

THE PARABLE OF THE PENNY-A-DAY LABOURERS

A SERMON

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“For many be called, but few chosen.” Matthew 20:16

I SHALL this morning, as far as I can, embrace the main drift of the parable, and set before you, as far as the Lord shall enable me, what I believe to be the real meaning of the parable. And in so doing I will notice, first, *the calling*; secondly, *the reckoning*; and thirdly, *the distinction*.

First, then, here is *the calling*. Now, at the head of this chapter we have the kingdom of God, that is, as I understand it at least, the New Testament dispensation, compared to a householder with a vineyard. Now, the first question is, What are the characters spiritually that are represented by these men that are called? You observe that these men that are called, or invited, if we may use the term, that these men who are invited to go into the vineyard, were persons characterized by something that distinguished them from others. And so, you will find that all the invitations of the Bible are to character. There is always something to distinguish the persons who are invited from the persons who are not invited. So that the persons here at the head of this parable are not intended to represent the world at large; but are intended to represent only a certain class of men; and to that certain class, on the ground of what they professed, came the invitation. Now then, what did they profess? In the first place, they professed to be out of work, and they wanted work. That was their profession; that was their distinctive character, that they wanted work. And then it was for the householder to put these men to the test, and see whether, when they obtained work, they would do it or not. Now let us look, then, carefully at this, what it represents. It represents a sinner who has done professedly with the profane world, and he wishes now to go to work for the Lord; he wishes now to go into the service of the Lord; he wishes now to be a praying man; he wishes now to be a believing man; he wishes now, or professes at least to wish, to be a God-fearing man; he wishes now to work for this same master, and to go into the vineyard, the free-grace vineyard. This, then, is the character which it here represents. And are there not a great many in our day that answer to this character? And now, among all those who profess to desire to fear God, and desire to serve God, and desire to be on the Lord's side, and desire to be satisfied with the way in which he shall deal with them, the Lord therefore is pleased to put such to the test, and then in his own time it comes out who are and who are not sincere in this matter. Not but they might have been sincere at the first; but very many, as we shall see when we come to the reckoning, they met with

something that showed that with all their sincerity they were not the fitted servants of that master, and the consequence was that the master and the servants parted. If you take care, then, to observe in the Scriptures that persons when invitations are given, (of course, effectual calling is another thing; when the Lord quickens a sinner from the dead, then there is nothing characteristic about that man previous to his call, because there he is in sin like another sinner; there he is dead like another that is dead; there he is wending his way to perdition like another that is wending his way to perdition; and there he is just the same as others, a child of wrath. But then, that is not the kind of calling to which our text refers. We must, therefore, be careful to understand that whenever this kind of calling, a calling to put men to the test, is given, that such callings or invitations are never indiscriminate, they always belong to a particular class. And you observe here that the invitation to go to work was founded on their professing to wish to obtain employment. And you will find that a great many invitations and exhortations of the Bible are founded, not upon the universal duty of men savingly to believe, nor founded upon universal redemption, nor founded upon any ability in man to come to Christ; but founded upon their profession. I will mention just an instance or two of this. You go to the 6th of John, and there were a people that followed the Savior; but then the Savior knew their motive, and he said, "You seek me, not because you saw the miracles." They did not understand the miracles; they did eat and were filled, and they saw the miracle, but did not understand the miraculousness of it; they did not enter into the secret of it; they were as ignorant of the Son of God after they were fed as they were before. The same now; the Lord may appear providentially for thousands, and they are glad to eat and be filled; and there is no harm in that gladness, it is all very natural and proper. But then, that is not religion. And such persons, for whom the Lord appears in his providence bountifully, I speak now of those of course that know not the Lord, those interpositions on their behalf leave them as ignorant as they were before. And yet, perhaps, if this providential interposition has been at all connected with religion, something religious, by means of some religious person, or by means of some minister, ministers are very often the means of helping the poor into good standings, and good positions, well, this would have a winning effect; and they therefore follow the Savior. But then he puts them to the test. Now, he says, you seek me, not because of the miracle, not because of anything supernatural that you know, no; but you will be my disciples, and you profess to be my disciples, you profess to be following me. Now, I will tell you of the ground upon which you must follow me if you follow me truly; you must labor not for the meat that perishes, but for something more than that, for the meat which endures unto everlasting life. And we know that meat, that sustenance, to be in substance Christ himself; he is, as that chapter abundantly shows, the meat that endures unto everlasting life; he is the bread that endures unto everlasting life. That is to say, the meat there conveys the idea, as we shall presently have to observe on this parable, of sustenance, and that sustenance that is by what Christ has done is everlasting; such persons can never, no, never come to want. Therefore, if you seek me rightly you must seek "that meat which endures unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you; for him has God the Father sealed." And you observe, when they were put to this test, and other testimonies contained in that chapter of the like kind, it was repulsive to them, and they went back, and walked no more with him. And yet these same testimonies, by which these mere temporal, false followers of Christ went back, are the testimonies that constitute the attraction to the really convinced sinner, are the very testimonies that hold fast the man that knows his need of Jesus Christ; and when that man is appealed to, as the Savior there appealed to his disciples, "Will you also go away?" "Lord, to whom shall we go? you have the words of eternal life." Thus, you see, there the exhortation to labor not for the meat that perishes, but for that meat that endures unto everlasting life, was not founded upon the doctrine of its being the duty of all

