



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 19:27–20:16

Gospel of Matthew

“Laborers in the Vineyard, or
Sovereign Grace in the Doctrine of Rewards”

TRANSCRIPT

Now we are turning to Matthew chapter 19 and verse 27 for our Scripture reading, and you remember this is at the conclusion of the 19th chapter, and specifically the encounter of the Lord Jesus with the rich young ruler. And since those verses have important relationship to the parable the laborers in chapter 20, we want to begin our Scripture reading at chapter 19 verse 27, and read through chapter 20 verse 16. Now the Lord Jesus has just said, with men this, that is, salvation, is impossible, but with God all things are possible.

“Then answered Peter and said unto him, ‘Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?’ And Jesus said unto them, ‘Verily I say unto you, That ye who 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 every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first. (Chapter 20): For the kingdom of

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heaven is like unto a man that is an house-holder, which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace. And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found other standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard.”

Incidentally, these last words found in the Authorized Version are probably not genuine. The earliest manuscripts do not have a repetition: and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive.

“So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the laborers, 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 denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a denarius. And when they had received it, they murmured against the householder, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a denarius? Take what is thine and go thy way, I will give unto this last, even 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

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shall be first, and the first last.”

Again if you have a Bible with the King James translation in it, the last words, “for many are called, but few chosen,” are not genuine. At this point, the earliest manuscripts again do not have them. They are derived from chapter 22 in verse 14 where they do occur, so we will close the 16th verse with

“The last shall be first and the first last.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word.

Our subject for this morning is “Laborers in the Vineyard, or Sovereign Grace in the Doctrine of Rewards.” Will those who work in the Lord’s service for a longer time get a large reward, and will those who do more get more? These two questions of time and quantity are questions that come before us in this section that we are looking at. Shall my son, who does not remember the day when he was not a Christian, because he has served the Lord for a longer time than his father, shall he get a larger reward? Or, to put in another way and look at it from a standpoint of quantity, shall Billy Graham, who has conducted world wide evangelistic campaigns and carried on all the ministries get a larger reward than a faithful Sunday school superintendent?

These are questions I think that are raised by the parable that we intend to concentrate upon a little bit this morning. It is a very difficult parable, perhaps one of the top two or three in difficulty of interpretation. It’s chief lesson is relatively plain, and that is the sovereign grace of God in Christian rewards. That comes through very strongly and very simply. He does what he will with his own, and he may do what he pleases what he pleases. He states that so plainly that it is impossible to miss it—is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? And so the lesson of the parable is plain, but it is the details, and some of the questions that arise out of it that puzzle us.

Alfred Plummer, one of the better interpreters of the New Testament, has said, “God keeps his promises to those who serve him, but he remains master in his own world. He is the sole judge of what each servant ought to receive. No one receives less than has been promised but many receive more. And in these uncovenanted awards there are much that, in man’s eyes, seems to be unfair, but God sees not as man sees, and shall not the judge of all the earth do right?”

A parable, you notice as you look at the first verse of chapter 20, has to do with the kingdom of the heavens. He writes, for the kingdom of the heavens is like a man that is a householder, so it is evident that this parable has primarily to do with the kingdom of heaven. Now the kingdom of heaven, we have been saying in our exposition in the Gospel of Mathew, is ultimately a reference to the messianic rule of our Lord Jesus upon the earth. He has just referred to that in verse 28 of the preceding chapter, when he said in the regeneration, when the Son of Man shall sit upon the throne of his glory.

But now since Gentiles and Jews have to do with this kingdom of the heaven, I think it is fair to say that the principles found in this parable are principles that pertain not only to the Nation Israel, not only to the nations of the Gentiles, but they also pertain to us today, because we too are related to that messianic kingdom.

The parable is closely related to the immediately preceding words of chapter 19. That is evident because chapter 20 verse 1 begins with the conjunction, for, which relates the parable to that which has preceded. And furthermore, we notice verse 30 says, many that are first shall be last and the last shall be first, and then in verse 16 of chapter 20 we read, so the last shall be first and the first last. And so it is evident that the intervening material is very closely related to the climax of those last words of chapter 19.

