

–J.C. Ryle *Expository Thoughts on Matthew* || Matthew 20:1-23–

I. Introduction:

- A. This is one of the longer and more elaborate parables in the gospels, but it is easily misunderstood. Several common misunderstandings or misinterpretations include:
1. Divorcing this parable from the preceding chapter.
    - a) This parable is a direct response to Peter's question in Matt 19:27. Peter is asking Christ what their reward will be, considering they have been with him from the beginning of his ministry. We've encountered this prideful focus on reward before. Peter's question could also be taken to mean the reward for Jews, compared to recent converts and Gentiles. Looking at Galatians 2:11-14, Acts 10:28, etc. Peter clearly struggled with the idea that the gentiles were being grafted in.
  2. Interpret that this parable is about employer/employee relationships.
    - a) Some people might take this as evidence that employees must take what the employer gives, and that equal pay for equal work is therefore unbiblical.
  3. Infer that this parable is about fairness.
    - a) Some people might take this to be about honoring your commitment and your contract. The first workers agreed to a certain wage, and they must honor their agreement despite what the employer might pay others. The meaning of the parable "must be" to honor our agreements.
- B. These errors and others cloud the mind as to the true meaning of this parable. A quote from Chrysostom: "The saying is a parable, wherefore neither is it right to inquire curiously into all things in parables word by word, but when we have learned the object for which it was composed, to reap this, and not to busy one's self about anything further." Don't get hung up in employment ethics and unfair compensation plans, when the parable is about God's sovereignty over salvation.

II. Matthew 20:1-16 Ryle gives us 2 lessons to consider about this passage:

- A. *In the calling of nations to the professed knowledge of himself, God exercises free, sovereign, and unconditional grace.*
1. He calls the families of the earth into the visible church at his own time, and in his own way. This is an easy concept to assent to, but very hard to understand practically and see in real life.
  2. In this parable, the employer is God himself, and the hired workers are the nations or the chosen elect of God, that are brought to salvation at different times throughout history.
  3. We cannot understand the mind of God, and he does not answer to us. We cannot ever grasp why God works the way that he does, saving some now, but others later, and still others, never.
  4. We all have loved ones who are unbelievers, and this harsh reality hurts. But there is always hope that they are a worker yet to be hired at a time to be determined. This is our prayer.
  5. God loves to keep the church from pride, and so to keep the older branches of the church from looking contemptuously on the younger branches.
  6. Each era of believers may well be understood as another branch being grafted into the tree. Some are older, some are stronger, some may bear more fruit than others, but we are all branches of the same tree and so are not to be regarded as inferior.
  7. *The wall between Jews and gentiles is removed. New converts are fellow heirs and partakers in the same hope as the believing Israelite.*
- B. *In the saving of individuals, as well as in the calling of nations, God acts as a sovereign, and gives no account of his matters.*
1. He has mercy on whom he will have mercy (Rom 9:15) and that too on his own time.
  2. God gives no account or explanation for who he calls and when he calls them. He is sovereign, and it is in opposition to that sovereignty to think we deserve better treatment or reward on account of the time or circumstance of our conversion. This is antithetical to the gospel.
  3. Every fiber of the gospel indicates that all believers are equally forgiven before God, all equally washed in Christ's blood and clothed in his righteousness. All are equally justified, accepted and found at Christ's right hand at the last day.

4. 4 brief cautions in dealing with this parable:
  - a) Beware of supposing that salvation is in the slightest degree to be obtained by works.
  - b) Beware of supposing that the distinction between Jew and Gentile is entirely done away by the gospel.
  - c) Beware of supposing that all saved souls will have the same degree of glory.
  - d) Beware of supposing that it is safe for anyone to put off repentance until the end of his days.

III. Matthew 20:17-23 Ryle gives us 3 important things to notice.

- A. *Notice the clear announcement which the Lord Jesus Christ makes of his own approaching death.*
  1. Christ warned his disciples 3 times at least, of his coming suffering. The importance of his suffering and death was known only to himself, and He wanted to prepare the disciples for it.
  2. The disciples did not grasp what was coming, nor the importance of it. Christ tried to prepare them mentally for his suffering and the loss they would feel with his death, and to prepare them for what they would have to endure themselves and the ministry that lay before them.
  3. Christ knew from the beginning all that was before him. He knew he was going to suffer and endure the agony at calvary, yet he walked calmly forward for the good of his church. Surely there was no suffering like his, yet surely there was no love like his either.
  4. Christ knew that without the shedding of blood, there could be no remission of sin. He knew that his death was the appointed sacrifice, so he went willingly to the cross to complete the mighty work that he was on earth to do.
- B. *Notice the mixture of ignorance and faith that may be found, even in true hearted Christians.*
  1. James and John were true believers, but were still ignorant of the suffering of Christ. They focused exclusively on sharing in His reward, without a thought to sharing in his suffering.
  2. Yet, they showed remarkable faith, because they knew Christ was the coming King.
  3. *There was much of faith in their request, but there was much more of infirmity.*
  4. We can all be like this. We can be strong in some aspects of the Christian life, but ignorant in other areas. Some Christians have enough faith to follow Christ, they have enough knowledge to hate sin and come out from the world, yet there are many truths of Christianity of which they are deplorably ignorant.
- C. *Notice the solemn reproof which our Lord gives to the ignorant request of the mother of Zebedee's children and her two sons.*
  1. When Jesus says, you don't know what you're asking, he's really saying, "you're asking to share in my reward, but you have no concept that you must also share in my suffering."
  2. How often we commit this same type of error, particularly in our own prayer lives. How often do we ask something of God, without considering the cost?
  3. In prayer, we ask that our souls may be saved and go to heaven when we die. But are we prepared for what that request entails? Are we prepared to take up our cross daily and follow Christ? Are we ready to give up the world for his sake? Are we ready to put off the old man and put on the new?
  4. We ask that God would make us holy and good. But have we counted that cost? Are we prepared to be sanctified by any and all processes that God in his infinite wisdom, deems necessary that we pass through? Are we ready to be purified by affliction? To die to self and die to sin? To be weaned from the world? To be drawn nearer to God by loss and trials and affliction?