men savingly to believe; nor founded upon that which does not exist, namely, universal redemption; nor was it an exhortation of universality or of indiscrimination; it was an exhortation to these persons on the ground of the profession that they made, and on no other ground. And just so, in the 55th of Isaiah, "Ho, everyone that thirsts." Why, my hearer, thousands have had a thirst to be religious, but it has come to nothing. Thousands have had an earnest desire, a desire strong enough to make them religious for a time, and perhaps all their lifetime, but have never had that kind of thirst, or that kind of hunger, or that kind of desire, that has brought them to perfection. And where is the perfection? The perfection is contained in that same chapter a little farther on, namely, "Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David." Here their thirst generally passes off; here their hunger generally passes off. The very sight of such food, not that they can see it really, is something so repulsive to them, it savors so of that gospel everywhere spoken against, it savors so of the freeness and certainty of the grace of God, that these people in their souls, being still under the dominion of Satan, while they had a thirst and had a hunger, and had a desire to seek the Lord, yet now these great truths of the gospel are brought in they cannot understand them, and they therefore are repulsive to them, and they fly off; they have no affinity with them, they have no sympathy with them, and so off they go. Thus, then, I should like to make this point clear, that the invitations of the Bible are always founded upon character. There is no exception to this rule; the character is either expressed, or else it is implied. In some scriptures the character is not so much expressed as implied in the first instance; such a scripture as, "The Spirit and the Bride say, Come." Well, now, there seems no distinction of character expressed in that scripture, but it is implied; for when the Spirit says, "Come," he does so effectually; not the Bride first says, "Come," but the Spirit first, and the Bride afterwards. So, wherever the Holy Spirit marks a sinner, convinces him of his state, and gives him a desire to know the truth as it is in Jesus; wherever the Holy Spirit has thus evidentially said, "Come," the church may invite such, the church may then say unto such, "Come with us, and we will do you good;" the church may say, "Come in, you blessed of the Lord; why stand you without?" The church may thus invite those persons who are now, in the right sense of the word, become true Samaritans, and they shall "call every man his neighbor under the vine and under the fig tree." And thus, then, the invitations of the Bible rest essentially upon character; the character is always distinguished, either expressly or by implication. And so, here, these men had nothing to do; they were idle. You at once perceive the impropriety of the householder going to a man that was at work, and saying, Go, work in my vineyard. Why, he would say, I am already at work. Therefore, he would not go to those, but to those who were doing nothing, and professing to want work. He wanted servants, they professed to want work, and so the two met together, and did very nicely. Thus, then, "many be called." These were called, and received into the service of the householder, on the ground of the profession they made.

