

## ***“An Unexpected Wage “***

\* Today we read *The Parable of The Vineyard Workers*, (Mat 20:1-16) that is peculiar only to Matthew. Biblical scholars are not sure whether the evangelist composed this parable or received it as a part of his traditional materials, and what its original reference was. However, its present context associates with the conclusion of the teaching of “Possession and the Kingdom” in the preceding chapter 19 that ends with the notable remark: <sup>30</sup> *But many who are first will be last, and the last first*. Significantly, in the end of our parable, Jesus calls to our attention the same ruling that <sup>16</sup> *the last will be first, and the first last*. An attempt to answer, *What does it mean?*, produces the endless array of interpretations among theologians. But the one thing in common, is that the parable refers to the rewards of the people who were called to work in “God’s vineyard” - or His Church. This idea is not alien to the teaching of *The Parable of The Talents* (Mat 25:14-30), or to the dispute *Who is the Greatest* from (Luke 22:24-25); also it can be seen very clearly in (2 John 1:8) where it says, <sup>8</sup> *Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward, ...*. Therefore, those members who hold positions and responsibilities in the church are not left without wage; they are nourished and blessed with their daily bread. At the same moment they should have curbed their sinful flesh by God’s grace; otherwise, they will be found among the last and will not receive the gift – life with Christ without end. That is a brief conclusion of the parable.

\* As soon as many of us are the confessors within the Lutheran tradition, it would be interesting to know what the reformer M. Luther had preached and taught on this matter. The next is a shorten variant of Luther’s sermon *The Parable of The Vineyard Workers* with our comments; and in italic type we posted Luther’s thoughts as they appear in the English translation.

\* In the beginning Luther notes that he will avoid to discuss the minor details in the parable such as hired hours, wages and so forth. Then he remarked on the earlier interpretation of the parable due to its disconnection with the objective reality. As for example, in the case with interrelating the first hour of employment down to the eleventh hour. It says that *the first hour was the time of Adam, the third that of Noah, the sixth that of Abraham, the ninth that of Moses, and the eleventh hour that of Christ and his apostles*. *Such talk is all right for pastime*, says Luther. Then he continues, *For it does not harmonize with Scripture to say that the shilling signifies eternal life, with which the first, or Adam and the holy patriarchs, were dissatisfied, and that such holy characters should murmur in the kingdom of heaven, and be rebuked by the householder and made the last, that is, be condemned*.

\* As a theologian, Luther was accustomed to look for the supporting material of his doctrinal corpus in the Scripture. And here the Pauline teaching of man’s salvation apart of any work was found the solid ground

in Luther's interpretation of the parable. Accordingly, the householder *desires to have his goodness esteemed higher than all human works and merit, yea, that his mercy alone must have all the praise*, says Luther.

\* Next, what is a more profitable for a worker, to earn the penny by his own merit or because of the undeserved mercy of the householder? The Jewish presumption is by their good works as well as our own clergy, remarks Luther. They hire themselves for a penny per day; consequently, their lives are bitter and they lead a career that is indeed hard because they are under the Law. They must experience how sin has taken captive the conscience and how they must be eternally lost; meanwhile there is nothing more but wrath and perdition wish to reign. Contrary to this, the conscience of the last hour workers is led by grace and that willingly and without being driven by the law. In the end, each worker got a penny (the temporal reward); at the same time, their eternal rewards are quite different; that is to say, *the last will be first, and the first last*.

\* About meanings of "last" and "first," they should be observed from God's and men's viewpoints, said Luther. The Scripture and our daily life confirm the Biblical truth that the world extols the physical beauties which awake in a person proudness. Therefore, what is the first before men is the last before God and vice versa. That is to say, *whosoever exalts himself, shall be humbled*, (Mat 23:12). On the other hand, those in whom there is no sign of worldly superiority, *yea, who indeed suffers for Christ's sake, God esteems as the first, but men as the last*.

\* After that Luther concludes that *no mortal is so high who will not have occasion to fear that he may become the very lowest*. As for example, the pope and his cardinals who imagined themselves as vice-regents of God, and persuaded the world to believe it. In fact, no mortal lies so low or can fall so low, if their God wouldn't extend his grace upon a man that he may become the highest. Therefore, we have no reason to be haughty was a remark. Speaking from his life experiences and his knowledge of the Holy Bible, Luther calls his listeners to follow after the humble image of Christ and regard not the penny but the goodness of the householder who in positive sense himself is the very first and the very last to saints and sinners. That is why no one can boast by his own merits or achievements before God, but all glory unconditionally given to Christ, who is the Master of our merits and our achievements.

\* As it was shown from Luther, the labors in the parable stand for members of the church among whom there are hypocrites as well. Some people in the church may seem close to God by virtue of their merits. They might lead a congregation to believe that they *have served Jesus all their life*, or that they know God from their childhood, or that they are descended from a family with old Lutheran tradition. As usual such people look for a higher position, and they like it when others honor them.

It is hard to make the hypocrites known to public because they hide themselves *behind the trees*; but the parable improves our vision to see how the hidden things come out. Therefore, come and see.

\* It certainly happens when in view of "the first" - the strong and skillful - God rewards "the last," - the weak and less skillful - with material blessings! In this case no one hypocrite can stand silent, they fell by the wayside, of course not in ethical error or unbelief, but in the more subtle sin of selfishness. The question of the householder in (v.15), *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*, proves that "the first" demanded to themselves the position of owing and distributing the money, as well as authority! In that demand the Master says, *Take yours and be gone!* (v.13). In application it means that life eternal is lost. Some commentators interpret this remark as the total rejection and damnation. In the beginning the position of "the first" seemed unshakable; they have been regarded, possibly as lights or as examples for worthy emulation. But now they are assigned to a place in the night of eternity.

Beloved, may God preserve us all in his grace! And let us be attentive to the warning of the parable - *envy or jealousy, that is nurtured and not repented of, leads to eternal disaster.*

Amen