

Many Are Called, But Few Are Chosen (Part Eight)

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Nothing good has come into the world without opposition, and that is especially true in spiritual matters. Here we face not only the hostility of mere people, but satanic opposition as well. That is why the Bible warns us to be on our guard against the Devil, who, we are told, in I Peter 5:8, “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”

The apostles Peter and Paul alert us to Satan’s schemes, because he must not be able to outwit us. In II Corinthians 2, the apostle Paul wants us to remember that we know Satan tries to deceive us constantly.

II Corinthians 2:9-11 For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

Paul points out here that one of Satan’s deceptions is to get us to be unmerciful.

Since we have an enemy who is so fiercely opposed to the existence of God’s rule on earth, we should not be surprised to find God warning us against his devices in the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13.

Jesus does this clearly in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, which portrays the relationship of the church to the wicked one and his agents. It shows how Satan, like the enemy of a certain farmer, sows weeds in God’s field, meaning that he scatters non-Christians among believers.

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares

To a multitude gathered before Him, Jesus spoke the Parable of the Wheat (which is grain) and the Tares (which are weeds), in which He exposes the work of the mystery of sin against the church and the extent to which the evil one is allowed to go in his opposition to it.

This parable reveals a slightly different aspect of the same truth taught in the preceding Parable of the Sower. In the Tares, the mixed character of the church culminates in the ultimate separation of Christians in name only, from the saints.

In this parable, there are two sowers, two kinds of seed, and two harvests: one good, the other bad. The Parable of the Sower depicts four kinds of soils, but in the Parable of the Tares, the field, which Jesus says represents the world, contains all the soils interspersed over its entirety.

Matthew 13:24-25 Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way."

The enemy sowed weeds in a field that was not his while the servants slept. This does not necessarily mean that the servants were not watchful and were thus to blame for the mixed field. The wording implies that it was the normal time for sleep, night.

Matthew 13:26-29 “But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them.'”

"Tares" here is darnel, a seed hard to identify from the wheat seed, and immature wheat and darnel look alike. To try to destroy the darnel would mean destroying much of the wheat, and separating one from the other would be beyond the servants' abilities.

The bad seeds grow to become poisonous weeds that allow only the healthiest of the wheat to survive. Tares, like weeds, have never been a saleable product. Nobody wants it!

Also, the roots of the two plants entangle themselves, so that pulling up one would mean, unavoidably pulling up the other. When the plants are older, it is easy to tell them apart.

Matthew 13:30 ‘Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."”

Only when the wheat has matured can the tares be detected. Then, the tares are gathered together in bundles in the field and destroyed by fire.

Jesus illustrates two sowers of different character. In the Parable of the Sower, the sower stands for Jesus Christ and by relationship all teachers of God's truth.

Here, in the Parable of the Wheat and Tares, "the sower" is exclusively Jesus. He is the "owner" (in verse 27), and "the son of Man" (in verse 37).

The other sower is called "his enemy," "an enemy," "the wicked one," and "the devil" (in verses 25, 28, 38-39). To describe this enemy, Jesus uses the Greek word “diabolos” meaning the accuser, deceiver, liar, and betrayer—one who is against all that is true and righteous.

The Parable of the Tares Explained

Now let us look at Jesus' revelation of the meaning of the parable.

Matthew 13:36-38 Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom [believers], but the tares are the sons of the wicked one [unbelievers]."

Satan's sly nature is revealed in his choice of the darkness for doing his diabolical work. Also, note that he does not bother to sow the wicked among the wicked, but the wicked among the good. Satan's malicious intention in sowing tares among the wheat is to cause contention and confusion.

James 3:14-16 But if you have envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.

Many who are not in the process of conversion resemble those who are. Just like true Christians, they go to church, pray, and read the Bible, but they are only religious hobbyists. Jesus calls them "sons of the wicked one" (in Matthew 13:38), and being tares, they will be destroyed. The tares are not originally from the wicked one, but they develop character according to his strong influence. They are led by him and so are his children.

John 8:44 "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."

In discussing this passage, some Bible commentaries have made an issue of a detail in Christ's explanation found in Matthew 13:38.