Well, now notice *the reckoning*. By-and-bye the householder comes, reckons with these, "beginning from the last even unto the first," and giving each a penny. We shall now see what it was that these insincere servants stumbled at; the very things that are the life of the gospel, and the delight of the true servants. Now the first thing, on the part of the master, was that of sovereignty; the next thing on the part of the master, in this reckoning, was that of goodness. And there were two qualities, also, on the part of these evil servants, first, that of envying the other servants, and secondly, that of enmity against the master. Well, now, the master said, "Friend, I do you no wrong; did not you agree with me for a penny?" Now let us understand this, if we can, in its spiritual sense. Let us stop, and see if we can consistently, without anything absurd, or wrong, or trifling,

understand what is meant spiritually by this penny a day. The matter is very simple, if you will let it have its natural course; and the matter stands like this, Now, if I give you a penny a day, that is, seven pence-halfpenny, as the learned tell us the penny of that day amounted to, this was just what the laborer could live by. So that he agreed, If I come into your service, and I can live by that service, then I will be satisfied; I will be satisfied with that. And just so it is now. What is a sinner's hope when he enters the service of the Lord? Why, that the Lord will sustain him. Ah, he says, if I serve the Lord the Lord will sustain me, for he sustains his servants, and takes care of his servants; and while others may be hungry, his servants shall eat; and while others may be thirsty, his servants shall drink; and while others may lie down in sorrow, his servants shall rejoice, and he will sustain them. You cannot have too much confidence in him. I think this is the doctrine that is conveyed in the penny a day. It is the same doctrine conveyed in that command given in the 6th of the Revelation, when the black horse, the organized power, came forth with his rider, to rob the royal household of that which the householder had appointed for them; the command came, "A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see you hurt not the oil and the wine." As though he should say, The Lord's servants shall be fed; he will sustain them; they shall never come to want; and when their servitude is ended, they will be rewarded according to the nature of their service, not according to the merits of it, not according to the extent of it, but according to the nature of it, for the Savior says, "I will give unto every one of you according to your works;" that is, not according to the extent of your works, but according to the nature of them; that is, they must be works of faith, for "without faith it is impossible to please God." They must be works of love to God; the love of Christ must constrain you; and they must be the works of heartfelt decision for God:

"God abhors the sacrifice
Where not the heart is found."

But when the heart is made thus decided for him, then this shows that you are a real Christian, and you will be dealt with according to what you really are, namely, a real Christian, and there is set to your account the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ, and your reward to all eternity will be commensurate with the worth and worthiness of the blest Redeemer. Hence you observe that the servants enter not into one joy and the Master into another. No. "Well done, you good and faithful servant; enter you into the joy of your Lord" It is the joy of divine approbation; it is the joy of God's presence; it is the joy of God's love; it is the joy of God's salvation; it is the joy of God's eternity; it is the joy of God's omnipotence, the joy of God's immutability, the joy of the unsearchable riches of eternal glory. But I must be careful not to ramble. I think, therefore, in order to get at the meaning of the penny, we must look at it in what it implies. For you must remember that parables are only shadows, and, as the apostle nicely expresses it, not the very image of the things, but only an outline; and therefore we must not attempt to spiritualize every little part of it, but look at the main drift. So, then, I take the penny to mean sustenance; they agreed, if the Lord would sustain them. A little like Jacob; he entered into a solemn agreement, only the Lord was better to Jacob than Jacob's agreement was; just the same as he was here, he was better, for these men for one hour ought to have had only the twelfth part of a penny; and so, as they were very earnest servants, the Master would not so deal with them, and Jacob was not like the evil servants that murmured. Jacob says, Well, if God will be with me in the way that I go, and give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then he shall be my God, and I will be his servant. Well, Jacob kept to his agreement, and the Lord kept to his; and

