

The Reward of Grace. Christ's Object Lessons - Chapter 28

The truth of God's free grace had been almost lost sight of by the Jews. The rabbis taught that God's favor must be earned. The reward of the righteous they hoped to gain by their own works. Thus their worship was prompted by a grasping, mercenary spirit. From this spirit even the disciples of Christ were not wholly free, and the Saviour sought every opportunity of showing them their error. Just before He gave the parable of the laborers, an event occurred that opened the way for Him to present the right principles.

As He was walking by the way, a young ruler came running to Him, and kneeling, reverently saluted Him. "Good Master," he said, "what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"

The ruler had addressed Christ merely as an honored rabbi, not discerning in Him the Son of God. The Saviour said, "Why callest thou Me good? There is none good but one, that is, God." On what ground do you call Me good? God is the one good. If you recognize Me as such, you must receive Me as His Son and representative.

"If thou wilt enter into life," He added, "keep the commandments." The character of God is expressed in His law; and in order for you to be in harmony with God, the principles of His law must be the spring of your every action.

Christ does not lessen the claims of the law. In unmistakable language He presents obedience to it as the condition of eternal life--the same condition that was required of Adam before his fall. The Lord expects no less of the soul now than He expected of man in Paradise, perfect obedience, unblemished righteousness. The requirement under the covenant of grace is just as broad as the requirement made in Eden - harmony with God's law, which is holy, just, and good.

To the words, "Keep the commandments," the young man answered, "Which?" He supposed that some ceremonial precept was meant, but Christ was speaking of the law given from Sinai. He mentioned several commandments from the second table of the Decalogue, then summed them all up in the precept, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

The young man answered without hesitation, "All these things have I kept from my youth up; what lack I yet?" His conception of the law was external and superficial. Judged by a human standard, he had preserved an unblemished character. To a great degree his outward life had been free from guilt; he verily thought that his obedience had been without a flaw. Yet he had a secret fear that

all was not right between his soul and God. This prompted the question, "What lack I yet?"

"If thou wilt be perfect," Christ said, "go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come and follow Me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions."

The lover of self is a transgressor of the law. This Jesus desired to reveal to the young man, and He gave him a test that would make manifest the selfishness of his heart. He showed him the plague spot in his character. The young man desired no further enlightenment. He had cherished an idol in the soul; the world was his god. He professed to have kept the commandments, but he was destitute of the principle which is the very spirit and life of them all. He did not possess true love for God or man. This want was the want of everything that would qualify him to enter the kingdom of heaven. In his love of self and worldly gain he was out of harmony with the principles of heaven.

When this young ruler came to Jesus, his sincerity and earnestness won the Saviour's heart. He "beholding him loved him." In this young man He saw one who might do service as a preacher of righteousness. He would have received this talented and noble youth as readily as He received the poor fishermen who followed Him. Had the young man devoted his ability to the work of saving souls, he might have become a diligent and successful laborer for Christ.

But first he must accept the conditions of discipleship. He must give himself unreservedly to God. At the Saviour's call, John, Peter, Matthew, and their companions "left all, rose up, and followed Him." **Luke 5:28**. The same consecration was required of the young ruler. And in this Christ did not ask a greater sacrifice than He Himself had made. "He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich." **2 Corinthians 8:9**. The young man had only to follow where Christ led the way.

Christ looked upon the young man and longed after his soul. He longed to send him forth as a messenger of blessing to men. In the place of that which He called upon him to surrender, Christ offered him the privilege of companionship with Himself. "Follow Me," He said. This privilege had been counted a joy by Peter, James, and John. The young man himself looked upon Christ with admiration. His heart was drawn toward the Saviour. But he was not ready to accept the Saviour's principle of self-sacrifice. He chose his riches before Jesus. He wanted eternal life, but would not receive into the soul that unselfish love which alone is life, and with a sorrowful heart he turned away from Christ. As the young man turned away, Jesus said to His disciples, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God." These words astonished the disciples. They had been taught to look upon the rich as the favorites of heaven; worldly power and riches they themselves hoped to receive in the Messiah's kingdom; if the rich were to fail of entering the kingdom, what hope could there be for the rest of men?

