

### **The Lord's Parables (3) - The parable of the labourers in the vineyard**

Confused as the disciples were about the Lord, and having only a very limited understanding of the things He taught and stood for and sought to accomplish, Peter spoke to Him on one occasion seeking an assurance that he and the other disciples would have special rewards and privileges in the kingdom of heaven. They had, he pointed out, sacrificed much and forsaken all. Surely, they deserved and merited a greater measure of happiness, a bigger reward, than others, and would have it.

Though the connection between the two things is not always seen, because of the chapter division which comes at this point, the Lord's response to Peter was, at least in part, in the form of a parable. The subject under discussion was the kingdom of heaven which the Lord went on to liken - and I quote- "a landowner went out early in the morning to hire labourers to work in his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard." Subsequently, at the third, sixth and ninth hour he went out into the market place hiring more labourers and, without specifying a wage, promising to give what was right for them. At the eleventh hour he went out again and found men whom he knew had been there all day. These he also hired and sent to work in his vineyard.

At last, and at the end of the day, it was time to pay the men. "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner, saying, these men who were hired last, worked for one hour and you have made them equal to us who have born the burden of the work and the heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. (Matthew, Chapter 20: 1-16).

Known as the parable of the labourers in the vineyard its immediate purpose was to teach Peter, and his fellow disciples, that though others would come later to labour in the vineyard, and even though they may not have sacrificed as much, yet their reward, their sense of blessedness and happiness, would be as great.

Peter and the disciples were being like the labourers who had been hired first and who complained when others, though they came later, received as much and were rewarded in the same way. What the Lord wanted them to understand is that He is always scouring the marketplace for labourers, for people who will work to cultivate the Church within themselves; and called at different times though they may be, yet their reward; their sense of well being and happiness; can be as great as that of anyone else. And that, rather than causing resentment and displeasure, jealousy even, should be a cause for rejoicing.

As we have previously seen, though the parables have an immediate point and purpose as this one had and can be seen to be connected to particular situations at the time they were spoken, yet the Lord also intended that they should serve as vehicles containing truth and teaching which would always be relevant in every age.

Though the parables appear to be nothing more than illustrations and similitudes, yet and as Swedenborg wrote of them, They "are representative of the spiritual and celestial things of His kingdom". (*Arcana Caelestia* 4637) And it is what this parable teaches us concerning the establishment of that kingdom within the individual person to which I would now like to turn.

As was indicated, the parable concerns the Church. But it is not the Church outside of us which is meant, but the Church inside of us. Everyone who both knows and tries to live according to the Lord's truth and teaching, has something of the Church within them. And this is what is meant by the vineyard. Like a vineyard the Church needs constant care. It must be cultivated. Plenty of work is required; weeds have to be kept out.

In order that the church within us might prosper and bear fruit, labourers are needed, and these are represented by truths learnt and, up to this point, standing idle in our memories, which are the market places of our minds. These truths have to be called forth from our memories and sent to work but, like the labourers, they are not called upon all at once. Some, you remember, were hired at the commencement of the day, some at the third hour, some at the sixth, some at the ninth, and some at the eleventh. And that, in a very wonderful way, teaches us how it is that the Lord calls forth from our memories, or causes to be called forth from our memories, the truths that are needed in a particular situation we are in, or at different stages or ages we go through.

There are many truths stored up in the memory, but they can only be brought out and put to work gradually, and over a period of time. Once one truth is busy at work in our hearts and minds, and getting on with the job, then another truth can be introduced. It might be the Lord's truth concerning judgment of others, or concerning forgiveness, or concerning pride, or concerning self importance, or any one of a great number of things. The important thing to note is that they are not all introduced and set to work at once. The Lord reminds us of, or confronts us with, certain truths at one time and with others at another.

Regeneration, or the establishment of the Lord's kingdom within us is a gradual process. Once we have absorbed into our thinking and attitudes and integrated into our behaviour the implications a particular truth has for us, then we can come to terms with the implications another truth has for us (or with even deeper implications of that earlier truth).

Unless we read the parable carefully the point escapes us that the labourers hired at the eleventh hour had been there in the market place all the day. "And about the eleventh hour" it is said, "he went out" (that is, the landowner) "and found others still standing idle, and said to them, Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" It seems then that they, though only called at the eleventh hour had in fact been standing there in the market place from the beginning and longer than those who had earlier in the day been called to go to work in the vineyard. Those then who were there first and been there longest were the last to be hired. All of which sounds odd until we become aware of the underlying point and teaching being touched upon here.

As children we are more open to certain teaching and concepts than ever we are subsequently in our youth and adulthood. A child, for example, has no difficulty accepting his or her dependence on God. Children much more readily trust God and are not beset by the anxieties we in adulthood are. And these teachings about God, and the individuals' sense of complete dependence on God, whilst they are there from the beginning are usually amongst the last of the "labourers" to be called to work in the vineyard. They are there longest, but they are the last to be called to action.

It is only in the later stages of their spiritual growth and development that adults come to appreciate, accept, and acknowledge (not just with their lips but with their hearts as well) their entire dependence on the Lord. I repeat the point: certain truths and concepts which have been with us longest, from childhood, are amongst the last of which we become truly aware and sincerely conscious of.

What does the rewarding of the labourers mean? Each, at the end of the day, was rewarded. The labourers we now know to mean the truths of the Bible learnt and stored up in our memories. They are called forth from the memory and are necessarily given work to do if the Church is to prosper within us.

But how can they be rewarded? Is it not true that once a truth is 'put to work' in our lives, a new dimension is added to it? We see things in it which we never saw before. It gains a significance, a value and an importance for us which it never had before. The reward is this new aspect it takes on. You have possibly read many times the Lord's teaching about forgiveness. We know how it was that He told Peter he was to forgive not seven, but seventy times seven. Quite so, we say. And that's the way it should be. But how the meaning and importance and implications of that teaching on forgiveness changes when we are actually caught in a situation which requires our forgiveness! Forgiveness we may not be happy to extend! A new insight into what the Lord was saying comes to us. We gain a whole new understanding of what is involved.

With the labourers who were hired first the landowner had to bargain with them before they would go into the vineyard to work. The others who came later were content with his promise that he would pay them what was right. With those first labourers reward was very much to the forefront of their thinking.

At the beginning of regeneration it cannot be otherwise than that the prospect of reward; of how we will personally benefit from our obedience to the Lord's truth, figures very prominently in our thinking. And this is what is pointed to here. It is our early attitudes to living the life that leads to heaven which are touched upon. We obey the Lord's truth at the beginning because of the way in which we will benefit; because it is going to make us look good in the eyes of other people, and so on. This is what we are thinking about. Reward. Personal benefit. As regeneration progresses, however, this fades. It no longer matters. It ceases to be a consideration. As to the way in which we shall benefit, or our lives will benefit, we leave this to the Lord. We know, and are confident that He will do to us what is right.

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