

The Workers' Revolt

Four Bible Puzzles:

Matthew 20:1-16

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Have you ever put puzzles together? The harder the puzzle is to put together the more sense of accomplishment you receive in fitting it together. I confess that most puzzles, 250 pieces or more, I skip over. I like the kids' puzzles. I'm good at 10 pieces or even 20. That is probably why I often skip over the many puzzles within Scriptures. Yet, there is tremendous truth in each puzzle. All Scripture, even Scripture that is difficult to understand, was given to enable us to live today as fully-equipped disciples of Christ.

Did you know that Jesus spoke in puzzling terms? He spoke in parables. They were puzzles that people had difficulty understanding. They needed interpretation. The gospels record the disciples asking Jesus for interpretation. The meaning is hidden from the proud and self-reliant. It is unveiled to those who truly seek God on his terms.

We noted that truth a couple weeks ago when we considered a puzzling teaching and experience of the Hebrew people. I called it *Toxic God Syndrome*. We discovered that the holy and loving presence of God is toxic to defiled humanity. The priest Aaron could only approach God in a cloud of burning incense from a sacrifice of atonement for sins. Jesus told a parable about the good and bad attending the wedding banquet of God in wedding clothes. Without those clothes given to us by God, we are thrown out and experience eternal death. Jesus is those clothes. We are robed in him. We live in Christ as Paul wrote so often. In Christ the heavenly Father, hungry for his prodigals, wraps us in his arms and restores us as his children.

Today we see another puzzle in a parable of Jesus. I call it *The Workers' Revolt*. Let's listen to God's truth for you today. Here's the story as Jesus tells it.

A bunch of workers were unemployed. They gathered in the city square shortly before dawn to find employment. Around 6 or 7 a.m. they were hired at the normal day's wage to harvest grapes. At 9, noon, 3 and 5 p.m. the landowner found others standing in the square who had not found work. He invited them to work the rest of the day for him. He didn't name the wage and they needed whatever he would pay, so they went. When dusk approached, each worker, beginning with the latest hired, was paid the full day's wage. The early "hires" began to grumble about its fairness. They forgot that they were unemployed and without provision until this landowner contracted them. They were begrudging another person's generosity because they forgot his generosity to them. Jesus sums up by saying that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

What does this mean?

First, this story illustrates how quickly our thinking gets messed up. We think we know what justice is. That is why our courts are tied up with all kinds of civil litigation. We've eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and now we've become judges of good and evil. We judge ourselves, dressing ourselves in fig leaves like Adam and Eve to conceal our shame, and we judge one another. We are so unlike Jesus whose only concern was doing the will of his heavenly Father at every moment.

Second, this story reveals the generosity or grace of our heavenly Father, for life is a gift. Eternal life is a gift. A relationship with Jesus is a gift. We can't even say "Jesus is Lord" without God's Spirit helping us have the faith to say that. Do we recognize that grace? Do we

recognize the wooing of God's Spirit? Whether we enter God's field early or late in life, grace, God's generosity, blesses us.

One day when Jesus was invited to eat with some Pharisees, a woman with a sinful reputation entered the home, knelt down by Jesus and washed his feet in her tears, dried them with her hair and anointed them with perfume. Simon, the hosting Pharisee was offended and thought to himself that Jesus was out of touch and therefore could not be a messenger of God; but Jesus confronted him with a question:

A man loaned money to two people — five hundred pieces of silver to one and fifty pieces to the other. But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that? (Luke 7:41-42, NLT)

Simon the Pharisee was not dumb. He answered correctly that the one with the larger debt appreciated and loved the lender more. Then Jesus drew the parallel to the sinful woman. He compared this woman's act of kindness and devotion to the relative inhospitality of the Pharisees at that meal, and then assured her of forgiveness. You see... if you're self-righteous you need no gospel, you need no savior and you need no god. However, if you recognize that your debts can't be repaid, that your sins create harm that can't be undone, then you will see grace and generosity. Though your sins made you last, God's love makes you first for you recognize that our lives totally are gifts of grace.

Jesus reinforced that vision of life with this story that offends our sensibilities. Indeed, even as sin means death, life is grace. Life is grace because through a generous act God births us into life, and then his Spirit graciously leads us to Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life. Grace calls to us while we sit unemployed or underemployed in the town square. While we sit idle, or trifle away life because of sin's deceptiveness, grace calls to us.

My friend, Dr. Bob Stamps, quoted from Psalm 23: “Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.” He said that the Hebrew word translated *follow* in that verse is much more aggressive. Justifiably it could be translated *chase*. “Surely, goodness and mercy will chase me all the days of my life.”

When the twin towers of the World Trade Center flamed with terror, when they toppled in mass murder, God’s grace rushed to the scene of devastation and to the side of the devastated. Have you heard the number 297,046? As of February 22nd, according to government agencies and the United Nations, that is the number of dead and missing from the December 26th tsunami. When that big wave rolled in, for whatever reason, God’s grace chased after. December 21st, 1971 I, a 16-year-old, was numbed by the collapse and death of my very active father. Grace rushed to our family’s side as food, blessings, friends and prayers enveloped us in our mourning.

There’s another kind of mourning. My friend Dr. Bob Tuttle experienced this and stated publicly that when he was divorced, it felt like he fell off God’s train and then couldn’t run fast enough to catch up and get back on. However, my friend found that he didn’t have to. God’s grace was chasing him and rushed in with another train that he could board by faith. You see God foreknew his sins and was chasing him anyway, chasing him with goodness and mercy.

I don’t know specifically how sin has idled you or left you trifling in the town square, but I do know what it means to miss God’s mark for my life. I know what it is like to fall off the train because of sinful attitudes and actions. I’ve caused more than my share of hurt. I also know what it is like for grace to chase me. God foreknew my steps and in his compassion rushed in with his train to lead me in his perfect will.

Whatever hour of your life this is, the beginning, the third, sixth, ninth or eleventh hour, grace is calling to you. The generous owner says come. Forget the revolt by others and come!