

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 23 March 2025. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

The Eleventh-Hour Servant

Matthew 19:30 - 20:16

In the spring of 1993, when I was 16 years old, an important chapter of my life began. It all started when my dad took me to a McDonald's store on the way home from school one day. I went into the store, and asked for a job application; and soon, I was hired. The next thing I knew, I was walking into the McDonald's headquarters in Mansfield, to collect my red and white pinstriped shirt, black trousers, and bill-cap with the yellow "M" on the front.

Now, at the moment I was hired, I became a real, *bona fide* employee of McDonald's. However, when I put on the McDonald's uniform, people easily *recognised* me as a member of the "Ronald McDonald family." They also recognised me as a McDonald's employee by the fact that they saw me *working* around the McDonald's store. After all, that was why I had been hired. The manager had hired me so that I could flip burgers, fry chips, assemble sandwiches, cook eggs, and make pancakes; wash dishes, sweep and mop the floors, clean the tables and chairs, and the toilets; put milk in the ice cream machine; clean the ice cream machine, the oven, and other machinery; and stock the stockroom, fridge, and freezer with food. It didn't matter whether it was a teeth-chattering - 25 degrees, or a sweltering 40 degrees, with 100% humidity: that parking lot had to be spot-swept, and the nasty rubbish and rancid grease and cooking oil had to be taken out to the dumpster and grease vats. I had been hired to *work*.

Well, so it is with the Christian life. The moment you repent of your sin and believe on Jesus, you not only become a member of God's family, but you are brought into Christ's service. Then, when you follow the Lord in baptism, you *identify publicly* with Christ. (Receiving baptism is like putting on a "uniform." A uniform doesn't *make* you an employee; it just *publicly identifies* you as an employee. Likewise, being baptised doesn't make you a Christian; it just *publicly identifies* you as a Christian.) However, "putting on the uniform" of baptism is only a first step in the Christian life. The Lord now has *work* for you to do. Christ saves you so that you may serve Him with your life. Furthermore, the Lord has **wages** to give you for your labour for Him. I still remember when I received the paycheque for my first two weeks of work. I had sweated and toiled in the sizzling grease for \$4.25 per hour, for about 16 hours; and after I cashed my cheque, I held about \$65 in my hand. When summer break rolled around, I began to work 40 hours, and to make about \$160 per week. (I remember being thrilled to be able to give \$15 or \$16 tithe to the Lord, and about \$5 to missions.) For me, that was a big deal. That \$150 was the reward of my toil; and I was glad to give some of it back to the Lord. Similarly, we who are saved will one day stand before the Lord, and receive rewards for the things that we did for Christ in this life. We will receive breathtakingly beautiful crowns, such as the **crown of life**, the **crown of righteousness**, the **crown of glory**, the **crown of rejoicing**, and the **incorruptible**

crowns; and we will cast them at Christ's feet, and say, "***Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power.***"

In some ways, living the Christian life *is* like working for an employer; and Jesus often made this comparison in his parables. However, there are some things about Christ's service that are *not* like any employer-employee relationship here on earth. What if, when I received my first paycheque, I received that \$65 for my 16 hours of work—only to discover that a brand-new employee, who had worked for only *a couple hours* in that pay period, had *also* received \$65? That would never happen in an earthly job, of course; but what if that were how it worked in the *spiritual* realm? Would it be right and fair of the Lord to reward His servants in this way? That is what we will be talking about this morning. The title of this message is ***The Eleventh-Hour Servant.***

Read Matthew 19:30 - 20:16.

I. The workers in Christ's Kingdom (v. 1)

In our last message, we studied the last section of **Matthew 19**. In that passage, Peter asked Jesus a very important question. He said, "***Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?***" (In other words, "Since we've left our livelihoods, and everything that we have, to follow you, what reward will we have in the Kingdom?") Jesus' answer to Peter was very specific, and very encouraging. He promised Peter that "***in the regeneration***" (in other words, in the coming 1,000-year Kingdom), he and the other Apostles will sit on thrones, and will judge the twelve tribes of Israel. However, the Apostles aren't the only ones who have been promised rewards. Jesus went on to say that "***There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.***" Jesus wasn't talking about *material* treasure: He was talking about the treasure of ***souls being added to the Kingdom of God.*** He was talking about acquiring new spiritual "mothers," "sisters," and "brothers," by leading people to the Lord. The more people we bring to Christ, the bigger our spiritual family becomes; and the more joy and blessing we have in this life (*in spite* of the persecutions that we often go through). However, these are merely the rewards that pertain to *this* life. Jesus also spoke of the "***world to come.***" The "everlasting life" that we received at the moment of salvation will continue on into eternity in Heaven, and into the Kingdom Age; and in *that* world, there will be definite rewards for our service to the Lord.