So we must take a look at the occasion of the giving of the parable in order to understand something of it’s meaning. Remember, the Lord Jesus had been approached by a rich young ruler who ran up to him knelt down before him, engaged in an act of homage before him, and said, good master what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life? And the Lord Jesus, seeking to point

out his sin to him brought him to the second table of the Law of Moses to show him that he was a sinner. But blinded by his desire for his possessions, the young man, finally, after the interview when the Lord Jesus had said, if thou be perfect go and sell thou hast and give to the poor and come follow me, turned from the presence of the Lord Jesus and left.

He had come to the right person he had asked the right questions, he had gotten the right answer, but he made the wrong decision, and commenting upon it, the Lord Jesus had said how difficult it is for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. And to stress it he said, “Verily I say unto you that 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.”

The disciples were puzzled by that because just as in our day, doors open very easily for men who have wealth, and so the apostles looking at this young man who not only had wealth and position and influence and prestige, but also had religion, said, “Who then can be saved?” And the Lord Jesus replied, with men this is impossible, for by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves. There is no way that we can be saved through our good works, for we are sinners, and we must pay the debt, pay the penalty of our debt before God.

But he added with God all things are possible. It is the gift of God not of works lest any man shall boast. So with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible, and then as the young rich man turned and moved off from the Lord Jesus, Peter, looking out, said, “Behold we have forsaken all,”—there is a stress in the original text in that first person pronoun—“We have left all and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?” The rich man may find it difficult to enter into the kingdom of God and he may have lost his opportunity, but what about us?

Incidentally—I didn’t make the comment, but it should have been made—rich men, then, found it very easy to get what they wanted, just as today they do. Someone has said, they do not find much difficulty in getting into the church, however hard it may be to get into the kingdom. It is sadly true that rich people who put on a veneer of religion easily get entrance into our Christian churches, because so often the leadership of the churches, desirous of the money to support the work, lower

their standards for them. It is sad but nevertheless it is true, and after I’ve read this, I think that there comes over me this sneaking desire to be a member of the kingdom of heaven rather than of the church, which is wrong, of course. Our Lord laid down stringent conditions, and it did not make any difference whether a man was poor or rich—the conditions had to be met. And I am persuaded that is the way it ought to be in the Christian church.

But Peter is thinking about what he has given up, and what they have given up. What are we going to have, Lord? And the Lord Jesus—incidentally that question that Peter asks has provoked some discussion by students of the Gospel of Matthew, and some of them have suggested that Peter was just manifesting some holy curiosity, that he was just thinking about what his reward would be as a theological question.

But others, I think more correctly, knowing Peter Johnson, that he was really manifesting here something of a mercantile spirit. He was saying we have done so much work for thee Lord, now what are we going to get? What is the *quid pro quo*? What is it that we are going to get because we have given up so much to follow thee?

Now the Lord Jesus is very gracious with Peter, and he does not immediately rebuke him, but rather gives him a promise. He said, Peter, I want you to know that in your case, and others who have followed me in the regeneration—now that is a reference of the renewal in the phase of the earth for the messianic kingdom—in the regeneration when the Son of Man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. So Peter, you and the other apostles are going to be co-assessors with me and rule with me in the kingdom; that is what you are going to get. And it certainly was a great saying.

But expanding the words, expanding the answer now, he says in verse 29, “And everyone that hath forsaken houses or brethren or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or land for my name sake shall receive one hundred fold and shall inherit everlasting life.” So the picture broadens from you apostles to everyone, and this is truly a beautiful thought fulfilled in the experience of all believers who have made the great decision through grace.

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There is no question about it but that the person who has come to faith in the Lord Jesus has come into the place where he shall receive an hundred fold. To give up a house, to give up a father, to give up a mother, to give up brethren, to give up other members of the family for the namesake of the Lord Jesus is to receive a hundred fold more. And I do not believe there are any Christians, true believing Christians, who near the end of their life cannot say that our Lord has beautifully fulfilled these promises that he makes to those who are willing, by the grace of God to make the sacrifice.

I know in my own experience that that is true. Had not God by his grace called me, and had not he by his grace pushed me into the work of the Lord, why the chances are right now I would be nothing more than the president of some large industrial corporation [laughter] with a few little friends located in a particular locality, and now almost every day I get letters from people all over the country—even out of the country—that say, Lewis we are praying for you and for Mary. That would never have happened if it were not for the wonderful grace of God and what he does when he fulfills all of his Word. An hundred fold more and ultimately everlasting life.

