clearly shows his trust was in his money, rather than Christ or His Word. So, that is why Jesus answered in that manner.

Now Peter sent a warning flag to Jesus in his response to Jesus' assessment of the young man.

Matthew 19:27-30 Then Peter answered and said to Him [It appears that Peter was like the spokesman for the group, the others all had this on their mind.], "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" So Jesus said to them, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone [including you, and me, brethren] who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Now there is inherent in Peter's statement the underlying attitude of what? That one earns by his work. "We have left all, and followed You." If one does this, at the very least, one earns salvation of God, and probably reward as well. "What are we going to have?" This is what precipitated Jesus' response in Matthew 20:1-16.

Jesus was very nice, patient, and treated this as a fair question. And it is. He does not castigate them, but assures them, and you, and me, "Look, I don't want you to worry about that." That is basically it. All of our sacrifices are not going to go unnoticed. You are going to receive much more than you ever give.

So, He concludes with this enigmatic statement, "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." That is what leads into the parable, then.

Some feel that the parable is a rebuke. If it is, it is very mild. I personally feel that it is not that way. He took the opportunity to expound the attitude that we should have toward our calling and its demands.

Matthew 20:8 "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.'

It is very interesting that Jesus did it this way. The last are pointedly called to be paid first. This is crucial to the lesson, because it injects something unexpected into the mix. Ordinarily if one works a full day, and another works only a portion of the day, any one of us would expect that he who only worked a portion of the day, would only receive a portion of a day's wages. We would expect them

to be pro-rated accordingly. (Using my minimum wage example from earlier), twelve times \$6, I should get \$72 for my day. One times \$6 for the fellow who only worked one hour should only get \$6 for the time worked—right? Any good union man would agree. But now we find in verse 9:

Matthew 20:9-11 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, . . .

Oh, oh, oh! Here we go again, just like Israel back in Numbers 11 and Exodus 16.

Matthew 20:12-13 . . . 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?'

These people felt entitled to more, even though they eagerly had accepted the landowner's offer when they were hired. And though they were paid fairly, they did not feel as though they were *treated* fairly. There is a difference between those two. The landowner gave them exactly what agreed to—it was just. But human nature did not feel it was just.

I will tell you, is that not enough to get a guy feeling offended? I am sure it is.

If that happened to us in our place of employment, I think there is every chance that we would feel upset if we are passed over for a bonus that others received, or if we do not get a pay raise when we feel we deserved it.

Now, please understand that is the feeling or attitude that might develop should something similar to this occur. I want us to understand before we go any further. This parable is not intended in any way by Christ to establish His view of employer/employee practices regarding wages today, or in the world tomorrow. Remember it is a parable. It is a teaching vehicle. There is a powerful lesson here.

One thing we can be certain of is that the parable as constructed has instruction for His disciples—you and me. We have been called into God's work.

Look at Isaiah 55 to get a principle:

Isaiah 55:8-9 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

We need to feed this principle into this parable lesson in Matthew 20. God does not think like a man thinks. He is bringing us to where we will think like He does. We are not there yet. We are going to be in His image. And when we are in His image, we are going to be one with Him, and we are going to think like He does. But we are at different points along the road as we grow to be in His image.

Now the primary thrust of where this appears, here in Isaiah 55, involves moral issues. If you drop back to verse 6 you will see that in the context: God's ways and thoughts in regard to moral issues in life. But the principle extends into other areas of life, because God thinks differently from man in

other areas as well. If we thought like God, there would be no separation at all between Him and us. But there is a separation there, and that gulf has to be bridged until we are all one with God.

Remember this principle: God is *always* guided by His righteousness, and His purpose—the two of them in harmony. His thinking and His ways; how He acts and how He reacts is always guided by His righteousness. God is moral in *everything* He does. He is absolute morality. There is no shadow of sin, no shadow of taking advantage of. He is always fair, and graceful to the extreme. So, His righteousness always guides everything He does within His purpose. I do not mean that anything outside His purpose is unrighteous, because eventually we are all gathered into His purpose. He is dealing with you and me more directly than He is with this world.

Now, God's purpose is to create a family; a kingdom consisting of the Sons of God, people who are like Him, people He is molding into His image. And so, God's actions will always be consistent with His nature and righteousness, and His purpose.

Let us tie something together, here: “The first will be last, and the last will be first.”

What is Jesus saying?

He is saying, “Friend, you had better be ready for some surprises. God doesn’t think like we do. His thinking is within the framework of His purpose. It is always going to be fair; it will always be just; it will always be loving. But it will also be always within the framework of His purpose.

We saw one: The last who got hired got paid just as much as the first ones. That is not normal. The last are as if they were first.

Now, I started this talking about works. And what is our attitude toward works? What is our attitude about God in the way that He acts and reacts? What is our attitude about ourselves in relation to His work?

This is an important parable. We had better have the correct focus.

