

Lesson 7

Proper 20

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 20:1–16

This is another of the parables found only in Matthew’s Gospel. It offers us a straightforward lesson, the point of which is not hard to determine and understand. It is helpful, however, to see it in context. During His interaction with the rich young man who wanted to know what he had to do to get eternal life (Matthew 9:16–30), Jesus had challenged him to change the whole focus of his life by giving his wealth to the poor and coming to follow Him. The young man had gone away sad, “for he had great possessions” (v. 22). Then Jesus had turned to His disciples to say, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (v. 24). And they had responded, “Who then can be saved?” (v. 25).

Jesus had given the needed direction to His disciples’ thinking by responding to their question: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Peter then boldly—and honestly—said, “We have left everything and followed You. What then will we have?” Read Jesus’ response in verses 28–30.

103. What privileged position did Jesus promise His apostles? How did He expand His assurances to include all of His followers?

Jesus ended His comments with a *mashal*, a pithy, cryptic statement intended for mulling over and chewing on. He repeated it at the end of this parable, so the parable surely is an expansion of what had preceded it.

A denarius was the usual pay for a day laborer, who usually worked from sunup to sundown, 6 a.m.–6 p.m., to earn his pay. Often his ability to feed his family for another day depended on his being hired. The point of Jesus’ parable hinges on the landowner’s hiring workers at various times during the day and then paying them all the same wage, a denarius.

104. What was Jesus teaching about the Kingdom with this parable? What would be a comparable situation in the life of the Church today?

105. What was Jesus warning against by having the landowner ask, “Do you begrudge my generosity?” (20:15).

106. In the light of the parable, interpret Jesus' *mashal* that "The last will be first, and the first last."

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 55:6–9

Isaiah 55 is the prophet's invitation to the thirsty—his call to the exiles to remember and take seriously the Lord's covenant and to enjoy the wonderful gifts of His grace "without money and without price" (v. 1). If they would, He assured them, "You shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace" (v. 12). He wanted them to believe that their restoration to their homeland was assured by the Lord!

Isaiah encouraged decisive action with his "___ the LORD" and "___ upon Him."

107. What thought is added by "while He may be found" and "while He is near"? (See Psalm 145:18; 2 Corinthians 6:1–2.) What was to be a necessary part of their seeking the Lord and calling on Him? What assurance did Isaiah give to encourage the turnaround he called for?

108. What practical application did the Lord's declaration that His thoughts and ways are higher than theirs have for the people of Judah in exile?

109. When have circumstances in your life made God especially near and accessible to you?

110. What gives us assurance that God really is always near and accessible to us? (See Hebrews 10:19–23.)

111. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 1:12–14, 19–30

Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi while he was under house arrest in Rome, awaiting his first trial in Caesar's court. It is a letter of thanks for their latest gift to him, help with his expenses in

Rome. His letter is called “The Epistle of Joy”—the word *joy* occurring sixteen times in various forms.

Philippi was named after Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. It became a prosperous Roman colony located on the Via Egnatia, the main highway between Rome and its eastern provinces. Many retired legionnaires had settled there because its status as a colony gave Roman citizenship to all residents. The congregation in Philippi was predominantly Gentile and cultivated a special relationship with Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

In his letter, Paul reported about his situation in Rome and about his expectations regarding continuing his apostolic mission. In fact, he told them that his house arrest had actually ____, and that the whole palace guard had come to know that his ____.

112. Within the Church, what had been the surprising result of Paul’s incarceration?

113. What part did Paul tell the Philippian Christians they played in his anticipation of deliverance and continued service? What was Paul’s main concern for himself as an apostle of Jesus during his incarceration and at his trial in Caesar’s court?

114. How is Paul’s attitude toward life and death an example for us to imitate? What convinced Paul that the Lord had more for him to do in his apostolic ministry?

