

Sermon: Being available

Mathew 20:1-16

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Intro

In many places in Cairo, and especially in areas where much construction work is done, you can see groups of day laborers squatting together. Often they have some equipment for construction work with them. This is how they make a living.

One day someone hires them, after some negotiations about how much to pay them for their day of hard work. Then for two days they have no work. If they are lucky, another man who is building his own house hires a few of them for a whole week.

Jesus tells a story of day laborers, waiting at the market place for work. He explains some important principles about the Kingdom of God, and how we are to serve God.

1 The Urgency

First the story; we read of the master of a house who needs to hire laborers for his vineyard. Jesus often uses examples from agriculture, and especially from vineyards, to explain an important lesson. I think this is because in the Scriptures of Israel, the Old Testament, the people of Israel is often compared to a vineyard.

The parable describes what really frequently happened at the times of harvests in Palestine. The grape harvest ripened towards the end of September, and then close on its heels the rains came. If the harvest was not ingathered before the rains broke, then it was ruined; and so to get the harvest in was a frantic race against time. Any worker was welcome, even if he could give only an hour or so to the work.

There is an urgency in the work of God. No time should be wasted. There is a harvest to be brought in. Earlier, Jesus had told his disciples that the fields are ready to be harvested, and because there is so much work to be done, the disciples are told to pray for more laborers for this harvest.

What did Jesus mean with this harvest? He speaks of the mission of the church, in Mathew 9:35-38:

Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

So when Matthew had previously quoted Jesus about a harvest, the focus was on people who need to hear the Gospel and who need to be helped.

That echo we must also hear, I think, in this parable about the work in the vineyard. God's work is not to build churches, to do projects, to hang crosses on our walls. All that is important, but His work is first and foremost, that we show our love for God by being a blessing for other people.

And there is an urgency. The end is coming, the harvest must be brought in. People need to hear of the love of God, and experience this by our shared lives with and for them.

The master of the house hired some men early in the morning, at daybreak. He offered them a denarius, the normal day's wage for a working man.

The market-place was the equivalent of the labour exchange. A man came there first thing in the morning, carrying his tools, and waited until someone hired him. The men who stood in the market-place were waiting for work, and the fact that some of them stood there until even five o'clock in the evening is proof of how desperately they needed a few pounds.

The hours in the parable were the normal Jewish hours. The Jewish day began at sunrise, around 6 in the morning and the hours were counted from then until 6 in the evening. Some people were hired at 6 in the morning, others at 9am, others again at midday, and the last laborers were hired at 5 pm.

When it became dark, the foreman was told by the master of the house to pay the wages of the workers. To pay the salary at the beginning of the evening was one of the very kind laws of Israel. Listen to Deuteronomy 24.14-15:

You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the Lord, and you be guilty of sin.

The foreman begins to pay, and then the troubles begin. Those who worked all day in the heat of the sun, breaking their back for the harvest, get the same as those guys who were only hired for one hour of work. That is not right, we should get more, we worked much longer! Is there no justice here?

2 jealousy of laborers

I can understand their jealousy. If I work 8 hours per day, I think I should be paid better than someone doing the same work only one or two hours.

But wait, this is a parable of the kingdom of heaven - not of the kingdom of this world. We learn something about God.

Mathew wrote this Gospel in the first place for followers of Jesus with a Jewish background. As Jews they had served God since the days of Abraham and Moses, and as a nation they had suffered great misery - because they were the people of God.

And now there are, in the churches of these Jewish Christians in the time of Jesus, newcomers, gentiles. People from all nations who accepted Jesus as Lord and who were grafted into the olive tree; they became part of the people of God.

Should the Jewish Christians, with their long history of serving God in the vineyard, not be treated with more honor and respect than those newcomers, who just came into the family of God, and who did not have had this load of backbreaking service to God in their baggage?

Is it not unjust of God, that he treats all followers of Jesus equal?

“Friend”, God says to the Jewish followers of Israel, in Matthew 20:13-15:

Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’

Our Lord is not unfair to the believers in Israel but gives them what he promises. He is simple generous to late-coming gentiles, making them equal members of his people.

Working in God’s vineyard is based on an unmerited invitation; A job in the Lord’s vineyard is a divine gift. Therefore, those who were the “first” to receive the call have no grounds for complaining when God calls the “last” and gives them the same reward.

This complaining, this jealousy of how God blesses others is not unknown to us. Why does God give him or her such a good job and look at me. Why is that other person so blessed with health, and I am so often oppressed by sickness.

Why do I work so hard for our Lord, and look at those others who just enjoy their life all the time without really working hard for God.

We presume that when it comes to God’s blessings, we should get more than others because we work better, or harder, or longer. And God cannot bless those others, because they are not as we are...

We judge others as less worthy than we are. Do we not understand that in Gods kingdom all is based on grace? So there is no room for us to be jealous of God’s good gifts to others.

“Are you envious because I am generous to others”, is Jesus’ question for us.

Israel thought it had more rights with God than the nations. But in churches we also sometimes take across this attitude. There are people who think that, because they have been members of a Church for a longer time than others, the Church practically belongs to them and they can dictate its policy.

Such people resent what seems to them the intrusion of new blood or the rise of a new generation with different plans and different ways. In the Christian Church seniority does not necessarily mean more honor. Who comes first does not have more rights with God; we all depend on his grace.

3 idle christians

We are all called to do God's work in this world. What does God want you to do in his vineyard?

There is nothing more tragic in this world than a person who is unemployed, a man or woman whose talents are rusting in idleness because there is nothing for him or her to do.

We see this sad situation much in Egypt; unemployment is rampant, especially among young people. Beside the financial problems this creates, it also often has a very negative impact on a person's mentality, on his or her self esteem.

In the vineyard of God there is also much unemployment. Not because there is no work, there is enough to do. But are we prepared to put our time and energy to it?

Do not wait with serving God. Yes, the heart of Christian service is to love God and your neighbor. But that involves work. Doing things. We need missionaries, accountants, secretaries, teachers, whatever abilities you have, they can be used in God's vineyard.

So do not wait until it is too late. When the time for payment comes, at the end of the day, those who did nothing, get nothing. Those who worked all day get rewarded, those who worked the last few hours get rewarded, but those who did nothing, who did not love God, love their neighbors, and who did not express this love in actual ministry for God and people, they end up empty handed.

But what to do! What can I do!

The heart of the matter is, I think, that we must make ourselves available at the marketplace. With our gifts and abilities, with our hammers, and chisels, we say to God, here I am, send me.

Too many Christians always worry about this question of "what is the will of God for my life". I have met them so often, people who always wonder what God wants from them,

and in the end, many of them do nothing. It seems that the question about the will of God, makes them paralyzed for doing anything.

Love God, love your neighbor and make yourself available for God. And if you do not know what he wants, why not let the master of the house, or the foreman, who went to the market, decide where you fit best?

If you do not know what you can do, and you have been waiting too long already, talk with people, talk with your priests, talk with friends, and ask them: what do you think I might do for the church, for the Kingdom of God, Where do you think I could work in his vineyard?

Conclusion

Do not worry about others, about how others serve God. Do not be jealous of others. Only make sure that you work for Him, and God will give you what he promised and probably much more. What our Lord gives to others is not our business, it is His.

Your availability is incredibly important. Offer yourself and your time and your energy and your money to God. There is much work to be done.