Many of you in this audience are fulfilling that text to me, in that I have received a hundred fold more as a result of the decision that he wrought to start with—it is all of grace isn't it? Wonderful promise. Incidentally, Mark adds an interesting little phrase that is not found here. He says that you will get all of this with persecution. [Laughter] Isn't that interesting? You will get it all with persecution. I have had a few of those, too, but those are part and parcel of what it is to be identified with the Lord Jesus.

Some of them, incidentally, I brought on myself. I am not proud of them, but some have been brought on by the virtue of the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The way the world carries on and continues its controversy with Jesus Christ is to attack the servants of Jesus Christ, and you can be sure that the servant is not above his master.

And finally the Lord ends in the 30th verse a kind of climax of his words: many that are first shall be last and the last shall be first. Now some have interpreted this as being a reversal of

positions. In other words, the rich man who has just left the Lord Jesus is going to go to the bottom of the class, whereas the others are going to therefore come to the top of the class. The first are going to be last and the last are going to be first.

Now that is a possible interpretation of this, but there is another. It is possible that this is a rebuke of Peter’s self-complacency. Peter it is good to make a sacrifice, but a sacrifice must be accompanied by humility, and if your sacrifice is accompanied by pride, then Peter you shall have to suffer judgment as a result of that, and many that are first shall be as last and the last shall be as first.

What he is saying in effect is, Peter there is no special merit in being first in the field. To be earliest in the field confers no exclusive right to special blessings. It is true you are one of the apostles, and I have called you for the service of the Lord as one of the apostles, but because you are one of the apostles do not think that you have special rewards. Rewards are based upon fidelity not upon opportunity, primarily. Fidelity is the important thing, and it is just possible that the first in our eyes shall be like the last, and the last shall be like the first.

In other words, when fidelity is the issue, there may be equality even though others have been in the field first. Now I think that is the lesson because the parable that follows teaches that very thing, that it is possible for workers who come into the work at the eleventh hour to receive the same award as those who have labored all day long.

Now you can see that this parable has to do with rewards and Christian service. It does not have to do with salvation and Christian life. That is, it does not tell us how to possess Christian life; that comes when we acknowledge our own sin, see the Lord Jesus as the one who has offered the atoning sacrifice, and rely upon what he has done for us for everlasting relationship to the Lord. It comes when we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, but when we come to life or service and rewards, then there are some other things that we need to keep in mind, and we are going to see that just as we are saved in sovereign grace, so rewards are by sovereign grace.

Now that is the occasion for the story that follows. For the kingdom of heaven is like a man who is a householder who out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. This little

parable is a parable in four parts, and it illustrates how the first may be last and how the last may be as the first. Now we don't have time to talk about the details of it, and as a matter of fact, we have in another chapter or so a parable of another householder in which it becomes important to pay attention to the nature of the householder, the nature of the vineyard, and what the service is, but we will drop that.

Of course as we look on to the reality, the householder stands for God, the sovereign God who owns all. The vineyard pertains to the kingdom of the heaven, and service within that kingdom, and we can leave it at that for our purposes today.

Now the parable is in four parts. There is the hiring of the servants, there is the paying of them, in verses 8, 9, 10. And then there is the murmuring of those that were hired first in the day, early in the morning verses 11 and 12. And then there is the answering of the complaint by the lord of the house, the householder, in verses 13 through 15.

Now there are two or three things that I want you to note about this parable as we begin. The hiring begins early in the morning, and we read in the very first verse the householder, who represents God ultimately, went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. Now notice that all of this begins upon the initiative of the householder. He did not wake up late in the morning, have a late breakfast with his servants about him and hear some knocking on the door, clamoring, and go to the door and find hundreds of people who were banging upon his door asking him for a job.

It's just the opposite. This man goes out early in the morning and the initiative begins with him. Now this is very striking because it illustrates again the great Christian principle that all of the work of God begins with God. It doesn't begin with us. As a matter of fact, we could have gotten along very well without God entirely, as far as we're concerned. In fact, most of us who have come to the knowledge of the true God through Jesus Christ regarded his initial intrusion into our life as an intrusion. We didn't like it at all. We thought it was very bad. We avoided it if at all possible. Some of us for years avoided it.

