

Fair Reward¹

I was part of a team that the Great Teacher had commissioned to seek and save the lost. But the magnitude of the problem made me wonder about how God would deal with those who agreed with Him, but did not have a personal relationship with Him. One of my fellow team members had similar questions, and we talked about it from time to time. He related some of his thinking in the form of a reshaped parable²:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a King who went out among the people early in the morning to attract followers that would become his subjects. He met with some and gave them their marching orders. He agreed to reward them for their loyalty and give them a place in his kingdom.

"About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'If you also follow me and I will reward you by making you citizens of the kingdom.' So they went with him.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

"'Because no one has asked us to join with them,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my kingdom.' The people he talked to at the later times he did not know as well, and did not have as good of a relationship with them as he did with those he met earlier.

The King sent others to gather in his people, even His Son³. They gained followers, but also suffered injury and death by those who were jealous of the King.

There were some, however, who showed up without really knowing the King or any of His servants. But they worked in the kingdom for the King's Cause (Goodness⁴) even without the benefits of the relationship⁵. They believed in His Truth without knowing Him in a personal way.

"When evening came, the king said to his prime minister, 'Call the people and reward them, beginning with the last ones that arrived and going on to the first.'

"The workers who began following at the end of the day came and each received a key to their new home⁶ in the kingdom. When those came who had been involved for a much longer time, they did not expect to see others there that they did not think had the proper relationship with the King. Though each one of them also received a home, they began to grumble against the King.

They said, 'These who were received at last or without knowing the King⁷ should not be rewarded the same as those of us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day. They have not kept to the traditions of the elders⁸, as we have all of our lives!'

"But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to follow and receive citizenship in return? Find your place and go there. I want to give the one who came to us last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want in my own kingdom as I collect my people? Or are you envious because I am generous and not as exclusive as you?'

"So some who think that they are close to God are really far away, and some who think that they are far from God are really close to Him.⁹"

When my friend finished his story, I told him that I had to ponder and pray about this. I knew that God wants a relationship with us all, and He want us to "get" the main point about the key importance of Good. God has such joy over every victory of Good over Evil¹⁰; would he tailor the entrance requirements for those who loved Good with their entire soul but who did not understand¹¹ its author? I would hope that he would embrace those who knew only the threshold of Good, overlooking¹² their ignorance and ultimately magnifying it as He gave them an understanding of Christ's sacrifice for us

Then I thought of one that was saved almost instantly without any real relationship (one of the thieves crucified with Christ¹³) and I realized that God can save whomever he wants¹⁴, not matter how I might think I understand the requirements. But to bicker over those who did not believe exactly as I did, or exclude them as inferior to us¹⁵, was definitely not approved by God¹⁶. In whatever manner we win followers for the kingdom, we must not get in the way of their salvation¹⁷ or their developing a relationship with the King.

1. Title could be "Fair Pay", based on the parable that is the core of this story
2. Matthew 20:1-16, The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard
3. see Matthew 21:33-45, The Parable of the Tenants
4. Amos 5:15a, "Hate evil, love good" and Romans 12:9, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good."
5. Matthew 7:20-23, "Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" ; also think about Matthew 25:31-46
6. John 14:2-4, "In my Father's house are many rooms..."
7. In The Parable of the Wedding Feast, Matthew 22:1-14, note the phrase "So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled..."
8. see Mark 4:7-8
9. consider the parallel to the thought in the original: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."
10. 1 Corinthians 13:6, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth."; think also of the imagery of the great battle discussed in Revelation
11. Luke 23:34a, "Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."
12. Acts 17:30, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent."
13. Luke 23:43
14. Romans 9:15, "... I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."; also Matthew 19:26c, "with God all things are possible..."
15. Matthew 21:31b, "Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you."
16. We tend to exude those who are not in our "group", as seen in Luke 9:49-50, "Master," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." "Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."
17. Matthew 23:15, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are."