"Jesus answereth again, and saith unto them, Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. And they were astonished out of measure." Now they realized that they themselves were included in the solemn warning. In the light of the Saviour's words, their own secret longing for power and riches was revealed. With misgivings for themselves they exclaimed, "Who then can be saved?"

"Jesus looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible."

A rich man, as such, cannot enter heaven. His wealth gives him no title to the inheritance of the saints in light. It is only through the unmerited grace of Christ that any man can find entrance into the city of God.

To the rich no less than to the poor are the words of the Holy Spirit spoken, "Ye are not your own; for ye are bought with a price." **1 Corinthians 6:19, 20.** When men believe this, their possessions will be held as a trust, to be used as God shall direct, for the saving of the lost, and the comfort of the suffering and the poor. With man this is impossible, for the heart clings to its earthly treasure. The soul that is bound in service to mammon is deaf to the cry of human need. But with God all things are possible. By beholding the matchless love of Christ, the selfish heart will be melted and subdued. The rich man will be led, as was Saul the Pharisee, to say, "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord." **Philippians 3:7, 8.** Then they will not count anything their own. They will joy to regard themselves as stewards of the manifold grace of God, and for His sake servants of all men.

Peter was the first to rally from the secret conviction wrought by the Saviour's words. He thought with satisfaction of what he and his brethren had given up for Christ. "Behold," he said, "we have forsaken all, and followed Thee." Remembering the conditional promise to the young ruler, "Thou shalt have treasure in heaven," he now asked what he and his companions were to receive as a reward for their sacrifices.

The Saviour's answer thrilled the hearts of those Galilean fishermen. It pictured honors that fulfilled their highest dreams: "Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of His glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." And He added, "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."

But Peter's question, "What shall we have therefore?" had revealed a spirit that uncorrected would unfit the disciples to be messengers for Christ; for it was the spirit of a hireling. While they had been attracted by the love of Jesus, the

disciples were not wholly free from Pharisaism. They still worked with the thought of meriting a reward in proportion to their labor. They cherished a spirit of self-exaltation and self-complacency, and made comparisons among themselves. When one of them failed in any particular, the others indulged feelings of superiority.

Lest the disciples should lose sight of the principles of the gospel, Christ related to them a parable illustrating the manner in which God deals with His servants, and the spirit in which He desires them to labor for Him.

"The kingdom of heaven," He said, "is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard." It was the custom for men seeking employment to wait in the market places, and thither the employers went to find servants. The man in the parable is represented as going out at different hours to engage workmen. Those who are hired at the earliest hours agree to work for a stated sum; those hired later leave their wages to the discretion of the householder.

"So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny."

The householder's dealing with the workers in his vineyard represents God's dealing with the human family. It is contrary to the customs that prevail among men. In worldly business, compensation is given according to the work accomplished. The laborer expects to be paid only that which he earns. But in the parable, Christ was illustrating the principles of His kingdom - a kingdom not of this world. He is not controlled by any human standard. The Lord says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways. . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts." **Isaiah 55:8, 9.**

In the parable the first laborers agreed to work for a stipulated sum, and they received the amount specified, nothing more. Those later hired believed the master's promise, "Whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive." They showed their confidence in him by asking no question in regard to wages. They trusted to his justice and equity. They were rewarded, not according to the amount of their labor, but according to the generosity of his purpose.