Turn to Isaiah 45, and let us apply this to ourselves:

Isaiah 45:9-13 "Woe to him who strives with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth! Shall the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' Or shall your handiwork say, 'He has no hands'? Woe to him who says to his father, 'What are you begetting?' Or to the woman, 'What have you brought forth?'" Thus says the LORD , the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: "Ask Me of things to come concerning My sons; and concerning the work of My hands, you command Me. I have made the earth, and created man on it. I—My hands—stretched out the heavens, and all their host I have commanded. I have raised him [Cyrus] up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; he shall build My city and let My exiles go free, not for price nor reward," says the LORD of hosts.

Now, feed that back into the parable in Matthew 20, because that principle also fits there.

God's view of things—His work—is always universal in its scope. He sees things from the end to the beginning, from the beginning to the end. God knows where He is going with everything. We do not.

Expect some surprises. That is what Jesus is saying. We only know partially. Paul said, “I see in part, and know in part.” The time is coming when things will be clear. They are not entirely clear, yet. We only know generally where He is heading with the whole project. But we do not know very much about what He is doing with each person involved.

Remember what Jesus said in John 14:1? “I go and prepare a place for you. If I go, I will come again.” First, He prepares a place. Then, He prepares people to fill the place so that we fit into what He has prepared us for.

Christ knows us inside and out. And, what we need, and more importantly, what His work needs far better than we do.

In the parable, a discontentment arose in the early workers because of jealousy, because they felt that they were entitled to more and better. There is something that involves me in this: It is one of the reasons I want you to call me by my first name, John. God is creating a Family, and we are brothers and sisters because we have the same spiritual Father, and that Father is the God of creation, and we have the same mother, Jerusalem above. I am also a minister, and therefore, there is an authority figure in terms of the church as well. But, that authority is given for ministering—serving. First and foremost, I am a brother. A brother in the faith who might be able to give a helpful counsel from time to time from God's Word; the real authority resides in the Father. My authority is very limited. I am not here to run your life.

Now, if I govern myself the way that I am supposed to, underneath the Father, I will submit to the Father, and I will not abuse my authority. I will treat you as a loving older brother.

Now if you do your part, you will also submit to the Father, and will treat me lovingly, as an older brother. And things will move along just right, because there is faith that the Father will take care; we will be praying to that end, and acting toward that end. He responds to those who obey Him.

Now, this parable shows discontentment within the family, because they think they are entitled to receive more than others based on their *works*, and the basis of their length of time of service to the Father. Jesus said, “Don't count on it!” God does not think like a man. “The last shall be first, and the first shall be last.” That cliché is a Hebraism to expect surprises. Things do not always work out the way they should, or are expected.

I remember Herbert Armstrong saying (at least four or five times), “Bill Homberger was going to get a bigger reward than he was.” Most of you do not know who Bill Homberger really was—the key master on the Ambassador College campus. But, because Bill had to overcome so much, and Mr. Armstrong was so gifted by God in comparison, Herbert Armstrong looked at him, and said, “That man has come way further than I have, by far.”

Let us put this all together. There are three lessons in this parable.

Matthew 19:21 Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

I went back to that verse because it provides the foundation for the agreement that the workers would have agreed to. Remember, Peter said “We have left all and followed you.” The covenant that we made with God (the New Covenant) is based on the same things. Reference Luke 14:26, and

Philippians 3:3-8. Paul looks back on his pedigree, and tells the Philippians that, “I have quite a pedigree, I do. I come from the tribe of Benjamin . . .” and then he goes on and lists all those things, “And, I left it all, and consider it no more than garbage.” Herbert Armstrong said, “I was nothing but a burned-out hunk of junk.”

What do we bring into this covenant we have made with God of which we can brag? If a man like Paul says that he cannot brag about anything, what do we bring into the mix as an employee that God is going to use? Nothing, except our life. That is essential. No life, no covenant.

Now, what does God give in return? When we agree with the landowner, what does He do? He gives us four things that are absolutely unattainable through any other means.

First, the forgiveness of sin—every sin committed is against Him, because it is His earth (Psalm 24 says that He created the earth, and the fullness thereof; and all the people—they are His). So even when a brother is caught in our sin, and they are hurt, the real sin is not against them. No, that person belongs to God. He created him, and gave him life. He is God's property that is being damaged. The sin is against the owner—God the Creator.

Not only that, it is His law that is broken. So, only He has the authority and the right to forgive sin. So, He paid for it with His Son.

The second thing He gives to us is His Holy Spirit. Where else are we going to get that?

The third thing that He gives to us is access to Him through Jesus Christ. Until this occurs, we have no access to Him. What a deal!

The fourth thing is eternal life. We are not immortal of and by ourselves.

And so, we bring into the deal our life; He puts everything else into it.

I should add one more thing: He promises through Paul in Philippians 4, “My God will supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Jesus Christ.”

What, outside of those things, are we entitled to? Nothing. That is the deal. We enter into a covenant with God; we give Him our life; He gives us these other things, and then what happens, brethren? We become His, because He has bought us. He has paid for us; He has redeemed us through Jesus Christ.