That is what this parable of the vineyard here in **Matthew 20** is all about. Jesus is illustrating how the rewards in His Kingdom work. Particularly, He is using this parable to illustrate what He had just said (about the first being last, and the last first). Let's look at that verse again. **(Read Matthew 19:30 again.)**

What did Jesus mean when He said, **“Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first”**? He’s saying that in *His* Kingdom, there is no distinction between those who have just gotten into the Kingdom, and those who have been in the Kingdom for many years. Why? Because *all* His servants are rewarded with equality, according to His kindness and grace!

In a few moments, we’ll talk much more about this. First, though, let’s talk about **the Employer** in this parable. In this story, there is a **“householder”** who went out early in the morning to hire servants, so that they could bring in the harvest of his vineyard. Who is this householder? He represents **the Lord Jesus Christ**. The **labourers** that the householder hired represent those who have received God’s gift of salvation; and the **vineyard** represents not only the nation of Israel, but also all humanity. Just as grapes must be harvested within a short window of time, so that they won’t be spoiled, and perish, so souls must be gathered into God’s harvest, before they perish eternally.

Now, if you have received God’s gift of salvation, you know that salvation is a free gift from God. The Bible says that salvation is **“the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.”** Now, salvation wasn’t free to *Christ*. He shed His precious blood on the cross in order to pay for it. But to *us* it *is* free. All we have to do is to receive this gift is to *believe on Christ*, and *repent* (*turn* to Christ, from sin). Yet, if salvation cannot be earned by our good works, why does Jesus compare His followers to “workers” in a vineyard? And if salvation be a free gift, why does Jesus say that we will receive *wages* for our work? I must admit that years ago, when I was a young believer, this parable confused me a little—that is, until I really began to understand *why* Christ had saved me. You see, up to that point, I had understood the truth of **Ephesians 2:8-9** just fine. In that verse Paul said, **“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.”** Paul went out of his way to state that we are *not* saved by doing good works, because salvation is a free gift from God. *This* much I understood perfectly. However, there was another verse that I needed to understand. Paul went on to say, in **verse 10**, **“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”** We are not saved *by* good works; but we are saved *unto* good works. The whole reason that Christ saves us is that we might now *serve Him* with our lives.

Read Matthew 11:28-30.

Christian, *you* weren’t seeking Christ before you were saved. (Not at first, that is.) The Bible says that **“we love him, because he first loved us.”** *Christ* is the one who came seeking for you—even when you were still blinded by your sin, and *happy* in your sin, and when you couldn’t have cared less about Him. Just as the

husbandman in this parable went out to seek for workers, even though *they* were not seeking for him, so *Christ* came seeking for *you*. He opened your sinful heart to His Word, and enlightened your spiritual eyes, so that you could see your need of Him. Through the power of His Word, and through the Holy Spirit, He drew you to Himself; and when you finally responded to Him in faith, and surrendered your heart to Him, He came to live inside you, and gave you eternal life. However, Christ didn't save you just so that you could miss Hell, and go to Heaven. He sought you out, and drew you to Himself, and saved you, so that you might now serve Him with your life! Jesus said, "***Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me.***" A yoke implies *service*. Just as a farmer puts a yoke on his oxen so that they can plough his field, so Christ has put a "yoke" of service on *you*, Christian. This yoke was placed on you the moment you were saved; and it will remain on you for the rest of eternity. Even in Heaven, and in the 1,000-year Kingdom, and through the countless ages to come, you will be serving your Master.

