

“Laboring For Christ”

Matthew 19:27-20:16

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Last month, thousands of athletes representing hundreds of nations from all over the world assembled in Tokyo, Japan for the start of the XXXII summer Olympiad. From their earliest years, many of these Olympians have lived with one thought in mind- and that is the dream of one day standing atop that awards platform and having the gold medal placed around their neck while their country’s national anthem is being played. Well five years ago, during the LAST Olympiad which was held in Rio De Janeiro, Polish discus thrower Piotr Malachowski won a silver medal and it became for HIM the fulfillment of his OWN life’s dream. However, he never held on to that medal very long for shortly after the Olympics had ended, the mother of a three-year-old cancer-stricken child named Olek reached out to him for help. For two years, he had been fighting retinoblastoma, a rare form of eye cancer that typically affects children. There was no chance to save Olek’s eye in Poland but a therapy offered in New York City COULD. Once the games concluded, Malachowski responded by auctioning off his silver medal in order to help the boy get his operation. After announcing that the medal had been sold, he said, “My silver medal is worth much more TODAY than it did a week ago. It is worth the life and health of little Olek.” Curiously enough, he had never met the family before nor did he ask for anything in return. He was simply confronted with a serious need and in order to help a desperate child, he freely and selflessly offered up his most precious treasure- his hard-earned silver medal which he had spent years training for in his quest to win. It was an extraordinary example of generosity and love that you certainly don’t see every day.

Well let’s now see how such an outstanding example of altruism might help us to better understand our New Testament lesson for this morning. Our account from Matthew actually begins with the PREVIOUS chapter--chapter 19--where Jesus is approached by a rich young man who is seeking eternal life. Now he was not searching for life on the order that CHRIST offered, that is, life as a loving and abiding relationship with the living God. Instead, he was looking for an ETERNAL LIFE INSURANCE POLICY, that is, a way to preserve his many material possessions and social advantages, not just throughout THIS life but right on into the NEXT. Jesus responded by telling him that if he was TRULY serious about experiencing life, he would first have to divest himself of his pride and love of worldly goods—the two greatest impediments to his kingdom--and become humble and poor like the REST of his followers. We’re told that when the young man heard these words, he went away sad for he had many possessions.

Where Peter and the others had thought of the young man as an ideal pick, they had to have been horrified by the way Jesus chased him away with his impossible demands. They had to have been thinking that if someone like HIM, with all his charm and good looks, his passion and intelligence, his wealth and breeding and social connections could NOT qualify as a member of his kingdom, then what hope could THEY—a group of simple fishermen--ever have? So Peter asks of Jesus, “Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall WE have?” In other words, the disciples saw themselves as making the kind of sacrifice the rich young man was unwilling to make. They had dropped their nets and abandoned their plows—leaving their

homes and families and former occupations as Jesus had asked of them--without once ever looking back. Surely, there would have to be SOME reward for such sacrifice, SOMETHING that would make all their years of duty and hardship worth it. It would only be FAIR!

In response to Peter's concern, Jesus tells them a parable. He says a man owned a vineyard and he needed many workers. Now vineyards were very labor-intensive and if it was spring, the soil would have to be dug and walls built, and if it was summer, the vines had to be pruned and tied, while if it was fall, the grapes had to be harvested and pressed. Therefore, early in the morning, the master went to the marketplace to hire other workers. They agreed to a denarius for a full day's worth of work. After a few hours, the master realized that he needed MORE workers so he returned to the marketplace, telling them, "You go to work in the vineyard too and I will pay you whatever is right." Yet they were STILL not enough so he returned again at noon, then at three, and finally around 5:00 p.m. to hire yet MORE laborers.

An hour later, it was sundown and the owner instructed his manager to give the men their wages. To everyone's surprise, each one received the exact same amount- a denarius for their labor, the equivalent to a full day's pay. However, those who had toiled the full twelve hours thought it quite unfair that others who had worked only one or three or even six hours, should receive the same remuneration as themselves so they complained to the vineyard-keeper about it. His response was, "My friend, I am not cheating you. I have given you what I promised. Don't be jealous of those who only worked for an hour. You must allow me to have pity on their poverty if I want to."