twenty years afterwards, if you had said, Well, Jacob, how do you get on? Get on! he says, why, now, behold, I am become two bands. I was then a poor man, and now I am a gentleman. I then hardly knew, when I ate one meal, where to look for the next; and now I have plenty: I am become two bands. Why, the Lord has been much better to me than ever I could have expected. Then you do not mean to murmur, do you, Jacob? Murmur! no. I have had a great many trials, and shall have a great many trials; but, however, I will abide in the service. And when he came to die. Well, what do you say now? Has the Lord preserved you? Are you satisfied with the agreement now you are got to the end? Ah! Jacob says, "The God which fed me all my life long unto this day" this my dying day, "the Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads." I am quite satisfied. I agreed for a penny a day, and the Lord has been raising my wages all the way I have come along, so that I was never so well off before as I am now. We often find in the world that the longer you serve persons, the worse they think of you but not so with the Lord. The longer you serve the Lord, the better he is to you. He will be far better to you in years to come than he is now; for he knows how to time the manifestations of his love; he knows how to time the throwing in of his mercy; he knows how to throw in the importation to us of his favors. He looks forward and sees when our time of need is coming, and he has provided against it. This is what I understand by the penny a day. Well, say some, have you entered into this agreement? Why, it was the very first agreement I entered into. I have a very strong feeling upon this, even taking, in the first place, a temporal view of it. My first feeling, conviction, was my need of a God to take such care of me. I was under an apprehension that I did not know what I might come to before I died, seeing so many around me had come to this, and that, and the other. What will become of me? I thought. Well, now, I felt if I could serve the Lord, I should like to do it; and I felt he would take care of me in that service, though I did not at that time understand the nature of his service as I do now. I did not know that the vineyard was such a free-grace vineyard as it is; I did not know that the order of things was so good as it is; but that was the first conviction that I had that abode with me. And then upon that followed that soul-trouble which I shall never forget, and never cease to bless the Lord for. Ah! it prepared my soul to receive those infinitely precious truths that have been dear to me from that day to this; will be dear to me in the future, and dear to me while the ages of eternity roll their majestic rounds.

Now, have I made, then, the character clear? and have I made the agreement clear? and are we satisfied with the agreement, that the Lord will sustain us? I know not anything at which the Christian should more tremble than at the thought of the Lord forsaking him. "Oh, leave me not, nor forsake me," is a prayer repeated in the Bible, I do not say in those precise words, but in substance, a great many times. And that arises from a variety of feeling; sometimes from soul-darkness, fearing the Lord will leave us; sometimes from adverse providences, fearing the Lord has left us, and does leave us, and will leave us; and sometimes from a love to his name, as though the soul should say, Lord, take whatever you please from me, do not take yourself from me, but give me more of that spirit that Job had. Not when Job cursed the day of his birth, Lord, I have plenty of that naturally, without any more being imparted to my poor, old, fallen nature, but the spirit of Job when he said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Thus, then, here are the persons professing to wish to serve God; secondly, here is the agreement. And a great many have been discontented with the agreement, and have murmured, and gone away; but those who are taught of God shall be content with the service, and such shall find that the Savior's yoke is easy, and his burden light. But we will look a little further into this. "Is it not lawful," said the master to these murmuring ones, I will come round to their envy

