

Mt 20 1-16. The workers in the vineyard.

Out of genuine concern for us, one of the ideas which the Bible constantly stresses is that our salvation, our acceptance by God and our relationship with Him, is not the reward for our good works. This runs so contrary to our natural way of thinking that our good deeds will earn us entry into heaven that the Bible stresses again and again that our salvation cannot be earned, only received with grateful thanks. Paul wrote to the Ephesians in 2:8-10 that it is by grace we are saved, not by our works lest anyone should boast.

The best way to understand this is from close personal relationships and what happens when someone close to us harms us. When that happens, we do not want them to do something good to make up for the harm but first of all, to apologise to us, recognising the damage done to the relationship. Without an apology, a good deed, far from helping the situation, may actually rub salt into the wound. We do not see relationships as giant balance sheets, with up to the minute scores on who is ahead and who is behind. It is the same with God - the problem is not that we have not done enough good and therefore need to improve our score. The problem is that we have offended God by our sin. What God wants first of all is repentance for what we have done wrong so that we

recognise the damage done to our relationship with God. God also wants us to love Him by seeking to serve and obey Him. Until these foundational issues are dealt with, it is meaningless to talk of good works. Good deeds do not cancel sins, but are a response to all that God has done for us.

Moreover, imagine that we had to have a certain number of good deeds before we could be saved. There could be no death-bed conversions. A person could arrive at the pearly gates only to be told they were 1 good deed short, and be sent to hell. God wants our relationship with Him to be based on something far more certain than our fluctuating performance in obedience. Obedience is essential but it can never form the basis of our relationship with God. We form our relationship with God through repentance and desiring to serve Him, and only then do we try to do the good deeds which God has prepared for us. God wants to be generous in forgiving us but we must acknowledge our sin.

Quite a few people in the Bible would have been very enthusiastic over this great generosity of God's. Think of the penitent thief hanging beside Jesus, and recognising in Him, apparently a fellow criminal, someone who was innocent and who would return as a king. Jesus promised him entry to Paradise

that very day, not because of his works, he was being executed as a criminal, but because he desired a relationship with Jesus. Or think of King David, whose lust for Bathsheba led to adultery and the murder of her husband Uriah. These works would only ever lead to punishment, but David's humility and repentance in Ps 51 shows someone who was conscious of his sin and repentant. These two and all who recognise the depth of their sin before a holy God, will rejoice that salvation does not depend on our good works.

The Parable. So much about this parable rings true concerning daily life in Jesus' time. The vineyard was a well understood metaphor for Israel and had been since the time of Isaiah. The owner is clearly God. The wages are right, even generous. The urgency at harvest time is right. The hours from dawn to dusk, are right. The payment of wages at the end of the day is right.

And yet this employer is rather unusual. First, rather than send a servant in search of more workers, the employer goes himself. This is just like some of Jesus' other pictures of God as the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep in the wilderness to search for the lost sheep or the father of the prodigal son, who runs to meet his son. If religion in general is humanity in search of God, the gospel is God in search of us.

Secondly, the employer is very generous. As was normal, he started to pay those who had arrived last. He had promised them what was right and they would have expected the appropriate fraction of a denarius, a day's pay. But the employer recognised that 1 hour's pay was not enough to feed a family. So, he gave them a full day's pay, which they had not earned. To change the parable so that these last ones had done a full day's work in 1 hour, misses the point. The employer gives them a day's pay because he is generous, not because the workers earned it.

Lastly, he addresses the complaint of what we might call the shop steward in a very novel way. Rather than acknowledge the justice of the complaint, he points out that the enterprise bargaining agreement had only been struck that very morning! Those who worked all day lost nothing, it was just that mercy was added. The employer was entitled to do what he liked with his own resources.

He also calls this man "Friend". In Mt, the only people called "Friend" are those who are in the wrong, they have presumed on others' generosity rather than being grateful for it. It is said to the man who refused a wedding garment and was therefore ineligible to enter the wedding feast and to Judas as

he was about to betray Jesus to death. This man wants the employer to break the contract which all have agreed to.

So, this apparently ordinary parable takes on a new meaning, especially when we note the context. In the previous chapter, Peter and the disciples had asked Jesus what reward they would get for leaving all and following Jesus and working hard for the kingdom. In a sense, the answer is nothing more than what they had already been promised- eternal life in all its fullness. The disciples might complain about those who had denied Jesus during His earthly ministry and only jumped on the band-wagon after Pentecost. Matthew's church, and especially its long-standing members, might complain about all the work they had done and how these newcomers were crowding them out. But all of Christ's people are equally saved whether they have served Jesus all their lives or whether they converted on their death-beds. Our good deeds are not a claim on God for our salvation.

But God is not unjust. People who have served Jesus all their lives and faced great opposition, persecution and even death will receive a far greater reward than someone who has just converted on their death-bed to avoid going to hell. Think of a building: God gives to every person who becomes Christian, the

same foundation: forgiveness of sins, access to God, the gift of the Holy Spirit, etc. What the person does in response is what they build on that foundation. Some people build junk, by living a life which is indistinguishable from the world. Others, with God's help, build a strong and valuable building, which is their gift to God.

God has prepared good works for us to do and we need to be sure that we are actually doing them because that is what we will be judged on. We should take some time this week to ask God if there is anything that He has asked us to do, which we are not doing, and start doing it.

Amen.