If allotting the same wage to everyone regardless of the hours spent working was surprising to those laborers, it has to be EQUALLY objectionable to OUR minds. I think we would all agree that people should be rewarded for their PERFORMANCE and NOT on the arbitrary whims of their employer. If you WORK twelve hours, you should be PAID for twelve hours while if you work for only ONE, then you should get only ONE hour of compensation- that's the American way and anything ELSE would smack of PURE COMMUNISM, WOULDN'T it! Doesn't Jesus say elsewhere that the laborer is worthy of his hire, meaning that the worker is due a fair wage, one commensurate with his effort? But then, God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts, ARE they?

Now let's try to make some sense of our parable. The master is God, his steward is Jesus, and the vineyard represents God's kingdom. Those who were hired at the end of the day were the publicans and sinners who at the last minute committed themselves to Christ. Meanwhile, those who were hired earlier on were the Scribes and Pharisees who for their many years of service to God believed they deserved a much GREATER reward. Those religious leaders thus feel in the interests of justice and fairness that they should receive MORE rewards, MORE compensation for all their efforts than the sinners whom they regarded as being unworthy of God's merit. The point that Jesus is making is that the rewards of the kingdom are not necessarily measured by one's efforts or by one's sacrifices but solely by God's good grace and no other. Regardless of how long or how hard one has worked on behalf of Christ and his kingdom, the gifts of God are totally unmerited and left to God's own discretion.

Jesus's followers had to be scratching their heads over this latest teaching. After all, they were really not much different than the religious leaders- they were with Jesus from the beginning and had made many sacrifices on his behalf. Therefore, they felt they were entitled to a MUCH GREATER share when it was time for them to receive their reward. From the

beginning, his disciples were CONTINUALLY keeping score- arguing amongst themselves as to who was the BETTER Christian and who deserved HIGHER honors and who would be FIRST to enter their Lord's kingdom; it was a constant frustration to Jesus. What they REFUSED to learn was that the first rule to being a follower of his lay in humility and selflessness, NOT in trying to advance oneself at the expense of others or showing how great one can be. Jesus' response is "Don't think that because you've made sacrifices for the kingdom that it necessarily ensures you will receive any kind of a great reward. Do not presume that those who serve God the longest or hardest will receive more than those who serve the least." You see, the principle Jesus was trying to get across was that in GOD'S economy, rewards would be based on the SPIRIT in which those labors were performed. REGARDLESS of how long or how hard one worked, if it was done in a proud and selfish and begrudging spirit, the return for such labor would be NIL, while those who offered a SMALL sacrifice, though in a humble and grateful spirit, would receive TEN TIMES OVER. The disposition of the heart is EVERYTHING to God.

We are warned here that the motives for working for Christ are ENTIRELY DIFFERENT from that of our own "dog eat dog" world, where one faces intense competition and the first to the top wins REGARDLESS of how many persons you have to crawl over in the process. The fact is that we don't always have to strive to have the largest church, the tallest steeple, or the highest salary. Rather, Christ would have us fall in love with SERVICE ITSELF so that even if there were NO REWARD AT ALL, we would STILL choose it as the most HONORABLE, the most USEFUL, and the most JOYFUL way of spending our life. This is why I have always had such admiration for school teachers and nurses and social workers, but ALSO for grocery clerks, airline stewards, and gas station attendants- and this was long before it became fashionable to praise them for working during this pandemic even when it posed a tremendous risk to their OWN health and safety. Though such professions aren't the most glamorous or offer the best pay, still in GOD'S eyes they can accomplish so much MORE than many of the presidents and CEOs of the Fortune 500 might. The ONLY reward we should EVER desire or be concerned about is to enjoy the love and close companionship of Christ himself- NO MORE! Any OTHER goal, any OTHER motive would detract from our commitment to him. As the late German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke has written:

When we do something for our Lord, when we really take seriously the matter of honoring him in the poorest of our brethren, when we pray to him, when we surrender to him our life with its joys and sorrows, its passions and despondencies, this is not a means to an end- to the end, namely, of securing a claim on eternal salvation...but rather this is an end IN ITSELF, it is ITSELF "salvation."

