



CHRISTADELPHIAN ISOLATION LEAGUE

EXHORTATION

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SECTION LEADER:

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Readings: 2 Samuel 3, Jeremiah 9, Matthew 20

The Labourers in the Vineyard or the Generous and Loving Master

All the gospels were inspired by the Holy Spirit giving an accurate and faithful record of the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus. The Spirit also used the character and talents of each gospel writer to give different aspects of those teachings which gives each of the four records their individual view of the Lord Jesus. For instance the physician Luke recounts more miracles of healing than the other gospel writers, together with a particular interest in the under classes in Jewish society such as women, the Samaritans and the poor.

Matthew was a Jew and his record is full of quotations from the Old Testament showing that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah foretold by the prophets. The words: *"...that what was spoken by the prophets may be fulfilled"* is found regularly in his record. Matthew was also an educated man with good commercial knowledge. He was a tax collector for the Romans. His job was to charge travellers on one of the main Roman roads in Galilee a duty on the sales value of the goods and produce being carried into the Roman territory to trade. Many nationalities would have used those roads carrying all different currencies. Matthew would have to have had knowledge of the currencies and apply an exchange rate to each different coin. So with this knowledge Matthew gives the names of the different coins that Jesus used in his parables and teachings.

"Acquire no gold nor silver nor copper for your belts" (**Matthew 10:9** ESV). Jesus tells his disciples as he sends them to preach about the Kingdom of God. Each of those words he used for money were specific coins in circulation in Israel. In Mark's comparative record he does not go into such detail, Mark uses the word *"money"*.

The one coin that is mentioned in today's reading from **Matthew 20** is the *"denarius"* or the penny. The denarius was a standard Roman coin and was the normal day's pay for a soldier and so it was generous for a master to give a denarius to a casual labourer for one day's work. This should make us think that the parable, which is usually described as the 'labourers in the vineyard' is more about the love and generosity of the master of the house than what work the labourers actually did.

The Jews who listened to Jesus (and those that read Matthew's gospel) would also have been very aware of another parable of a vineyard. It can be found in **Isaiah 5** where the prophet describes the parable as a love song for Israel:

"Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes." **Isaiah 5:1, 2** (ESV).

Despite all the preparation and love that the Lord had bestowed on Israel and Judah over many years and many generations, the response from Israel had usually been rebellion and an unwillingness to work in the Lord's field. Israel repeatedly preferred the worship of other gods and continually showed a lack of faith and trust in the One God who had chosen them to be his special people.

But the Lord has prepared another vineyard for another people. He has shown his love to us in calling and choosing us to be disciples of His Son and members of this Kingdom. What does he ask of us? **Isaiah 5** describes what work needed to be done in the vineyard. **Verse 6** gives pruning and

hoeing as the regular work. Pruning, so that the vines produce fruit and not just long fruitless branches covered with leaves which may be good to look at but is not what vines are grown for. The other work of the labourer in the vineyard is hoeing; hard and repetitive work, so that “*briers and thorns*” don’t grow and overwhelm the vines.

There are spiritual lessons in both these activities. In our spiritual lives we need to “*prune*” the growth of our characteristics inherited from Adam. The apostle Paul calls them the: “*desires of the flesh*” (**Galatians 5:16**). But we also need to work on the growth of the fruit of the Spirit: “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*”. (**Galatians 5:22, 23**), at the same time trying to cope with all the effects of the curse from Eden that the “*briers and thorns*” so vividly describe. The illnesses we may suffer, our mortal nature and the need to work to live, are all causes for anxiety and pain inherited from Adam. Growing a nature like Christ’s whilst coping with all these potential problems is what our discipleship is about. But if we do all this will we earn life in the Kingdom?

The parable that Matthew records about the labourers in the vineyard shows that we cannot earn an entry into the Kingdom. Do you think that those labourers who had worked all day for their denarius and then grumbled about those who received the same payment for a shorter working day will be first in the Kingdom? They were angry at the Master’s generosity to others. Yet they received exactly what the Master had contracted to pay for their labour.

Paul when writing to the Ephesians says: “*By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*” (**Ephesians 2:8, 9**). We may prune all our natural desires, develop a fruit of the Spirit that is very good, but our salvation still depends on grace, it is a gift of God through faith.

The parable was told by Jesus partly as a response to Peter’s question at the end of the previous chapter: “*See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?*” (**Matthew 19:27**). Some of the disciples, like Matthew, had given up their jobs, left their means of living in order to be a disciple of Jesus, and today there are similar examples of disciples leaving (or being forced to leave) their positions for the sake of their beliefs. What is their reward? Jesus says that we should not think of the rewards in the same way as the Jews did or many in the world do today. It is not a commercial transaction based on a reward. Jesus says that this way of thinking will be turned upside down; the first last and the last first. The true disciple will receive one hundred fold, they will inherit eternal life as a gift from their Father.

John in the Revelation of Jesus Christ describes those who are with the Lamb as: “*called and chosen and faithful*” (**Revelation 17:14**). We can do nothing about being “*called and chosen*”, the Lord in his mercy and by his grace has decided this. However we can do everything about being “*faithful*”, that is entirely our responsibility. Through faith we develop a Christ-like character and Christ-like actions. But we can never earn the right to be in the Kingdom, it is a gift from a loving and generous Father.

Immediately after the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, Jesus, for the third time foretells his suffering, death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

The love and generosity of God is perfectly seen in the death of His son on the cross. Jesus did not deserve to die. All his life he had worked in His Father’s vineyard, labouring so faithfully that: “*his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*” (**Luke 22:44**). All this was in obedient service to his Father and for the love he had for his disciples of all ages. And the one who died with common criminals, one of the least in worldly terms, one of the last, became the first. He became the first to rise from the dead to everlasting life. In these simple emblems of bread and wine we see all the love, compassion and forgiveness of our Heavenly Father and of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.