115. How did Paul show his secure confidence in the love and esteem in which the Philippian Christians held him?

Paul’s only indicates his major concern. Paul was ready to leave his future in God’s hands. If it was not what he anticipated, he did not want his friends in Philippi to be dismayed, but to be strong in their faith and commitment to discipleship. Historians generally agree that Paul was acquitted and released and was able to carry out his planned mission to Spain—and probably was able to visit his friends in Philippi again. A few years later, he and Peter were caught in Nero’s persecution and martyred.

116. What are the key factors in a manner of life that is “worthy of the gospel of Christ”?

117. What did Paul say would be the effect on those threatening them when the Philippians would stand firm in the Gospel and not be frightened when they were put on the spot for their faith? What effect would it have on their fellow Christians? Is this double effect still felt today when Christians stand firm in the face of martyrdom?

118. What worldview strengthens Christians to be able to stand up and be counted in the critical moment?

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Lord God, heavenly Father, since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 20:1–16

103. Jesus told His apostles that in His glorious kingdom, they would “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28). Jesus expanded His assurances to “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands” for His sake (v. 29a). They will “receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (v. 29b). Here, too, Jesus’ words go beyond the literal to include all who give the kingdom priority over every other association or attachment or possession. There surely is a present-life quality to His promise, for He adds “eternal life” as the ultimate gift, but the “hundredfold” is not a guarantee just of material reward. It reminds us of the vastly superior reward of knowing the blessing of Jesus’ presence in every aspect of life and His assurance that “all these things” we need will be ours as well.

104. With His parable, Jesus taught that life in the kingdom of God is based entirely on the gracious disposition and action of the King. No worker in His kingdom can approach Him and say, “I have worked for You, so now You owe me.” Instead, we are grateful to have been “hired” and are blessed by what He is disposed to give us, and we are to rejoice also in His grace toward others. Remember, Jesus said even a cup of cold water given in His name will be rewarded. A comparable situation in the Church today would be comparing a lifelong Christian who served his Lord faithfully with one who came to Christ only in his later years, yet both receive the same assurance of eternal life as God’s gift of grace!

105. The landowner’s “Do you begrudge my generosity?” makes us recognize that we easily slip from a grace application to a works emphasis as we make comparisons. We know we are saved by grace, but when we make comparisons, we find ourselves sometimes thinking we who have served conscientiously deserve God’s grace more than the newcomer or those who don’t appear to work as hard in their service as we do. In the course of this discussion, ask your group, “What figure in another of Jesus’ parables is brought to mind by these complainers?” The older brother who resented the father’s welcome and acceptance of his prodigal brother is the classic example of the “works-oriented” who don’t want God to act in grace toward others.

106. Jesus’ *mashal* reminds us that God does things differently in His kingdom than we would expect. Where the one who would be greatest must be the slave of all, where there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine lifelong church members who “need no repentance” (Luke 15:7), it is not surprising that the last to come, perhaps because they had the

farthest to travel in their spiritual journey, should be first in line in approaching the throne of grace with their praise.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 55:6–9

Fill-in Answers: Isaiah’s “seek the Lord” and “call upon Him”—both imperatives—call for decisive spiritual action on the part of people who were busily adapting themselves to life in Babylon and forgetting their covenant identity.

Isaiah called the exiles to active remembering of the covenant, to active practicing of those things that strengthened the covenant faith.

107. “While He may be found” and “while He is near” assure us that He may be found and that He is near, but they also suggest that times of opportunity do come to an end. Returning to the Lord (repenting), the wicked forsaking His way and the unrighteous man His thoughts, are always necessary parts of seeking and finding the Lord. (See Matthew 3:1–2; 4:17; Acts 2:37–38.) Unless the Church’s message includes a call to repentance, we may be “comforting the comfortable” with a Gospel of cheap grace instead of “afflicting the comfortable” with God’s call to decisively turn to Him in repentance. Isaiah encouraged and enabled this turnaround by assuring that the Lord will have compassion and will abundantly pardon those who turn to Him. This assurance is still the dynamic that allows “the afflicted to be comforted” as they turn from sin to Christ.