Occasionally I will ask people WHY they ever became or remain a Christian in the FIRST place and the answer I often hear is "because I want to go to heaven when I die." Like the rich young man, they come to Jesus looking for their OWN "eternal life insurance policy." It's the same reason that many Islamic terrorists are so willing to become martyrs for their faith- they're promised instant salvation in heaven if they die for the cause. Now I don't begrudge persons wanting to enjoy something greater in the afterlife than what they've experienced here in THIS life but if that's the SOLE reason they go to church or teach Sunday School or work at the local food pantry, then sad to say they've completely wasted their time and effort. Serving Christ is not a means to some greater end but the end ITSELF- we serve Christ because we

LOVE him and discover our greatest satisfaction lies in simply LABORING ON HIS BEHALF and no other!

You see, as Piotr Malachowski demonstrated when he auctioned off his Olympic medal to benefit one ailing child, performing something for its OWN sake becomes its OWN reward. To do something for another person for no other reason than the mere pleasure of doing it for that person--WITHOUT personal gain attached to it--is to discover what TRUE FREEDOM is. Our labor, instead of being a chore, then becomes JOYFUL SERVICE. Instead of complaining about how hard we are always working and how under-appreciated we are for it, we can take satisfaction in even the SMALLEST tasks, performing them with a quiet and thankful heart. The paradox here is that God promises a reward to those who serve him WITHOUT THE LEAST THOUGHT OF REWARD. For God, the reward lies in SERVICE ITSELF, for the honor of serving him in the FIRST PLACE and NOT in some future payoff. We must never forget that it is not by OUR merits by which we are saved but CHRIST'S and HIS alone, and if we truly understand that, then all we should EVER want is with gratitude in our hearts to FAITHFULLY FOLLOW him, to HUMBLY SERVE him, and then to TRY TO LOVE OTHERS EVEN AS HE LOVES US.

I want to end my sermon with a very personal story as this individual touched my life in a deep and meaningful way and has become for me a model of what TRUE Christian discipleship should be. During my first pastorate, Frances--our church custodian--was an older woman who was not only one of our most faithful deacons but also a member of the Search Committee which had called me to the church. She was one of the gentlest and humblest persons I ever met--always quick to greet you with her warm smile and gentle laugh. During the week, she quietly went about her duties vacuuming the carpets in our sanctuary, washing and waxing the floors in our Christian Ed. building, scrubbing the toilets, and dusting the furniture. She would come an hour before everyone else on Sunday morning so that the buildings would be nice and warm for when the congregation arrived, and was always the last to leave so as to be sure that all the lights were turned off. She certainly didn't have to work and what we DID pay her, wasn't very much. A point of fact was she was never really interested in the money because she understood how there wasn't anything in the world MORE noble or MORE satisfying than simply being a laborer in her Lord's vineyard. All she ever wanted to do was to QUIETLY and DEVOTEDLY serve God through such service, even when her husband would demean her for it, often calling her an "old maid" and a "wash room attendant" for making the five-mile drive to the church several times a week. She considered it her MINISTRY to us, but ESPECIALLY she saw it as a SERVICE TO CHRIST whom she wanted to please more than ANYTHING ELSE, something her husband could never understand.

Frances will always be for me a model of what Christian servanthood, which for me is the definition of Christian SAINTHOOD, is all about, an exemplar of how Christ would have us ALL serve him- humbly, faithfully, and without ever complaining or drawing attention to ourselves or comparing ourselves with others. To this day, I continue to think of her committed service and the saintly spirit in which it was made, and I know that God honored her heart and service as much as or EVEN MORE than God honored the service of Peter or John or Paul's. No service can EVER be TOO SMALL OR INSIGNIFICANT to honor God by, keeping in mind that whatsoever we do to the LEAST of all persons we no less do unto HIM! Let us pray...

Teach us, Lord, to serve you as you deserve- to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labor and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do your will. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.