

The Road to Last

Wayne Waibel – 09/20/20

If it seems like everything of value in our society runs contrary to the will of God and His vision for our future, I'd be hard pressed to argue the perspective. It does not feel logical or even normal to raise that opinion, but this parable in particular gives one reason to pause – reflect - and examine.

For one thing, the parable itself does little to tie in with the Jesus Saying at the end, "So the last will be first, and the first last." This parable has more to do with a fairness, and in that – it's difficult indeed to find the fairness in this one. How can it be right for one who labors twelve hours to be paid the same as one who works but a single hour? We're going to have to unpack this one as best we can. So begins our journey on the road to last.

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Even though Exodus 16 is less about grumbling and more about unbelief, it still serves to support Matthew 20. We need to be reminded that God's standards of justice and value are consistently presented in both the Old and New Testament as alien to human standards. We might be made in His image, but we do not possess the mind of God in any sense.

The Israelites bemoaning their lot as their journey through the wilderness begins shows a remarkable loss of memory. In their retort to Moses that at least they were well fed under Pharaoh, they have completely forgotten how their oppression weighed on them just over a month previous – remembering only that they had food and water. And yet – God provides.

He uses this as a teaching or perhaps more of a testing opportunity for the children of Israel as He prepares to enter a covenant relationship with them. And they are (we are) a hard-headed people.

I wonder if they would've grasped the idea of trusting in the Lord any sooner had they known they would be wandering in the wilderness forty years. Sometimes we build our own prisons when we choose to look at circumstances instead of looking to God.

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We fall into the same trap through our reliance on social media for both validation and truth telling. It has become our sole source for facts, and these facts are based entirely on algorithms designed to promote commerce. In other words, what we view as facts on whatever platform we choose are essentially what we want to hear in the first place!

Our worldview is so terribly skewed now that the only way back to some semblance of reality is through an intentional and massive reworking of our daily lives.

It has become for us a journey along the road to last that encompasses the moral fiber lost along the way in the pursuit of our perception of an abundant life. Somewhere along the line we blurred the boundary between need and desire.

Once that threshold was breached, we were thrust back to precisely that moment in time when the Israelites failed to embrace gratitude for their freedom; choosing instead to whine about being hungry.

As it pertains to the parable of the vineyard, those workers who felt they deserved better needed a reminder of the master's generosity in letting them work at all.

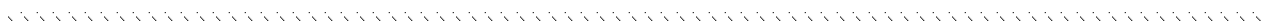
God is the giver of every good gift, whether it is ours or someone else's. Gratefulness should be at the heart of our faith. Therefore, when anyone reaps a benefit, we ALL have cause to rejoice.

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We are called to live with hope. If your wealth exceeds your need, you have little need for hope. Which is why it's so difficult for someone with great wealth to even seek the kingdom of heaven. Knowing this – Jesus addresses the condition often in His ministry.

The Matthean church was made up of a few folks that were actually around while Christ spoke of these things.

These people were largely marginalized and poor – they were the last, so their road was very well travelled. They were intimately familiar with the path. It is no accident then, that the truths exposed in these writings – though meant for them – still need to resonate with us. For them – it inspired hope. For us – it exposes the way.



And even though this “way” is thousands of years old, it still represents a new order. The road to last is not something people typically seek. Especially not those of us who have been indoctrinated into the American way of life.

This may very well be the land of opportunity, but that opportunity has been so manipulated over our short emergence as a nation that now it resembles Empire in every sense of the word.

While one could argue that this country has become Godless and self-serving, I think the greater truth lies in the hearts and minds of the regular folk among us. The vast majority that live paycheck to paycheck without complaining. The ones who put those with a greater need before their own self-interest. They do this because they are of a mind that to be in service is the highest aspiration.

It's difficult to explain to someone that can't separate their efforts from the efforts of their neighbor that grace is freely given to all; that it has nothing to do with who you are – or what you've done. Because in a very real sense – we are all equally undeserving of God's abundant grace.

Just like the children of Israel, every single one of us is on a lengthy journey of trying to unlearn habits cultivated under Empire, and learn anew what it means to wander this world under the care of a loving God. And just like the workers in the vineyard, we must learn to embrace the truth of God's indiscriminate generosity – full in the knowledge that the least of us – in the kingdom of God – will be first. Amen.