So just as in the coming into Christian life we are called to it by God—all he foreknew, he also predestinated, and whom he predestinated, these he also called, and whom he called these he justified—just as we are called into the possession of Christian life, we are called into Christian service too; called by God. In other words, the initiative begins with the Lord. If any man has the will to serve God, it is because his own will has been motivated by God to do that. If anyone has a will to be one of the householder’s servants, it’s because, as Dr. Barnhouse used to like to say, “God has first jiggled his willer.” [Laughter]

Now that’s what Paul told the Philippians: work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. Talking to Christians, “For it is God that worketh in you both to will [and] to do of his good pleasure.” So even our Christian service is service that is motivated, initiated, moved by God, and we respond. Incidentally, the reason he says, hired—that seems strange to think of the servants of God being hired—I think that we’re not working for wages, but the reason I think that he uses that term is because Peter has put it on that basis. He has said that we have left all and followed you; what are we going to get? And so the parable is told in a little bit of condescension towards Peter’s own view of things, so he speaks about hiring.

Now what does he mean when he says that he hires some in the morning, early in the morning? Incidentally, the Jewish day was divided into twelve parts so that there were twelve hours. No matter how much sunlight, there was still twelve hours, so that when daylight savings time comes, it’s still twelve hours. I’ve heard of one farmer who was a little upset over going on daylight savings. He said he didn’t know whether he could stand or not, another hour sunlight would burn up all his crops. [Laughter]

But twelve hours are in the day, so that early in the morning would be just after the sun had come up. The third hour would be a fourth of the day, sixth would be noon, ninth hour would be in the middle of the afternoon, and the eleventh hour would be just before the sun went down. Now he speaks here about early in the morning, and then at the third hour, the sixth hour, and the eleventh

hour—ninth hour and the eleventh hour; five different times he speaks of hiring. Now what is meant by this?

Now we could translate this to the whole Christian era and speak of the Jews and the Gentiles. That is possible. Or we could transfer it to a more personal sphere, and think of the fact that God does hire some of his servants early in life, some when they are young people, some when they are middle aged, some when they are older, and some when they are almost ready to go into the far beyond. [Laughter]

Now, let’s think about that for a moment, because I think that is true. I am not sure that is what this parable speaks about, but it is true and there are many that think that it is. It is a striking thing that when God calls his servants to serve him, he doesn’t call them all at the same time. There are some called when they are children.

Early in the morning is one of the most beautiful times of the day. I wish I knew much about it, but I stay up late at night. But when I have gotten up early in the morning, it’s beautiful. There’s a freshness on everything. It’s too bad you cannot study late and get up early both. And it’s great to be called as a child. Its amazing what little children, who have an understanding in their own way of the grace of God, are able to do. They can say words that can melt the heart of a mother and can touch the conscience of a hardhearted father, and Christian service is beautiful and fruitful in the life of a little child.

And then God calls young men. He calls young men in high school and college, and they’re able to give the greater part of their life to the service of the Lord. Then he calls some men who are in business, as he called me. We don’t have as much to give, humanly speaking, but nevertheless he calls us, and according to this particular parable here he offers us a possibility of a great reward. And there are some who are called when they are older. John Newton was called as middle-aged man really, practically, and yet his life was a great testimony to Jesus Christ.

C. I. Scofield, who wrote this *Scofield Reference Bible*, was called at the age of 36 to salvation and Christian service as an alcoholic and a lawyer, but he had given him abilities so that he was able

to compress into beautifully succinct sentences the major parts of the Christian faith. And this *Scofield Reference Bible* has been magnificently used through the years by God. Oh, there are some things in it that are not inspired, of course. The notes are certainly not inspired, and I could wish that it was a little more Calvinistic, but nevertheless, it has been used of God in the lives of many, even in my life. And Mr. Scofield was a relatively old man, a middle aged man, when he was called to salvation and service.

John Flavell was once preaching—he was one of the Puritan—and as he preached, when he came to the benediction, instead of pronouncing the benediction, he said, “This morning, I’m sorry that I cannot pronounce a blessing upon you. I cannot pronounce a blessing upon you, for not all of you love our Lord Jesus Christ. And if any man love not our lord Jesus Christ let him be anathema, Paul tells us. I cannot give you a blessing this morning, and with that he closed the service.”

There was a man present who was just a little fellow seventeen years of age. Eighty-six years later in the United States of America, when he was one hundred three years of age, he remembered the saying, and he was converted. For three years he lived as a Christian you can find his tombstone today. It reads something like this: “Here lies a babe three years old by grace, who died at age one hundred six by nature, or take the dying thief.” Here was a man who had very little to offer our Lord. His life was about over, and yet at the conclusion of his life, God spoke to him, and not only called him to salvation but called him to Christian service.