108. To be assured that God’s ways and thoughts were infinitely higher than theirs encouraged the exiles to see that God was at work even in their difficult circumstances and would live up to His covenant promise—even though they could not understand the way He was going about it. That is true also for us when we experience difficult times of testing. We trust God’s higher wisdom and knowledge and purpose.

109. Some in your group may be willing to tell of times and circumstances in which God was especially near and accessible to them. Sharing your own experience will encourage them to be open with one another.

110. God’s coming to us in Christ to fulfill His covenant of grace assures us that He wants nothing more than to be accessible to us, ready always to communicate His grace to us through Word and Sacrament and ready always to hear the prayers we bring in Jesus’ name. (See Romans 5:1–2; 8:38–39.)

111. The landowner’s approach to his hired workers was not what they expected. God’s grace is always surprising because His thoughts and ways are infinitely higher than ours.

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 1:12–14, 19–30

Fill-in Answers: Paul told them that his house arrest had actually served to advance the Gospel, and that the whole palace guard had come to know that his imprisonment was for Christ.

112. Because Paul was being bold to testify even to his guards while under house arrest, most of the brothers in the Lord were being encouraged to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

113. The Philippians contributed their prayers for Paul. That and their need for Paul’s continued guidance encouraged him to think it would be God’s will for him to supply their need: “To remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” Paul’s main concern for himself was that he not “be at all ashamed”—not back away from his proclamation of the Gospel when put on trial in Caesar’s court—but that “with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.”

114. Paul's attitude toward life as a disciple of Jesus is the epitome of the Christian's attitude toward all of life. To live with this attitude and purpose is "Christ"—relating to Him in faith and serving Him faithfully in love. As we approach it in faith, to die is "gain," the whole purpose of Christ for us and in us being fully realized when we pass through the door of death into eternal life. Ask yourself and your group: "Can you describe your daily life as 'Christ'? Can you sincerely say, trusting your Lord's promises, 'Death will be gain for me?'" Paul was convinced that God would lead him safely through what lay ahead so that he could "continue with [the Philippians and others] for your progress and joy in the faith."

115. Paul was so secure in knowing the Philippian Christians' love for him that he could say: "I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again." After a conversation, as he was leaving, old Gus Gagelman, a farmer and a member of Trinity Lutheran Church in Great Bend, Kansas, used to say with a twinkle in his eye, "Sure glad you got to see me!" And he was right! People did love him and were always happy to see him! That's how Paul felt—"When I come, your joy will overflow!"

116. Paul applied his situation to the Philippian Christians and urged them to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel. The abiding values are the key factors in conduct that is worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Such a life is based on faith; it displays a living hope; and it expresses itself in love. Ephesians 4:25–5:21 gives an excellent detailed description of such Christian life and conduct.

117. The faithful, fearless witness of Christians even to the point of death would be "a clear sign to [their oppressors] of their destruction." Their fellow Christians—and they themselves—would see in their faithful, fearless witness a sign "of your salvation, and that from God." Most martyrdoms today are the result of persecution by religious zealots—Muslim, Hindu, and so on—so it's hard to say that they will be a sign of their oppressors' destruction. Muslims especially think they are serving Allah when they take action against and execute "infidels." They, too, are willing to die for their beliefs. But when the deaths of Christian martyrs do not deter the continued faithfulness of living Christians, the fanatics must have to think: "What is it about this relationship with Jesus that makes them so stubborn?" The death of martyrs, who witness even to death, surely is a sign that they and all who put their trust in Jesus will be saved.

118. The Christian worldview is that our lives in this world are important as we live as God's children and seek first the kingdom of our Lord Jesus. In the process, we are given opportunities to grow in our relationship with Him and to further the outreach and impact of the Kingdom. We need to make the most of these opportunities. All the while, we may know in faith and hope that for us to live is Christ and that to die in faith in Him is gain. So, while we are at work here, we recognize that our citizenship is in heaven, and we live looking up, waiting for our Lord Jesus to come in glory—or waiting for Him to take our spirits to be with Him until that Last Day.