In the previous verse, Jesus had explained that "the one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man," an explanation that no doubt applies to the Parable of the Sower as well and shows that the parables are all somewhat linked. Then he goes on to say, "The field is the world" in verse 38. Some have stressed that point, arguing that if the field is the world, it cannot be the church. Therefore, Christ's prohibition against trying to separate the tares (or weeds) from the wheat (or grain) before the final judgment should not be applied to the church.

The concern over that interpretation is a valid one, because the church should strive to maintain purity. Other passages in the New Testament instruct us to work for that goal. But to argue for that idea leads us off track as far as the interpretation of the parable is concerned. For one thing, it is impossible to make a rigid distinction between the world and the church in this parable since, a little farther on, in verse 41, Jesus speaks of the angels weeding "out of His kingdom" everything that causes sin and all who do evil.

God's Kingdom is not the world in general, so any interpretation based exclusively on the phrase "the field is the world" should be suspect.

Again, what is the point of Satan planting children "in the world," if all it means is that the Devil's children and God's children live side by side? At best that is self-evident. Besides, if that is what Jesus means, the parable is not even stating the situation in the best way. If the field is the world rather than the church, it would be more correct to say that the Devil's people are in the world already and that it is Jesus, rather than Satan, who plants his seed among that which is already growing.

It would be Jesus who does the new thing, not Satan. However, as Jesus tells the story, the point is what Satan is doing, and that is something done after Jesus has already sown His seed. In other

words, the Devil places his own counterfeit Christians among true believers to hinder God's work. So that is the real message, and whether the field is the world, or the church is actually irrelevant.

The point is simply that the Devil is going to bring forward people (whether in the church or out of it) so much like true Christians, though they are not Christians, that even the servants of God will not be able to tell them apart.

Consequently, although we want a pure church and will certainly exercise church discipline to the best of our ability in clear cases, we must not think we will achieve total purity in this age of the church. Even in our exercise of valid church discipline we must be extremely careful not to discourage or damage anyone whom God has called.

Continuing with Jesus' revelation of the meaning of this parable, let us pick it up in verses 38-43:

Matthew 13:38-43 "The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

In this parable's relationship to the church, it exposes the problem of evil intermingled with good within congregations, just as the same kind of mix confronts nations, communities, and homes. No matter how society tries to legislate or separate out lawbreakers from the rest of society, the seeds of sin and crime find a place to grow.

God's church is similarly affected by Satan's constant attacks. The genuine wheat and the counterfeit wheat—the tares—are always together in the church.

The servants' perplexity about the sowing of the tares shows that the presence of sin is often a mystery to people.

II Thessalonians 2:7-10 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

God cannot be blamed for them because He does not sow evil—Satan does.

James 1:13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.

By this parable, Jesus prophesies that the church of God on earth would be imperfect. The spiritual church has members with the Holy Spirit who are dedicated and loyal, yet have personal defects. It

also has within it, unconverted people who may recognize the truth but are there only to enjoy association with God's people.

Jesus' intent is to enlighten and warn the saints of this fact, not to expose the tares at this time.

Acts 20:29-32 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

God will root out the bad seed when the good seed has matured.

The good seed is expected to bear good fruit. "The good seed," "the wheat," and "the sons of the kingdom" refer to baptized members of God's church in whom the Holy Spirit dwells—the saints, the elect, the righteous.

Matthew 13:43 "Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

In the previous parable, (Matthew 13:19), the seed represents "the word of the kingdom," but here, the good seed is the product of that word received, understood, and obeyed (verse 38 says, "the good seeds are the saints").

The Son of Man, as the Sower, or Owner, sows only good seed, that is, they are those who are righteous due to walking worthy of God—living His way of life, and becoming the "children of the Kingdom."

I John 2:6 He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

II John 6 This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it.

It is God's will that Jesus Christ the Redeemer sow His redeemed ones in this world of sin and misery for the purpose of training and testing them as true witnesses for Him in preparation for the Kingdom. Therefore, He has placed Christians where He wants them.

Jesus tells Peter that he is like wheat, and as such, he would be sifted by Satan.

Luke 22:31-32 And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."