Now, *why* does God want us to serve Him? After all, He is God; and He certainly doesn't *need* us. He is infinite, eternal, and self-existing. He existed from everlasting, before He ever created the heavens or the earth; and He does not need our help. He doesn't even need *us*. He wasn't lonely before He created us. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had loving communion with each other before there was such a thing as physical matter, or "time"; and they could have continued satisfied in each other for all eternity. Yet, in His incredible love, this eternal, immortal, Triune God created us. He created us for His good pleasure, so that He might enjoy us, and that we might enjoy Him. He *hard-wired* us to need *Him*. Without *Him* in our lives, there is no true joy. True *rest*—true, inward satisfaction, fulfilment, and peace of mind—comes from knowing God personally, and from serving Him with your whole life, out of a heart of love and thankfulness. In **Colossians 2:9** Paul said, "***For in him [Christ] dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.***" In other words, Christ is fully God! What does this mean for us, though? Well, in the next verse Paul goes on to say, "***And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power.***" In other words, the only way we can have completeness and purpose in our lives is to be "in Him" (to have a personal relationship with Him); and to those who are "in Him" He has given the incredible honour and privilege of serving Him. Serving Him is not a drag, or a bore: it is what gives our life meaning! Our lives are all about serving Him! Let's see what Solomon said about this.

Read Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.

According to this verse, "***the whole duty of man***" is "***fear God, and keep his commandments***"! By the way, in our English Bible, the word "***duty***" is supplied in italics, to make the English read smoothly. (In our language, an adjective needs a noun to describe.) However, in the Hebrew, it simply says, "*Ciy zeh cal ha-adam*"—literally, "For this is ***the whole of*** the man." Christian, your *whole life*, your *whole being*, and your *whole purpose of existence*, is to fear the LORD, and keep His commandments. Embrace this truth, and live it, and you *will* have joy, even in the

midst of the darkest trials! Serve God with all your might, out of a heart of love. This is why Jesus sought you and bought you, with His redeeming love!

II. The wages in Christ's Kingdom (vv. 2-16)

(Read Matthew 20:2-16 again.) Thus far, this parable has taught us that Christ saves us from our sin so that we might *serve Him with our lives*. The Lord has work for us to do now that we are saved. What about the *wages*, though? What, exactly, does the "**penny**" in this parable represent? Well, the Greek word behind "**penny**" is the word *denarius*; and a Roman *denarius* was the average day's wage for most people. What does it represent, though? It represents two spiritual truths. In one sense, it represents **salvation itself**; and in another sense, it represents **the rewards** that Christians will receive for their service to Christ.

So, let's break this down. First of all, let's talk about how the "**penny**" represents salvation. When the penny is applied to salvation, the idea is that at the end of the day, when our life on earth is over, and our work for Christ is done, every child of God will receive the exact same gracious gift of **eternal life** with God. Now, the reality is that who are saved received the gift of eternal life at the moment we believed on Christ. "Eternal life" doesn't mean "eternal existence": it means "having a *personal relationship* with the Father and the Son." In **John 17:3** Jesus said, "**And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.**" Eternal life begins at the moment you are saved, and it continues on for eternity. However, there *is* a sense in which the full benefits of salvation have not yet been received. On the resurrection day, we who are saved will receive sinless, immortal, resurrected bodies, which will be fashioned like Christ's resurrected body; and on that day, all the promises of salvation will be complete. Even those who come into the kingdom of God at the "**eleventh hour**" (at the end of their lives) will receive a sinless, resurrected body, *and* an incorruptible inheritance in Heaven.

Read 1 Peter 1:3-9.

Do you see why every child of God will get the same reward? It isn't "unfair" that Christ's servants will get the same reward of "eternal life" with God: it is *totally* fair. It is fair because we weren't saved by our own merits or labours in the first place! It doesn't matter if you served Christ for fifty years before your death, or for only five minutes: if you truly repented of your sin and believed on Christ, then you "have" eternal life, right now: and this eternal life will continue on into eternity in Heaven, with your Lord.

You see, salvation isn't a debt that *God* owes *us* because we worked hard for Him: it is a *gift of His grace* to undeserving sinners. The penny in Christ's parable isn't a

picture of a “debt” that Christ, our Employer, owes us: it is a picture of a “gift” that He has graciously given us. Every true child of God has been promised the same “silver coin” of redemption. The ½ silver shekel that the Israelites offered to God in Old Testament times is a beautiful picture of this truth. It didn’t matter if you were rich or poor, small or great, old or young: *everyone* willingly offered a half silver shekel (no more, no less), as a token of his faith in the coming Redeemer. Throughout Scripture, silver is a picture of the redemption of our souls; and redemption does not come in greater or lesser measures. If you are redeemed, *you are redeemed*. You can’t be “halfway” redeemed. You can’t be “halfway” bought back. You can’t be “halfway” reconciled to God. If you are saved, you are “all in,” because you belong to God!

