



SERMONS

by

Anthony Baateng

Date: 24th September 2017

Preacher: Anthony Boateng

Bible readings: Matthew 20: 1-16 and Philippians 1: 21-26

Title: “The last will be first and the first will be last”

The setting is clear; in the book of Matthew 20:1-16, the disciples are competing for a place in the Kingdom of God. They are making an indirect request to sit on the throne next to Jesus when He rules supreme as the new King of Israel, as a reward for their sacrifice – Jesus responds with a parable.

In this parable, we meet a landowner who has invited leading consultants and wine critics to help launch the first growth of his wine. His aim is to get feedback and helpful advice. He took control of the estate after his father’s death 12 years ago. His estate is large and produces two types of wines: Justice (first-growth) and Evangelise (second-growth).

You can imagine all the responsibility on his shoulders, the endless field trips (day and night), – estate management, grapes plantations and finally just 1 month away from seeing the real fruits of his investment after all the suffering and perseverance. He can still remember the first day he took over the land from his father – from fluctuation in the quality of wine to weak bank balance.

Finally, First-growth and second-growth wines are experiencing recognition locally and are soon to go nationwide. He has restored a once-declining estate to a level worthy of its reputation. Wine critics have described his wine as a *“unique, powerful, brilliantly consistent wine of stunning grace and elegant”*.

However, there’s a caveat, the consultants have given him an assessment of how much work needs to be done. He now realises the harvest is great, but the workers are few. So, what does he do? This is his passion. It will break his heart to see all his hard work go to waste. So, he decides to hire more workers at 6:00 A.M. and agrees to pay them £100 for a full day’s work. He then hires on an ongoing basis when he goes to the market and discovers that some are standing idle – at 12.PM, at three o’clock, and even at five o’clock.

He makes no promise to these new workers about their wages just whatever he feels is right. His main concern is to ensure that as many people as possible are hired for the day, regardless of how long they work to achieve his goal.

Perhaps you can relate. You’re a pastoral leader, senior church steward, circuit steward or Sunday school leader. You know what is like to be entrusted with a role. You’re prepared to do everything to ensure you fulfil your role, right? After dedicating a lot of time and effort to your church – endless meetings, and pastoral support, now you finally have a new church building. Or maybe you have recently purchased your new house or flat. You have recently gotten married. You have recently been promoted or got a new job. I believe the feeling is the same. So maybe you can understand. It’s a state of ownership, responsibility and accomplishment, but it requires teamwork, hard work, and commitment.

We all know deep down the love we have for our church. We’ll invest the church money to keep the building running even if that’s all we have – a projector or even a new boiler. Sometimes we can also get fed up when we feel our role deserves more recognition.

In the case of this parable, the problem arose when payday came, and the owner of the estate asked his manager to call and give the workers their payslips, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' Each discovered they had received the same monthly wages.

Matthew says that when those who worked from 6:00 A.M. received their wages, *"they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'"*

In other words, they were so unhappy about receiving the same wages as the workers who started later that they complained directly to the landowner. They became envious of Jesus' generosity. **The question is, are you serving for the reward or is it out of love?**

So, what did the landowner finally say? Now I'm paraphrasing here, *14I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Are you envious because I am generous?' 16 The last will be first, and the first will be last."* Can you imagine what they must be feeling at this point?

Since I answered my call to preach it has been challenging to say the least. At times when preaching, I feel everything is going so well that at times I get caught up in a different space and feel like I can go on forever. But sometimes something happens spiritually that I just can't explain rationally. At times unexpected feedback from my mentor has made me reflect on my calling. I have felt disappointed when I compared myself to others who started at the same time as me. Like the disciples, I was unhappy deep down at times for I wanted my reward, but I never complained, I just prayed about it and reasoned with my mentor. **My question is this, can you serve when you don't get the physical reward you want? Can you serve when everything is not going right?**

In the case of some of these disciples, their attitude to serving was borne out of the spirit of serving for reward when Jesus rules supreme, rather than out of love. Now we might condemn them as glory seekers, but I believe we ought to honestly look deep into our self and we will recognise that we all have a similar attitude. We all have a desire to hold the most important roles in our churches, earn the most money. We love it when others compliment us on our new weave, clothes, and shoes.

We all have a desire to be recognised. And so, we join things like fellowship groups, societies, choir group or take up a post that we have no passion or time for. The danger is that it can create divisions, make our church feel unwelcome and stop the progress of our church. It can cause us to say negative and envious things about others. It can become an ego, an obsession rather than out of love.

Let's draw our attention to the book of Philippians 1: 21-30 where Paul is writing to the Philippian church to seek for the spirit of steadfastness among them in their suffering.

Paul writes, *27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel*

So, what can we take from today's readings?

- Brothers and sisters, I believe the Lord is urging us to shake off the spirit of envy, glory-seeking, and individualism. He wants us to respond whenever there is a need and forget about the reward. And we do this trusting that God is completely sovereign and those who serve Him can trust that they will be rewarded with generosity at his appointed time.

- Brothers and sisters, I believe the Lord is telling us that we can be on His right or left-hand side by serving with love. It doesn't matter about our status, role at work, seniority, race or bank balance. All we must do is conduct ourselves in a Christian manner and give our all for Christ.

I don't know about you but sometimes I look at the state of our churches and begin to reflect on my calling and my purpose in life. Sometimes I wonder what legacy I want to leave behind when I meet my maker. Sometimes I come to church or meetings and feel spiritually irritated. I wonder if this is all there is to church. Sometimes I wonder is this world worth living in?

But then I hear God telling me: 'remain committed and joyful even in your suffering.' I hear a voice telling us: trust in God for your salvation. Meet the needs of others in their thirst – out of love for Christ. Give everything to fight for justice.

Personally, one day when I meet my maker, I want to be able to say that I used my God-given gifts and passion to preach the good news. I want to be able to say that I used my struggles to help others. I want others to be able to say that I used my faith to conquer my fears. I want to be on the Lord's left or right side like the disciples, not for any selfish reason or my preaching ambition, but to stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, fighting for justice. And any reward or recognition on this earth will not matter for the Lord said,

"The last will be first, and the first will be last."

Gracious God give us strength, courage, joy and the Spirit of Love to serve you wholeheartedly to reveal the Glory of God. **Amen.**