All of God's saints should heed this warning to watch and pray that the field of our heart not be sown with tares by the enemy. God bought us with a price and given us His Spirit, making us new creations in Him and heirs of His Family and eternal life. He expects us to bear fruit in our corner of the field of this world in which He has sowed us. God's church is in this world, but not of this world.

Applications

Let us continue to apply this to the church, but in more detail.

1. Let no one deceive you!

If Satan is mixing his people in among true Christians, then we should be alert to that fact. We should be always on our guard not to be taken in by those who pretend to be Christians but are not, and we should not be surprised if Satan's followers show up in strange places or eventually show their true colors by abandoning Christianity entirely.

In II Corinthians Paul gives just such a warning, pointing out that Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.

II Corinthians 11:12-15 But what I do, I will also continue to do, that I may cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast. For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

Again, we should not be surprised if some ministers eventually repudiate the faith and leave the church. John also wrote about such people, saying:

I John 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

2. Do not expect church members to be perfect. Jesus did not pretend (nor should we) that the visible church is perfect.

Sometimes those who are not Christians say, "I'm not a Christian because the church is filled with hypocrites." But that is itself a hypocritical statement. It implies that the one making it is better than those whom he rejects, which is probably not true! At best it is not the whole truth since there are deeper reasons why people will not become Christians.

Nevertheless, the real problem is that if the objection were to be eliminated by repentance (that is, if hypocrisy and other sins were to be eliminated among the people of God), there would be no valid opportunity for the objector to criticize us. The critic, who is himself a sinner and a hypocrite, does not fit in. Eventually, there will be a place for him only because Jesus came to call sinners to repentance.

Matthew 9:13 But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.'

3. Do not condemningly judge other church members of being tares.

We may evaluate the fruit produced by other church members and say, "He doesn't act very converted." But we will not know until the resurrection.

The members of the church who are not tares are not completely free of sin either; every Christian has both human spirit and God's Spirit influencing him. We cannot always distinguish between the wheat and tares in this age. But the day is coming when that distinction will be made. The harvest will happen, the wheat will be gathered into God's barn, and the tares will be burned. As a result, we should examine ourselves as to whether we are true children of God or not. As Peter words it, we must "make our "calling and election sure."

The Secular Church

There is also another very subtle deception that hinders the true church. We must beware of the secular church! As Christians, we must be on guard against Satan's tactics. Secular means "worldly."

We are warned not only against Satan's infusion of his own people into the church; but also against the visible church's bureaucratic growth (which confuses money, size, and structure with spiritual fruit) and against the infusion of evil into the lives even of converted people.

In other words, we must beware of the church becoming secular, that is, of becoming like the world around us. The religion of the secular church is humanism. The basis for humanism is idolatry. We make ourselves our own idols by *selfishness*, *self-centeredness*, *self-seeking*, *self-glorification*, *self-exaltation*, and *self-will*!

The secular church is a church that is conformed to the world. It is characterized by the world's wisdom, the world's theology, the world's agenda, and the world's methods. When the visible church becomes worldly, it may still be trying to do God's work, but it will be trying to do it in the world's way. It looks to the media and money rather than to God and His power to produce spiritual fruit and growth.

How has that happened? Like the false teachers throughout history, they use the Bible's words, but give them new meaning, pouring bad secular content into spiritual terminology.

Sin becomes merely dysfunctional behavior. Salvation becomes self-esteem or wholeness. Jesus becomes more of a warm and fuzzy icon, than a Savior from the guilt of sin and death.

People are told how to have happy marriages and raise nice children, but not how to become right with an offended God. The secular church does not want to preach a gospel that would expose people's sins, make them uncomfortable, and drive them to repentance.

When you put these contemporary worldly characteristics together, it is difficult to escape the feeling that Jesus' Parable of the Leaven has been fulfilled all too visibly in the visible.

The visible church has been permeated by the "yeast" of Satan's strategies! Under normal circumstances, yeast that has begun to work cannot be eradicated. That is why it is such a good picture of the sin that will be in the church and world until the return of Jesus Christ.

Although in baking we would never be able to rid dough of yeast, in the spiritual realm we can have important successes, at least where we ourselves (and perhaps our immediate families and church) are concerned.