Now it’s not a very good place from which to carry out your Christian service hanging on a cross, but nevertheless, he did, and he did precisely that, because if you’ll remember, he gave testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ, not only gave testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ, but syndicated him by saying, “This man had done nothing amiss.” He worshiped the Lord calling him Lord, and then gave us a magnificent prayer, “Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,” which has caused numerous interpreters to believe that at the moment of his death he probably understood more about theology than any man living at the time, including the apostles, because he saw the nature of the messianic kingdom. He saw that our Lord was the messianic kingdom. He knew that

when he passed from this life, he would have life beyond the grave. He knew that the greatest thing in life was not the stay here, but to go there. He didn't say, “Let me come down from the cross,” but he said, “remember me when you come in your kingdom.” Now what a magnificent Christian service this man rendered at the last few moments of his life, and what tremendous quantity it had, because down through the years, men such as I have been proclaiming the gospel contained in the words of this magnificent sermon of Jesus Christ, called at the eleventh hour to the service of the Lord.

What I think is the essence of the householder who goes out and hires men early in the morning, then at nine o'clock in the morning, then at twelve, then at three in the afternoon, then at five before the sun goes down, after the sun has gone down, he gives command for all the workers to gather. He is going to pay them.

Then there are a couple of surprises. The first surprise is that everybody is paid the same: those that have borne the burden of the heat of the day, as they have said, are paid one denarius—one silver piece—and those who were hired at eleven o'clock. Who would ever hire anybody like that in business? What industrialist would go out to the employment agency and say, “I need a worker today. Have him come over at 4:30 and work until five, and then pay him a full days' wage? Well, industrial plants and commercial establishments don't operate on the principles of grace, fortunately—that is fortunately for the stock holders. [Laughter] That is all right. That is all right. Stockholders deserve a return on their money; after all, they are risking a lot, so they deserve it. But it is good business not to waste your money like that.

But this is the kingdom of grace. It's different. While everyone is paid—that's the first surprise is everybody is paid the same. The second surprise is that those who began to work first were paid last, so you can see them standing there, fuming the whole time, calls up one of those eleventh hour workers. Pays them a denarius, while thinking perhaps, he will pay us more. But there is annoying suspicion down within that he might not, because after all, they have coveted for that, and then they discover to their disappointment that he is going to pay them one denarius.

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And so they began to complain and murmur and even in the way they express it, they say it's not that he has put us on a par with them, but he has put them on a par with us. We have worked all day long. We were out there when it was really difficult and tough, and when we were perspiring, and we won't get any more.

And he was standing right there by them, and so he answered them in the 13th and 15th verses, “Friends I haven't done thee any wrong have I? After all, what did I promise you? I promised you a denarius; that is what you agreed to, didn't you? That is what I paid you: one denarius. Take what's yours and go. I will give unto this last even as equality unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own? It is mine isn't it? Can I not do what I wish? And then finally he says, is your eye evil because I have been good to these? Has this made you evil, envious, contemptuous of them? So he makes plain that he was just.

He reminds them of his rights, and he uncovers their envy, crushing in defeat for them. Then the conclusion. The application: so the last shall be first and the first last. That makes the application. It is evident that the application is not preference, but equality. Equal unto us. I give unto this last even as unto thee.

Now what are the principles? Let me just state them. First of all, rewards and Christian service depend ultimately on God's sovereign good pleasure. Ah. We don't like that, do we? They depend on his sovereign good pleasure. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?

Does that remind you of anything in the books of the New Testament? Yes, it does. I know it does. “Nay, but O man,” the Apostle Paul said, “who art thou that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus?” You're mine. “Hath not the potter power over the clay of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor? Is it not perfectly all right for me to say I shall have mercy on whom I have mercy, and upon whom I will ahardeneth, is it not possible for me to do what I will with mine own? Ah we don't like that, do we? We love God anywhere but on the throne. We want to make this little God, so little

that we can control him and use him. It is lawful for him to do what he will with his own, and happiness comes when we realize it.

Now that is the first lesson: rewards depend ultimately on the sovereign good pleasure of God. The second thing is very clear, too: the quantity of work is not the divine standard. Commercial standards are not God’s standards. The Jews have no rank over the Gentiles, the Gentiles have no rank over the Jews. Those who are called in the Christian service at an early stage in life do not have rank over those called at a later stage in life. It is the quality of our service that counts with God; not the quantity of it, the quality of it.