presently; let us have the sovereignty and goodness first, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own?" Notice, it is "my own." As though the Lord should say, Now, you Pharisees, that think so much of your own works, and that think you ought to have much more than anyone else, and boasting that you have eaten and drunk in my presence, and have done wonderful things, I do you no wrong. You agreed, if I sustained you, you would be content. Now, "is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" Ah! here comes the offence, here comes the difficulty, for the Lord to do what he will with his own. Let me just bring a scripture or two here for our instruction, and for our encouragement, as to how the Lord does what he will with his own. Here is one example "To sit," says the Savior, "one on my right hand, and the other on my left, in my kingdom, is not mine to give." I am not come to dispose of eternal things, they are already disposed of, I am not come to make a new arrangement, but to carry out an arrangement that has been made from all eternity; and "it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared," as another scripture says. Therefore, while the Lord has at command an eternity of mercy, oceans of mercy, innumerable mercies; while he has at command mercies of all kinds, quickening mercy, and pardoning mercy, and sanctifying mercy, and justifying mercy, and saving mercy, and healing mercy, and gladdening mercy, and sufficient mercy, he has mercy at command, and he disposes of that mercy just as he will. "I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy; and whom he will he hardens." Now, my hearer, are you got thus far? Are you saying, Ah! the Lord doing in that way as he pleases and making out the creature to be entirely at his disposal, I do not like such a doctrine. Well, then, we know you are a murmurer. The Lord open your eyes and give you to see that if he were not a God doing what he will with his own, not a sinner could be saved. Why, it is the sovereign pleasure of God, by which we are saved in and by Christ Jesus. Hence the doctrine of sovereignty. Some say, Ah! it is all very well for old Christians, but it should not be preached to young Christians. Well, but the disciples were young Christians when the Savior said, "Fear not, little flock; it is your Father's good pleasure," not your goodness, but "your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Ah, but nevertheless, again, they abide by their idea that it is not right to preach such a doctrine to the little ones, or to young Christians. Well, but the disciples were very young Christians when Christ said, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you." And I think myself that the disciples were very young Christians when they were. You might see them all sitting round the table, the eleven disciples; for Judas was gone then, and listening to the dear Savior's prayer. I mean the 17th chapter of John; and it is a chapter that has Calvinized a good many. It is a chapter that has set fire to the free-will card houses, hay, wood, and stubble, that men build upon in the experiences of many. They were young disciples, and yet that chapter sets before us the sovereignty of God as emphatically as any chapter in the Bible. Here, then, my hearer, again in our text. Ah, well, must not preach this doctrine of sovereignty to the young ones. Well, but our text preaches it to the servants that are only an hour old. They had labored only an hour, and the doctrine is preached to them, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own?" Here is a disciple an hour old, that is all, only an hour old, and the doctrine of election is preached. And they, of course, licked it; they saw it was to their advantage; for they knew that they would only have had the twelfth part of a penny but for election; it was election that gave them the whole penny, all the sustenance they needed. "Blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ, according as he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world." Here, then, is divine sovereignty preached to the disciples only an hour old. And yet the reverend gentlemen of the present day tell us we must not preach it to the little ones. At any rate, we may preach it to them that are an hour old, and we do not want to preach it to them much younger than that, certainly, an hour old; that is very young. So that if they will keep us only an hour without it we do not mind; we will wait