Now, let’s get back to Jesus’ parable. In the parable, the husbandman went out at the “**first hour**” (6:00 a.m.); at the “**third hour**” (9:00 a.m.); at the “**sixth hour**” (12:00 noon); at the “**ninth hour**” (3:00 p.m.); and, finally, at the “**eleventh hour**” (5:00 p.m. —only an hour before sunset). Yet, even though some worked for twelve hours, and some worked for only one hour, everyone received one penny. The husbandman graciously gave the same reward to everyone, regardless of how long he had been working for him that day. Well, so it is with salvation. It doesn’t matter if you are seven years old, or seventy: Christ offers the same salvation to all. It doesn’t matter how much of your life you have wasted in sin: if you truly repent of your sin, believe on Jesus, and surrender your life to Him, you are *saved!*

Now, to the natural mind, this doesn’t seem fair. Self-righteous people can’t wrap their heads around this. Jesus’ teaching about the “**eleventh hour**” goes contrary to every false gospel that was ever concocted. People who believe that they can work to *earn* their salvation scorn the idea that a truly repentant sinner could receive salvation at the end of his life, simply by believing on Jesus’ name. For example, **Brigham Young**, the second president of the Mormon religion, once made this statement: “Some of our old traditions teach us that a man guilty of atrocious and murderous acts may savingly repent on the scaffold; and upon his execution hear the expression—“Bless God! he has gone to heaven, to be crowned in glory, through the all-redeeming merits of Christ the Lord! This is all nonsense. Such a character will never see heaven” (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 8, p. 61). My friends, what Brigham Young called “nonsense” is what the Bible calls “the Gospel”—the good news of salvation! **The thief on the cross** believed on Jesus not only in the “**eleventh hour**” of his life, but in the *last few minutes* of the “eleventh hour”: yet, Jesus assured him that that very day, he would be with him in Paradise. This wicked thief and murderer had no way of getting down off the cross and “making amends” for his crimes, by doing some good deed. He couldn’t even receive baptism! Yet, he was **saved** by simply repenting of his sin, and believing on Jesus.

Read Luke 23:32-33, 39-43.

The penny in Jesus’ parable is a beautiful picture of salvation. However, there is another way that this parable can be applied. This parable also teaches us about the

rewards in Heaven that believers will receive for their service to God. Remember, Peter had just asked Jesus what kind of rewards he and the other Apostles would receive for leaving all to follow Him; and Jesus had told Peter that in the Kingdom, he and the other Apostles will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. There *will* be real, tangible rewards in Heaven, and in the 1,000-year Kingdom.

Now, perhaps some of you are wondering why this parable is a picture of both **salvation and rewards for service**. The answer to this question is simple: *you can't separate "salvation" from "service."* Yes, these are two distinct things, which must not be confused; yet, at the same time, you can't separate them. Remember, the whole reason that Jesus saves you is that you may now serve Him with your life! When you come to Christ to receive His gift of salvation, the "**yoke**" that He places on you truly is "**easy**," and your "**burden is light**"; but there *is* a "**yoke**" and a "**burden**," nonetheless. Christ *does* have work for you to do!

So, since this parable also pictures the **rewards** that Christians will receive for their service, what does this parable *teach us* about rewards? Does it teach us that there will be *no differences in reward, or degrees of reward*? Does it teach that all Christians will receive exactly the same rewards, regardless of how fervently, or lazily, they served the Lord? No, that is *not* what it means. In **Luke 19**, Jesus said that in the Kingdom age, some believers will rule over ten cities, and some over five cities, according to what they did with the talents that God gave them. In **1 Corinthians 3**, Paul said that Christians will be rewarded for what they did for the Lord, but will also "**suffer loss**" of reward for what they did in the flesh. There will also be differences in the *types* of rewards that believers receive, depending on the types of service that God gave to them. For example, in **1 Peter 5**, we are told that the "**crown of glory**" will be given to **pastors** who faithfully fed God's flock. (Obviously, not everyone is called to be a pastor: so this is a reward that will be unique to them.) As for the **Apostles**, Jesus Himself had just told the disciples that in the Kingdom, they will sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. Obviously, not everyone will have that honour, because there are only twelve Apostles. There *will* be differences in reward, according to the *kind* of service that God gives us, and according to how *faithfully* we served the Lord.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:9-15.