So God desires us to trust in Him who justifieth the ungodly. His reward is given not according to our merit but according to His own purpose, "which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord." **Ephesians 3:11.** "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us." **Titus 3:5.** And for those who trust in Him He will do "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think." **Ephesians 3:20.**

Not the amount of labor performed or its visible results but the spirit in which the work is done makes it of value with God. Those who came into the vineyard

at the eleventh hour were thankful for an opportunity to work. Their hearts were full of gratitude to the one who had accepted them; and when at the close of the day the householder paid them for a full day's work, they were greatly surprised. They knew they had not earned such wages. And the kindness expressed in the countenance of their employer filled them with joy. They never forgot the goodness of the householder or the generous compensation they had received. Thus it is with the sinner who, knowing his unworthiness, has entered the Master's vineyard at the eleventh hour. His time of service seems so short, he feels that he is undeserving of reward; but he is filled with joy that God has accepted him at all. He works with a humble, trusting spirit, thankful for the privilege of being a co-worker with Christ. This spirit God delights to honor.

The Lord desires us to rest in Him without a question as to our measure of reward. When Christ abides in the soul, the thought of reward is not uppermost. This is not the motive that actuates our service. It is true that in a subordinate sense we should have respect to the recompense of reward. God desires us to appreciate His promised blessings. But He would not have us eager for rewards nor feel that for every duty we must receive compensation. We should not be so anxious to gain the reward as to do what is right, irrespective of all gain. Love to God and to our fellow men should be our motive.

This parable does not excuse those who hear the first call to labor but who neglect to enter the Lord's vineyard. When the householder went to the market place at the eleventh hour and found men unemployed he said, "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" The answer was, "Because no man hath hired us." None of those called later in the day were there in the morning. They had not refused the call. Those who refuse and afterward repent, do well to repent; but it is not safe to trifle with the first call of mercy.

When the laborers in the vineyard received "every man a penny," those who had begun work early in the day were offended. Had they not worked for twelve hours? they reasoned, and was it not right that they should receive more than those who had worked for only one hour in the cooler part of the day? "These last have wrought but one hour," they said, "and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day."

"Friend," the householder replied to one of them, "I do thee no wrong; didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way; I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?"

"So the last shall be first, and the first last; for many be called, but few chosen."

The first laborers of the parable represent those who, because of their services, claim preference above others. They take up their work in a self-gratulatory spirit, and do not bring into it self-denial and sacrifice. They may have professed to serve God all their lives; they may have been foremost in enduring hardship, privation, and trial, and they therefore think themselves

entitled to a large reward. They think more of the reward than of the privilege of being servants of Christ. In their view their labors and sacrifices entitle them to receive honor above others, and because this claim is not recognized, they are offended. Did they bring into their work a loving, trusting spirit, they would continue to be first; but their querulous, complaining disposition is un-Christlike, and proves them to be untrustworthy. It reveals their desire for self-advancement, their distrust of God, and their jealous, grudging spirit toward their brethren. The Lord's goodness and liberality is to them only an occasion of murmuring. Thus they show that there is no connection between their souls and God. They do not know the joy of cooperation with the Master Worker.

There is nothing more offensive to God than this narrow, self-caring spirit. He cannot work with any who manifest these attributes. They are insensible to the working of His Spirit.

The Jews had been first called into the Lord's vineyard, and because of this they were proud and self-righteous. Their long years of service they regarded as entitling them to receive a larger reward than others. Nothing was more exasperating to them than an intimation that the Gentiles were to be admitted to equal privileges with themselves in the things of God.

Christ warned the disciples who had been first called to follow Him, lest the same evil should be cherished among them. He saw that the weakness, the curse of the church, would be a spirit of self-righteousness. Men would think they could do something toward earning a place in the kingdom of heaven. They would imagine that when they had made certain advancement, the Lord would come in to help them. Thus there would be an abundance of self and little of Jesus. Many who had made a little advancement would be puffed up and think themselves superior to others. They would be eager for flattery, jealous if not thought most important. Against this danger Christ seeks to guard His disciples.

All boasting of merit in ourselves is out of place. "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth, glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the Lord which exercise loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, saith the Lord."