Paul writes to the Corinthians:

I Corinthians 5:7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.

God is purifying His people and He will bring His church to complete maturity and holiness.

The Rich Young Ruler

Let us shift gears here. When Peter reacted to the unbelief of the rich young ruler by reminding Jesus that he and the other disciples had left everything to follow Jesus, he wondered what there would be for them.

Matthew 19:24-27 "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." Then Peter answered and said to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore, what shall we have?"

Jesus answered by promising Peter rewards:

Matthew 19:28-30 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 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."

God is no man's debtor. But debtor is not quite the word to describe what is going on in this passage. Debt implies obligation, as if God owes us something. It was what Peter meant when he asked, "What shall we have?"

God owes us nothing, and whatever we receive from Him we receive only because He is gracious. To make sure the disciples understood this concept, Jesus told the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

This parable occurs only in Matthew, where it serves to illustrate the principle of Matthew 19:30.

"Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." This principle is repeated at the story's close.

The parable itself is a straightforward story. A landowner needed men to work in his vineyard, so he went out early in the morning and hired all the workers he could find.

In this parable, Jesus illustrates the human expectation of desiring more. There are some employees who should have been happy with the amount they were paid for their work. They would have been happy except for one thing; they saw some fellow workers receiving a higher hourly wage than they received. Their gratitude vanished—dissatisfaction, self-pity, and scowling set in.

The employer, representing God in the parable, firmly corrected them for their wrong attitudes. He asked them, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?"

Matthew 20:1-10 "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 to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So, they went. [Notice that, this time there was no set wage.] 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."

By that time, they were rubbing their hands together happily, supposing that if those who had worked less than they had worked were being paid a denarius, they would receive more.

Matthew 20:11-15 "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. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?'"

The parable is followed by a statement that is close to the one that ended the previous chapter.

Matthew 20:16 "So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

In the parable, God is asking His workers, "Are you envious because I am generous?" Envy develops from comparing ourselves with others. It is impossible to make an accurate comparison, because Christ works with each person in a specific way to develop the character and skills needed for his responsibility in God's Kingdom.

II Corinthians 10:12 For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

II Corinthians 10:17-18 But "he who glories, let him glory in the Lord." For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.

The parable teaches that service for Christ will be faithfully rewarded, and that equal faithfulness to our opportunity will be equally rewarded. However, only God can adequately assess faithfulness and opportunities, therefore, human judgments are inadequately assessed.

The result is that human comparisons with others clouds the mind to realizing true blessings. All blessings, all good gifts, belong to God and come from Him.

James 1:16-17 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

God Chooses

Who are we to ever question how God chooses to distribute spiritual gifts, responsibilities, and other blessings? It must really displease God to see someone pouting for lack of a better TV set or car or house or standard of living. If that person's mind is so set on physical things that he carries on like a spoiled child for not having more, one of the most harmful things that could happen to that person would be to be blessed with still more material possessions.

An increase such as this, can become a trap, possibly causing that person to lose out on salvation. We know that it can be harder for a rich person to be close to God than for a person who has little in the way of this world's things.

To have the right perspective on blessings requires a total reversal of human reasoning. We should live by the principle that happiness is not getting what you want but appreciating what you have. This is a major step toward contentment and having peace of mind.

Remember the disastrous effect wealth had on King Solomon? He had abundant wealth, but it helped to ruin him spiritually because he did not use it properly and he did not have the right priorities.

Interpretation Difficulties

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is clear enough, but that does not mean it is without difficulties. The first difficulty is that it presents us with an admittedly strange situation. We have a businessman who pays people who work only one hour the same wage he pays those who work all day. To the carnal mind, that is hard to accept.

According to the landowner, the pay for the full day's work is fair. That may be true, but what businessman operates that way? It seems irrational. It produces labor problems. More than that, it seems to be bad business. A person who operated in this manner *in this society* would soon be bankrupt.

But there is a further difficulty: The payment to the workers seems unjust. We may be reluctant to say it, knowing that the owner of the vineyard is God and that God is always just, regardless of what we may think. But still, to human reasoning, the procedure seems unjust.