Many believers will be deeply ashamed at the judgment seat of Christ, when they realise how little they did for the Lord, and how little they have to cast back at Jesus' feet. Make no mistake about it: there *will* be differences in reward, according to how faithfully we served Christ. Why, then, does Jesus say that those who come to Him in the eleventh hour will receive the *same reward* as those who came in the first hour? Is Jesus contradicting Himself? Not at all! The point that Jesus is making is that *He is gracious in the handing out of rewards*, and that He can do as He chooses. In His kindness, the Lord may give the same reward to someone who was saved for only a

few days before his death (or before the Rapture), as He will give to someone who came to the Lord at an early age, and was saved for most of his life. You see, it isn't the **years of service** that God will honour: it is *faithfulness in service* that He will honour. Sad to say, some believers who were saved for only a few years before their death served the Lord much more fervently in their short time of service than did many believers who were saved early in life. Many believers have been saved for decades, yet have served the Lord only half-heartedly. God is no respecter of persons; and He does not judge by outward appearances, as *we* do. He *will* judge fairly.

The bottom line is that it is all of God's grace, from beginning to end. Christ is the one who sought us out and saved us, even though we didn't deserve it; and He is the one who gave us the privilege of serving Him, and of receiving *rewards* from Him (even though we *still* don't deserve it)! We were not seeking Him; He was the one who sought after us.

Now, before we close this morning, let's take one more look at the closing statement of Jesus' parable. (**Read Matthew 20:16 again.**) We have looked at this statement from several angles this morning. We have seen that God will reward His servants graciously, not according to "seniority," but according to *faithfulness*. However, there is one more angle to this statement. You see, Jesus *often* made this statement that "the first shall be last, and the last first"; and when Jesus said this, He was usually talking about how God views **Jews and Gentiles**. Let's look at one more Scripture, and see how Jesus used this statement in another parable.

Read Luke 13:23-30.

What did Jesus mean when He said, "***There are last that shall be first, and there are first which shall be last,***" in *this* parable? Obviously, He was saying that in the Kingdom, Jewish believers and Gentile believers will be equally accepted by God. You see, the Jews really were "first." Christ came to the house of Israel *first*. Jesus was born into this world as a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and He preached the Gospel to His own people *first*. (In fact, it wasn't until about ten years after Christ's resurrection and ascension that the door was opened wide to the Gentiles.) God made the **New Covenant** specifically with the "house of Israel"; and we Gentiles have now been "grafted into" that covenant. As for the Gospel, Paul said, in **Romans 1:16**, that the Gospel is "***to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.***" The Jewish people *have* been given much privilege. They *did* come first. Nevertheless, in God's sight, Gentiles who believe on Him are just as precious as are the Jews. In the Kingdom, we Gentiles who believe on Jesus will sit down at the marriage feast of the Lamb, alongside the Jewish patriarchs of old. We will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and with all our Jewish and Gentile brethren of all ages; and together, we will worship our God and Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. There will be no difference in blessing between the "first" and the "last": we will all be one in the Lord.

Conclusion: As we close this morning, I would ask a couple questions. First, “Have you been saved?” Salvation is a free gift, which you cannot earn; and the way to receive that gift is simply to place your faith in Christ. However, the reason Christ wants to save you is that you might *serve* Him with your life. Are you willing to let Him come into your life, and be your Lord? I can tell you, from my 41 years of knowing the Lord, that it is *not* a drudgery, or misery, to be a servant of Jesus Christ: it is a joy beyond description. Jesus is seeking for men, women, and children to serve Him; and the benefits of being His servant are literally “out of this world.” Christ will give you everlasting life, and the hope of an eternity with Him in Heaven. Believe on Him today, surrender your life to Him, and be saved! **If you are saved already**, don’t serve the Lord half-heartedly: serve Him with all your heart, mind, and soul! You have been given the gift of eternal life, and the privilege of serving the King of Kings. Let your life count for the Lord, so that you will one day hear Him say, “***Well done, thou good and faithful servant.***”