That is lesson number one. We have got to understand that! God is just. He is fair. And in this parable, God guarantees a full and just remuneration for our labor whether our labor is long or short. We cannot go back to Him and complain that we are not being treated fairly because we have entered into this agreement. We gave Him our life, and He gave us these other things. Nothing else is spelled out.

The second lesson is: God claims the right to do as He pleases with what is His.

Matthew 20:15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?

He owns us because He bought and paid for us. So, God has done something that we could not do for ourselves; it is something that no man can do for us either. And the result is a binding obligation on our part to allow Him to use us as He sees fit.

Now, you can add these scriptures to this: Ezekiel 16:8, “I saw you, I did these things for you, covered you, and you became Mine.” Galatians 3:29, “If you are Christ's [He owns us], then you are Abraham's seed.” We are His possession. What is the basis for it? Galatians 1:7, “The blood of Jesus Christ—the payment of a ransom.” Colossians 1:14 confirms that. When you redeem something, it becomes the property of One putting up the payment for it.

And so, we belong to Christ, who paid for us by giving up His life's blood, and He can do with us as He wills, because it is right.

Lesson number three is the ultimate lesson of the parable:

Matthew 20:9-10 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.

Matthew 20:13 But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?'

Not only is Jesus saying that God is fair, and just, but also He is showing that God is full of grace and mercy. God retains to Himself the exercise of both His goodness, and His grace. The goodness shows in the fact that He was fair. The grace shows in that He went far beyond these people's trust that He would do what is right.

God is not operating a work based on man's normal quid pro quo—something for something. We give a day's work, and so the employer gives back a day's wages. God wants us to understand that He does not operate according to that. In forgiving us, He has already given us more than we deserve.

So, I think it is good to ask the question, “Why didn't the men who complained, instead rejoice that the men who waited so long in the marketplace looking for work, were now at some measure of peace because they had money to take home to feed their family?” They were not thinking of the other guy's blessing.

It is the same basic reason that the elder brother in the Prodigal Son was upset, because the brother came home, and the father greeted him so warmly with tears. Then the father said, “Look—you had me the whole while. What more do you want? How much more are you entitled to?” He did not look at that. He looked at the situation in jealousy, at what his younger brother was now receiving.

God is full of grace. So the rewards of God are not according to what men think is their merit. If we cannot bring in anything to God except our life, then we make an agreement with Him in which the basic terms are spelled out, what claim do we have on anything more than what was part of the terms of the original agreement?

Nothing.

Turn to Ephesians 2.

Ephesians 2:4-10 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come [this is part of His purpose!] He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

There is much that can be added to this that follows this same principle. I Corinthians 12:4-11 shows us the gifts that God gives to us. To work within His church comes from Him. We find that God has appointed the ministry, He placed them into the church. We find out that the reason the gifts are given is for the edifying of the church.

Turn to I Corinthians 4.

I Corinthians 4:7 For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

Paul is applying this to our place within the church. What he is saying is that it leaves us without a leg to stand on in terms of salvation itself, or because He gives the gifts so that we can work within the work; He places people where they are placed, the position occupied within the family; there is absolutely nothing to get puffed up about.

Now, there is a balance. Are our works needful for the people of God? Absolutely. Paul says in Philippians 2:12-13, "Work out your own salvation." There is work involved in terms of salvation. James 2:18-26 says, "Look—you show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works." Then he goes on to say, "Was not our father Abraham justified by his works?" He is showing that the two of them go together. There is grace. There are the gifts of God. But there is also the work that is required of us that brings us into the image of God that makes the witness in our lives on behalf of God.

There is certainly reason to be aware of how much one has accomplished within the work. Jesus said, "I have finished the work." He was aware of how much He had done. His last spoken words were, "It is finished." He meant the work, as well as His life. "I did it!"

What did Paul do? He gave a whole listing of all the things that he did. He had a right to be proud in the right way. But he goes on to say that, "There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness." This was not based on his works. It is only a symbol of eternal life—"I am going to have eternal life" is basically all he was saying. He knew that it was coming. He even said in another place, "I have worked more than they all." There is nothing wrong with a recognition of those things. But he never claimed anything more than that he was going to be in the Kingdom of God.

So, there is a balance.

Ultimately, in the final analysis, it comes down to what God has given, because if God had not given those things, there would be no good works; there would only be evil works. It is God who called, and it is God who forgives. It was God who gave His Spirit; it was God who gives eternal life; it is God who gives us the gifts that enable us to do the things we do. All we have to do is make use of them.

Those are our works. They are important.

If we believe that God is working in us, then we will know that what we are going through is for our good, because He looks at things in a universal sense. And though things may not be going as well as we want, wanting things to be better, we are working in that direction; we are working with a far greater degree of peace and contentment than we would ever otherwise have. And, we will not get into the fits or the attitude that the Israelites did when they complained, or the workers did in Matthew 20 when they complained, feeling that they were entitled to more.

The point of the parable is not that we all will receive the same reward, but that all rewards, and eternal life itself, is a matter of God's sovereign grace.