**WESTMINSTER BIBLE SCHOOL; THE PARABLES AND METAPHORS OF OUR LORD - THE TEACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**20. THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD**

*"For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who was the master of a household, who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. When he had agreed with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. He went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace. He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. About the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle. He said to them, 'Why do you stand here all day idle?' "They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' "He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and you will receive whatever is right.' When evening had come, the lord of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning from the last to the first.' "When those who were hired at about the eleventh hour came, they each received a denarius. When the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise each received a denarius. When they received it, they murmured against the master of the household, saying, 'These last have spent one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat!' "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Didn't you agree with me for a denarius? Take that which is yours, and go your way. It is my desire to give to this last just as much as to you. Isn't it lawful for me to do what I want to with what I own? Or is your eye evil, because I am good?' So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few are chosen."*

*Matthew 20:1-16*

THE FIRST sixteen verses of this chapter contain the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. We ask, What was the subject our Lord intended to illustrate when He made use of this parable? To take the parable out of its context and study it alone is impossible. John Ruskin went hopelessly wrong when he wrote "Unto this last," and thought he was interpreting the parable, which he did not understand.

Observe first the boundaries of the parable. The final verse of the nineteenth chapter reads, "But many shall be last that are first; and first that are last." The sixteenth verse of chapter twenty reads, "So the last shall be first, and the first last." In the first verse we have the dictum of Jesus, and in the second, an interpretation of the dictum. The great dictum is uttered, "Many shall be last that are first; and first that are last." The parable is given in illumination and illustration; and then our Lord gathered everything up and said, "So," in that way, "the last shall be first, and the first last." Those are the boundaries.

We go a little farther back and ask, What was the particular occasion of this dictum of Jesus? What made Him say, "Many shall be last that are first; and first that are last?" That came as the result of an answer to an enquiry raised by Peter. How thankful we are for Peter, and all his questions. In verse twenty-seven, "Then answered Peter and said unto Him, Lo, we have left all, and followed Thee; what then shall we have? It was because of that question our Lord uttered this dictum, and it was because of that dictum, resulting from that question, that our Lord gave this parable.

So again we must go back a little farther, to the story of the young ruler, to whom Jesus had said, "Go, sell that thou hast, and give to the poor … and, come, follow Me." He had turned his back, and gone away sorrowful. The man who had great possessions, a clean record, a fine temperament, stood confronting Jesus, and heard that word, that he lacked control external to himself. Jesus called him to submit himself to Him, but he went away. He clung to his possessions; and Jesus interpreted that as we saw in our previous study, "It is hard for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of heaven. … It is easier for a camel to go through the needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God." Peter now said, "Lo, *we* have left all, and followed Thee; what then shall *we* have?" What is to be the gain of this renunciation, after we have done it? As though he had said, Master, Thou hast called the man to a great renunciation. He has turned his back, and gone away. "We have left all, and followed Thee." What is the use of it? What shall we gain?

The Lord gave him a wonderful answer to that question: "Verily I say unto you, that ye which have followed Me, in the regeneration, when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of His glory …" He was looking on to something in the future, and telling them what they would gain in that future order that should be set up. They would gain authority as His administrators in that Kingdom; and not only so, but "everyone that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life." It is a very wonderful answer, that of Jesus. They would gain authority, friendship, eternal life; but do not forget that "many shall be last that are first; and first that are last."

So the Lord first answered that question of Peter's, and then uttered that word of warning. The parable is the illumination of the word of warning. Literally He said, "Many shall be last first, and first last." The words *that are* are in italics and are not in the text, "The last first, and first last."

What then is the subject He was illustrating? Service, and its reward. The teaching of this parable is applicable only to the disciples of Jesus, with regard to their service.