Jeremiah 9:23, 24.

The reward is not of works, lest any man should boast; but it is all of grace. "What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." **Romans 4:1-5.** Therefore there is no occasion for one to glory over another or to grudge against another. No one is privileged above another, nor can anyone claim the reward as a right.

The first and the last are to be sharers in the great, eternal reward, and the first should gladly welcome the last. He who grudges the reward to another forgets that he himself is saved by grace alone. The parable of the laborers rebukes all jealousy and suspicion. Love rejoices in the truth and institutes no envious comparisons. He who possesses love compares only the loveliness of Christ and his own imperfect character.

This parable is a warning to all laborers, however long their service, however abundant their labors, that without love to their brethren, without humility before God, they are nothing. There is no religion in the enthronement of self. He who makes self-glorification his aim will find himself destitute of that grace which alone can make him efficient in Christ's service. Whenever pride and self-complacency are indulged, the work is marred.

It is not the length of time we labor but our willingness and fidelity in the work that makes it acceptable to God. In all our service a full surrender of self is demanded. The smallest duty done in sincerity and self-forgetfulness is more pleasing to God than the greatest work when marred with self-seeking. He looks to see how much of the spirit of Christ we cherish, and how much of the likeness of Christ our work reveals. He regards more the love and faithfulness with which we work than the amount we do.

Only when selfishness is dead, when strife for supremacy is banished, when gratitude fills the heart, and love makes fragrant the life - it is only then that Christ is abiding in the soul, and we are recognized as laborers together with God.

However trying their labor, the true workers do not regard it as drudgery. They are ready to spend and to be spent; but it is a cheerful work, done with a glad heart. Joy in God is expressed through Jesus Christ. Their joy is the joy set before Christ - "to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work." **John 4:34**. They are in cooperation with the Lord of glory. This thought sweetens all toil, it braces the will, it nerves the spirit for whatever may befall. Working with unselfish heart, ennobled by being partakers of Christ's sufferings, sharing His sympathies, and cooperating with Him in His labor, they help to swell the tide of His joy and bring honor and praise to His exalted name.

This is the spirit of all true service for God. Through a lack of this spirit, many who appear to be first will become last, while those who possess it, though accounted last, will become first.

There are many who have given themselves to Christ, yet who see no opportunity of doing a large work or making great sacrifices in His service. These may find comfort in the thought that it is not necessarily the martyr's self-surrender which is most acceptable to God; it may not be the missionary who has daily faced danger and death that stands highest in heaven's records. The Christian who is such in his private life, in the daily surrender of self, in sincerity of purpose and purity of thought, in meekness under provocation, in faith and piety, in fidelity in that which is least, the one who in the home life represents the

character of Christ - such a one may in the sight of God be more precious than even the world-renowned missionary or martyr.

Oh, how different are the standards by which God and men measure character. God sees many temptations resisted of which the world and even near friends never know - temptations in the home, in the heart. He sees the soul's humility in view of its own weakness; the sincere repentance over even a thought that is evil. He sees the wholehearted devotion to His service. He has noted the hours of hard battle with self - battle that won the victory. All this God and angels know. A book of remembrance is written before Him for them that fear the Lord and that think upon His name.

Not in our learning, not in our position, not in our numbers or entrusted talents, not in the will of man, is to be found the secret of success. Feeling our inefficiency we are to contemplate Christ, and through Him who is the strength of all strength, the thought of all thought, the willing and obedient will gain victory after victory.

And however short our service or humble our work, if in simple faith we follow Christ, we shall not be disappointed of the reward. That which even the greatest and wisest cannot earn, the weakest and most humble may receive. Heaven's golden gate opens not to the self-exalted. It is not lifted up to the proud in spirit. But the everlasting portals will open wide to the trembling touch of a little child. Blessed will be the recompense of grace to those who have wrought for God in the simplicity of faith and love.