Why should those who were hired later be paid the same as those who were hired at the start of the day? Why should not those who worked longer be paid more?

Many have attempted to interpret the parable in an effort to eliminate these difficulties, but their secular interpretations do not work. Some have suggested that those who began early in the day did not work well. They took extended coffee breaks and talked on the job. They took a long lunch.

Those who worked a shorter day worked harder. They accomplished as much in their one, four, or seven hours as the early risers did in their twelve hours. It was a simple case of equal pay for equal work.

But, nothing in the story indicates that we should interpret it this way, and a lot goes against it. If nothing else, the concluding words stress the generosity of the owner, and not his accurate evaluation of the quality or quantity of the work that had been done.

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?”

Others have suggested that the coins were different. In one case, it was a gold denarius; in another silver; in another bronze, and so on.

Still others have supposed that the parable teaches there are not any rewards in heaven, and that ultimately it will not matter how much or how little we do for Jesus. The problem with that view is that other texts teach there will be rewards and our work does matter.

The Proper Interpretation

So how are we to understand this parable? At the very least, it is a story intended to teach about the grace of God in salvation. Peter wanted to know what he and the others would get for their discipleship, which they considered a major contribution on their part.

But when Jesus answered as he did, He was teaching that although the disciples would receive rewards for their service, anything they received from God—whether rewards for service or eternal life itself—was a gift flowing from the grace of God only. God owes us nothing, not even an opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel.

Most professing Christians today, take for granted God’s mercy and grace. God’s grace has become boring for many people. It is boring because we do not think of ourselves as sinners—at least not very great sinners—and because we think God owes us something, anyway. We think we are kind, generous, and forgiving. So, why should God not be?

What Jesus tells us is that God is not like human beings and does not operate in line with our ideas, which is why, “the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is one of a certain class of parables that deal in part with the problems the Jews had when Gentiles began to believe the gospel. The problem is reflected in the older brother in Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32); it is seen in the Parable of the Wedding Feast to which many were invited but refused to come (Matt 22:1-14); and in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14).

In the earliest days of Old Testament history, from the calling of Abraham, and especially Jacob, about 2,000 years before Christ, God began to deal with the Israelites, especially the Jews, in a special way.

God began to create, redeem, and eventually teach and disciple those to whom Jesus Christ would eventually come. The Jews were proud of that heritage, as we ourselves would be. But instead of

remembering that what they had received was due entirely to God's grace (grace they had often resisted), the Jews began to suppose that the benefits of their position were really due largely to themselves. They thought they had earned their position by centuries of faithful labor for God. They were not always complaining; they were often glad for the privilege. But when Jesus came, all the benefits they supposed they had earned by centuries of hard labor were now offered freely to the Gentiles, who had done nothing to deserve them. So, after a while, so many Gentiles were converted that it seemed as if the cherished Jewish traditions would be discarded.

As I mentioned, several parables deal with this problem in a variety of ways. The account of the older brother and the parable of the workers in the vineyard are similar. In each the faithful, hard-working people (the son in the one case and the workers who were hired at the start of the day in the other) resent the father's or owner's generosity to those they believe deserved less. The son stood outside and refused to go in. The workers grumbled against the landowner. The root problem was envy of the ones who had been treated kindly.

In the Parable of the Wedding Feast, the diagnosis is somewhat different. In the end the outcasts enter to enjoy the master's banquet, but the ones who were first invited are not there because they refused the master's invitation.

In the story of the Pharisee and Tax collector in Luke 18, the root problem of the self-righteous Pharisee is pride. He was thankful that he was, "Not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tithe of all I get." He was proud both of what he was not, and of what he was.

These are different ways of analyzing the same problem, a problem that was evident in Jewish reactions to Gentile blessings. But it is not a uniquely Jewish problem.

It is a problem for any who think that because they have served God faithfully for however many years, they deserve something from Him. We never deserve God's favors. If we think we do, we are in danger of losing them entirely.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is a version of one of Jesus' primary themes, appearing also in Matthew 18:4; 23:12; and Luke 14:11; 18:14.

Matthew 23:12 is a bit different but similar. It reads,

Matthew 23:12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Proverbs 3:34 Surely, He scorns the scornful, But gives grace to the humble.