that hour as patiently as we can; only do not keep us from it too long, for I do not think we can know too soon the blessedness that belongs unto us. But this gave offence. Now this is a very solemn matter to my mind; would that I could set it forth more clearly! What is my religion? When I come to divine sovereignty, do I then begin to murmur, do I feel offended, and do I feel an envy rise towards those servants that fall in with this sovereignty; do I envy them? They are the elect, are they? and they are the favored, are they? and they are the predestinated, are they? I wonder what there is in them that they should be so favored. Is this the language of some of you? Ah, then, see your own character in the murmuring servant; and see yourself, in the language of our text, excluded; "Many are called." You, sir, on the ground of the profession you made, you wished to serve God: you are invited to do so; and as soon as ever you reach the doctrine of sovereignty you are offended, and away you go. God will not keep you in his service; you are not his chosen; I mean, you are not one of his chosen servants; you must be quite another man before you and your service will be acceptable to the living God. Thus, when they came to the reckoning, you see sovereignty came in the way. Then, secondly, goodness. "Is your eye evil, because I am good." If the householder had been a poor man, and had said to the people that had been only an hour, Well, now, you are very good servants, but I cannot afford to give you more than the twelfth part of a penny; I have a good disposition of my own, and I wish I could really give you as much as you need, that would have been a different thing. But it appears the householder could afford it, and not only could afford it, but had a heart to do it. And that is something, is it not? There are some people in the world and in the church that can afford to do things, but they have not the heart to do them. Yes, some of you smile at that; it is not you, is it? Must not be personal, of course; people must take these things to themselves if they see they fit them. But here the master could afford it, and he had a heart to do it. And so, bless the Lord, our heavenly master, he can afford it, let it be what it may; he has unfathomable and unsearchable riches at command, and he has a heart to give them. Ah! poor sinner, why, you are one of the eleventh-hour laborers? I can afford to give an everlasting kingdom to you; I can afford a fulness of joy to you, and you shall be as happy as Paul, and as glorious as John the divine; for all shall be like Christ. "Is your eye evil, because I am good?" Yes, the carnal eye is. Ah! but the real Christian says, No, Lord; but for that great goodness you have laid up for me, where should I have been? But for the mercy which you have kept for poor sinners in and by your dear Son, where should I have been? Ah! no, Lord, your goodness is my everything; it is my song that you are good, and that your mercy endures forever. Now, then, the murmuring servant should have reasoned thus, though he would not have been a murmuring servant if he had reasoned in the way I am going to do. But suppose, there and then, just as his murmuring rose, his eyes had been opened, he would have said, Dear me, here is a master we are serving! Why, he has given the one-hour laborers, because they need something to eat and drink as well as we do, he has actually given them a penny, the same as us. Dear me, what a kind master! how good he is! I see that he is not bound by mere right and wrong; I see that the master is not only upright, but also benevolent; he is not only righteous, but also good. What a master this is! Why, I would not leave such a master as this for ever so. I dare to say, if I were ill, he would pay me just the same, I dare to say he would, and perhaps come and see me himself. And if I do not do my work very well sometimes, I dare to say he will look over it. I dare to say, if I were going on a journey, and fell among thieves, I dare to say he would send some good Samaritan with some oil and wine to pour into the wounds, and take me somewhere to take care of me. What a good master this is! what a fool you are to think of going away! you will never get such a master anywhere else. And that is the way the right-minded did reason; and that is the way the true Christian will reason. The dear Savior himself, when speaking of himself under this very character, his service as a yoke,

he says, "I am meek and lowly in heart." We can bear testimony that he is not an austere man, that he is not a hard master; we can bear testimony of his patience, his sovereignty, his goodness, and his mercy. And those that fall in, love him in this sovereignty, and love him in this goodness; they are the chosen servants. They, in abiding with him, will not desire to set his sovereignty aside, but stand out for it; they will not desire to set his goodness aside, but stand out for it. "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God; on them which fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in his goodness;" but if that be offensive to you, "you also shall be cut off." So, then, goodness toward you, if you continue in his goodness; having no goodness of your own; to continue in Christ, to continue in the faith, is to continue in God's goodness, for both the sovereignty and goodness of God shine in eternal perfection in and by Christ Jesus the Lord.

Here, then, is the character; here is the agreement, here is the reckoning, and here is the distinction. Now mark in those murmuring servants' envy; they envied the others. And so, the free-willier, he envies you your standing. The duty-faith man, he envies you your standing. Now, mind, they had not confessed this; no, they had too much of a certain kind of wisdom about them to do that; they would not confess it. Now, perhaps, you may think I am speaking almost thoughtlessly, but I am speaking in very deep solemnity, when I tell you what I believe, namely, that Satan works in the children of disobedience enmity to God's sovereignty and to his goodness. I pity their souls and pray for them. Satan inspires them with that envy, and they know it not. And hence sometimes you will hear a man who advocates duty-faith and free-will say, I could come over to your doctrine if I liked. Ah, no, you could not, you cannot understand it, cannot see the necessity of it, nor the beauty of it; you may think you can, but if you could, you would put a negative upon the Savior's testimony that "no man can come unto me except it be given unto him of my Father." So, then, you envy the elect; you envy them because of their standing, and you hate the master. Here is envy against the vineyard servants, and enmity against the master. They do not like to see us so well off and hence their everlasting sneers. Oh! you are elect; you are sure to go to heaven, do as you like; you are predestinated, does not matter what you do then; you may be a devil on earth, you will be a saint in heaven. And my answer to their sneers is, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."