What is the figure? First, a man who is a householder, and who has a vineyard. It is his vineyard, his property. Notice carefully that the picture the Lord draws here is of a man with a vineyard, his property; and he hired labourers to do his work in his vineyard. It is interesting here that the Lord took a day, twelve hours. "Are there not twelve hours in the day?" Here they are. He went out early, at the third, the sixth, the ninth, and eleventh hours. The owner, the master, went out and hired labourers at these intervals during the passing day. They were all called by the Master. There is no word in this parable of men asking for work. The labourers were not seeking work. They were outside the vineyard; but he called them inside, and set them to work; and they all came in, when he called them. Many were called early. They went in and worked. At the third hour they went in, and at the sixth, and ninth, and eleventh hours, when he called them. It is an Eastern picture of a householder, a vineyard, and work to be done in a vineyard. He went out, and the labourers went in to work, when they were called. They did not ask to go. They agreed for a penny. It was a bargain. It was a contract. Then the day closed after the eleventh hour, and the last hired did one hour's work only. Having agreed with the first, he paid the workers according to the agreement. We are not told he made any agreement with the rest, but he paid them according to his own will. He gave every man a penny only, to those last who worked only one hour he also gave a penny.

We can understand the murmuring; but if we also are inclined to murmur at the story, it is because we have not yet caught the real significance of the parable, or what Jesus was intending to teach. First of all the master dealt with the last men as unto the first. The first "supposed that they would receive more, and they likewise received every man a penny." We agree that a bargain is to be kept, a contract is sacred. If you agree with me for a penny; if justice is done, have you any right to object to my generosity? Has not this man a right to do what he wills with his own? That is the only question that arises, as to whether this householder had a right to do what he liked with his own. The implication of the question of Jesus was that he had such right.

Yet the teaching of the parable shows that the right is invested in something else. So we come to that teaching. It must be found in the strict limits of the context. There is no question of salvation here. It is wholly one of service. Moreover, these men were no lazy loiterers. They all entered the vineyard when they were called; and that is specially emphasized in the case of the last called.

Other parables have other aspects of service. There is the parable of the Pounds, and that of the Talents. In our thinking we often confuse these. The Labourers, the Pounds, and the Talents all have to do with different aspects of service. In the parable of the Pounds, every man received a pound, and our Lord was showing common opportunity, created by a deposit received. In the parable of the Talents, He was showing how varying gifts create responsibility. What then was He teaching here? That payment is according to fidelity to opportunity.

That covers the whole ground. That is the whole meaning of the parable. That fellow who went in at the eleventh hour never had a chance before. He was not called; but when sent, he went in, and was paid on the basis of the fact that for one hour he was faithful. The man who went in early, and served through all the burden and heat of the day was faithful to his work. The parable therefore illustrated the payment of reward to fidelity of opportunity. It does not mean that if a man has his opportunity, and does not take it, and wastes the fleeting hours, he will get the same reward as the man who has toiled through all the livelong day. Our Lord was simply emphasizing this one matter, fidelity to opportunity.

I wonder if we have really grasped that yet. What opportunity has God given you? I do not know. I am not asking for any answer, except in your own soul. He gave to D. L. Moody the opportunity of a waiting nation, of two nations, and when his day's work was done, he had his penny, because he was gloriously faithful to his opportunity. There is a woman somewhere among the hills and mountains, poor, struggling, striving, but she has two children, and she puts her life into the business of training them for God. We do not know her. We never heard of her, not even in the columns of the religious press, but she has gone. Her children have grown up; she has gone on. She got her penny! The penny is nothing. Our Lord took a denarius, a trivial amount even for labour, to emphasize the similarity of reward, on the basis of fidelity to opportunity.

Now then, "Many are called, but few are chosen." These words are omitted from the Revised Version both in the English and American revisions. It is wholly a matter of MSS. If we retain them, we should not read "chosen" there, but "choice," which word carries the idea far better. "Many are called, but few choice." These men were all called, and according to the parable they went and did their work, and got their penny. Said Christ, Yes, there are many called, but they are not worth their salt, they are not choice; they will not get their penny. "Many are called, but few are choice."

Has He called us into the vineyard? Well, if He has, we have only one thing that ought to fill our souls with Divine anxiety. That is that we do the job He gives us, and according to our fidelity will be our reward.