God Cares for People

Another lesson in the parable is that God cares for people more than things.

Why is it that the owner of the vineyard gave those who had labored only one hour the same amount as those who had labored all day? Was it not because he knew they needed the denarius?

When we read the story carefully, we notice that not a word of criticism is spoken against those who were not hired in the morning. When the master came and asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” they replied, “Because no one has hired us” (vv. 6-7).

It seems they had been willing to work, were eager to work, and undoubtedly needed the work, but they had not been hired. The owner hired them not for what he could get out of them in just a few hours, but because they needed the work, and he paid them the full denarius for the same reason. The owner was not thinking of his profit. He was thinking of people, and he was using his abundant means to help them.

How different this is from the older son in the parable of Luke 15! He was angered because his father rejoiced in the return of his younger brother. He should have been rejoicing too, but instead he was thinking only of how his brother had wasted his inheritance (Luke 15:29-30).

The older brother seems he would have been happy if the property had come home and his brother had been lost! As it was, the reverse was true, and he was displeased. God is exactly the opposite! He does not love us for what we do for Him.

So, who are we like?

Do we serve because we love God rather than because of what we can get Him to do for us?

Are we like God in our estimate of others, evaluating them in terms of their worth as beings made in the image of God and for fellowship with God rather than merely as tools for production?

Are we like the unhappy workers or the disconsolate older brother?

And speaking of the older brother, do you remember that his story appears in a chapter of Luke that contains three parables of something that was lost: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son? In each case, the object remained valuable in the mind of the owner in spite of its lost condition.

We can imagine an owner of sheep who might write off the loss of one sheep lightly. “After all,” he might say, “what’s one sheep when I still have ninety-nine? The loss is only one percent. A businessman has to expect a certain percentage of loss if he wants to run a business.”

The woman might have said, “I’m just not going to bother about one lost coin. It is one of ten, and I still have nine. I’ll be happy with them.”

The father might have decided, “Well, my younger son is gone. It’s sad, but such things happen. I will focus my attention on the son I still have.”

That is not what the owners or the father did. The father longed after his unwise younger son, and in the first two parables, the owners diligently searched until the lost object was recovered.

What is the explanation for their behavior? The object had value to its owner even though it was lost, and the owner was determined to recover it again.

In all these parables, including the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, God values what is lost and seeks it. In the story of the workers it is God Himself who goes out to hire them, early in the day, throughout the day, and until the very end.

You have been called and are not lost. You may be utterly worthless in your own sight, seeing only the ruin you have made, but you should know that you are valuable to God because (unlike yourself) He is able to see what you were created to be and what He can yet make of you.

Conclusion: Start Early and Work Hard

There is one last point. It is suggested by the wording of the most important verse that both introduces the story and ends it.

Matthew 19:30 “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Matthew 20:16 “So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”

The important word here is “many” because the teaching is not that every person who begins early with God and works for Him throughout a lifetime will inevitably be last, or that everyone who begins late will inevitably be first. That will be true for many people, but it will not be true for all.

Many who begin early will lose their reward or not even come to faith in Christ because they approach God in a false or covetous spirit, on the basis of their merit and not on the basis of God’s grace.

Many who enter last will be first because, although they begin late, they nevertheless recognize that their status is due to God’s grace and praise God for it. But neither of those cases is true for everyone. It is not necessary either to start early and finish last or start last and finish first.

The truly desirable thing is to work with all the might you have, not for reward but out of genuine love for our Savior Jesus Christ (which is shown through faithfulness, obedience, and, repentance), and when you have finished still to say what we find in Luke 17:

Luke 17:10 “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 must go above and beyond that, to be profitable servants of our Creator. It is people such as this whom God delights to honor. We must serve in the spirit of a son who serves because he loves his father, rather than in the spirit of a hireling who serves only for his wages and/or reward.

Be diligent! Continue your service to your God and your physical and spiritual family year after year. And when you come to the end you will not say, “What am I owed for my service?” But rather, you will say, “What a joy it is been to serve our gracious and loving God and our Savior and King Jesus Christ!”

Remember: For many are called, but few are chosen.