And so, what we have here is what someone has called the gospel of the punitive thief. It must have been great for him to have known that if he knew it, and it is great for anyone called into Christian service at a later stage of his Christian life to know that is possible for him to have maximum reward from the Lord. It is a tremendous incentive. So, I speak to some of you in this audience, it is great to be called into the service of the Lord when you are a little child, but it is also great to be called into Christian service at any age even at the eleventh hour. And if you give yourself whole heartedly to the Lord even at the eleventh hour, or at a younger age without the advantages of others, God rewards according to sovereign grace.

What a tremendous blessing that is to realize. And some of you business men, for whom your business means everything, and yet God has been speaking to you, it is great to know that even when life is almost gone, when you are almost ready to go off in the far beyond, there is still opportunity or repentance and call to the service of the Lord and possibly render a quality of service. Let God bless it. I look out over this audience, and I know two or three of you to whom that applies. You really were called to an understanding, intelligent, Christian service when you were relatively old. What a great reward lies ahead of you.

There is one other point and that is that time of entrance into the field is not the divine standard. The apostles, the church fathers—they are not necessarily ahead of us. I have a good friend. He is a young man, he has a wife a lovely person I have the greatest of regard for her. Well,

my friend asked her a question a year or so ago, and he said something like this to her, “What three men have influenced Western Christianity more than anybody else?” Well it was obvious she didn’t have a great acquaintance with the Christian world, because she applied Augustine, John Calvin and Dr. Johnson [laughter]. I like that [sustained laughter]. You know, it might be right [more laughter, Johnson laughs]. From this parable, it would be possible.

No, it is not right, I know. But nevertheless, it is possible. It is possible for somebody today to render the kind of service to God that would put him there with the apostles and the others who had been great. Time of entrance into the field is not the important thing. There is no most favored nation clause in God’s program of rewards.

Now of course that means when we think about things like this, we who have been Christian servants for a lengthy period of time should not begrudge the award that some are going to get equal to ours, perhaps even greater, when they have entered the field of Christian service so much later in life. It is possible that the quality of their service is better. But in the final analysis God doesn’t really reward on that basis, does he? It is sovereign grace.

We don’t deserve anything—not a one of us—we do not deserve anything. Start early in life, serve the Lord faithfully—what you get is grace. We don’t deserve anything, so why should we object if someone has a great reward? He doesn’t deserve it any more than we deserve ours. What we have is a gift of grace. We are greatly blessed. And even the things that we do are provoked by him and his wonderful motivating gracious work for us.

Well, that is the lesson for this parable: the God who is sovereign in salvation is also sovereign in rewards, and promises that we shall receive an hundred fold and shall inherit everlasting life. Now of course this is not intended to suggest that we ought to loaf through the ten hours of the day until the eleventh hour, and then when the eleventh hour comes, engage ourselves in some last minute, desperate service in order to make up for our failure to respond to the activities of God the Holy Spirit in our lives, seeking to bring us to faithful service. Opportunity must be seized if fidelity is to be rewarded, and everyone of these who were called did respond. They had to respond if the

“Laborers in the Vineyard, or Sovereign Grace in the Doctrine of Rewards” by S. Lewis Johnson
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householder was going to reward them for their fidelity and service, and so you who know about this when you are young, now is the time to give yourself to the service of the Lord. And you who are old, who may be thinking you do not have the opportunity to serve the Lord, now is the time to give yourself to him for Christian service.

If you are here and you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, this message has not been primarily for you. You are not even a servant until you have come to realize that one only becomes a servant of God through faith in the Redeemer who offered an atoning sacrifice.

You don't belong to the family of God, so your first step is to recognize your lost condition, recognize the Lord Jesus as having offered the atoning sacrifice that covers the sin of sinners, to believe the message concerning him, and to rest in what Christ has done for your eternal density. Then, having become a child of God, the challenge of Christian service is yours. May God help you to come to that division through grace. Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father we are so grateful to Thee for the blessings which are ours by virtue of the saving work of Jesus Christ. And Lord, we do pray that if there are some here who have not believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, give them no rest nor peace until they rest in him.

And Father for those who know him but have been laggard in their response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit toward the service of our great and loving God, move in their hearts to respond in grace, making themselves available for the work that Thou hast for them.

May grace, mercy and peace go with us.

For Christ's sake. Amen.