

(Note: this is the 12<sup>th</sup> in a series of "Leadership Letters" that have been written in the last few months. You can read previous letters at our web-site. Go to [www.GraceGlobalNetwork.org](http://www.GraceGlobalNetwork.org) and look under the "encouragement" section.)

Dear friends,

A few days ago I was speaking with a colleague who was depressed and out-of-focus about the ministry. "I'm not sure it's for me anymore," and "Is it really worth it?" were common laments I heard during our two-hour conversation. I'm not sure I had any insights that satisfied him at that time. But it got me thinking ... and asking some hard questions. Questions like, "Why Am I Serving Jesus Christ?" and "What really motivates me?"

Shirley McLaine, self styled great high priestess of the cult of narcissism so prevalent in our society today, was interviewed by a reporter from the Washington Post. He asked her the question, Ms. McLaine, what drives you? And in part she responded, *"The most pleasurable journey you take is through yourself. The only sustaining love involvement is with yourself. When you look back on your life and try to figure out where you have been and where you are going, when you look at your work, your life, your marriages, your children, your love affairs, when you examine all of that, what you realize is the only person you go to bed with is yourself. The only thing you have is working to the consummation of your own identity. And that is what I have been trying to do all of my life."*

What a stark contrast to Jesus Christ. It is said of Him, *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many."*

Every Christian man and woman is compelled to ask the question, *"Why am I serving Jesus Christ?"* Am I enamored of the gifts – or am I enamored with the Giver? Am I in it for what I can get out of it – or for what I can give to it?

The verbal answers often come quickly, but far too often they are superficial. Paul instructed us in Romans 12:2, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold" (Phillips translation). The alternative is to restructure your mind, to overhaul it, to allow God to "transform it." And I believe in Matthew chapter twenty, Jesus instructs us about the kind of "right thinking" necessary for Christian service. It's a familiar story ... the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

**Matthew 20:1-16** <sup>1</sup> *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; <sup>4</sup> and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. <sup>5</sup> Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. <sup>6</sup> And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' <sup>7</sup> They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'*

<sup>8</sup> *"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.'* <sup>9</sup> *When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner,*

<sup>12</sup> saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' <sup>13</sup> But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?' <sup>14</sup> 'Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.' <sup>15</sup> 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' <sup>16</sup> So the last shall be first, and the first last."

There is a sense of urgency for the landowner. Apparently it is late September, and the grape harvest must be collected quickly. Heavy rains follow the harvest time, so he goes out at 6:00 in the morning and strikes a reasonable bargain with the laborers: one denarius for a day's wage. Having come to terms with the appropriate pay-scale in that day, he sends them into the vineyard to begin working (v. 2).

Three hours later (v. 3) he needs more workers, agreeing only to pay them "whatever is right" (v. 4). All they had was a promise that he would be fair. Three hours later, at noon, and again at 3 PM he strikes similar bargains (v. 5). Finally, just before sunset, 5 PM, he finds others in the marketplace just standing around and invites them to join the workforce. But he asks them an interesting question: "Why have you been standing here idle all day long?" Their response (v. 7) is simply "Because no one hired us."

The story takes a turn at quitting time, when the owner of the vineyard breaks tradition and first pays those hired last (v. 8). To their surprise, and to the chagrin of the others hired, they received a whole denarius. Verse ten tells us, "When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius." They cry out "Not fair!" They grumbled at the landowner and threatened to file a union complaint and take him to the Better Business Bureau.

The landowner's reply is classic: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" (vv. 13-15).

Why did Jesus Christ tell this story? Certainly it wasn't to give a lecture on economics. He wasn't discussing management-labor problems before the AFL-CIO. The secret to understanding this story is found back in chapter 19. The rich young ruler had come to Jesus and asked for the "one thing" he had to do to insure his destination would be heaven. Jesus took a back-door route to help him understand that he had a heart problem ... and he went away "grieved" (19:22). Jesus used that opportunity to instruct the disciples about how hard it was for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Their surprised response was to ask, "Who then can be saved?" (19:25). Jesus answers in verse 26 by saying that it is humanly impossible, but all things are possible with God. In verse 27, Peter speaks up and says publicly what all the other disciples were thinking privately: "Lord, we have left everything and followed You. What then will there be for us?" His bottom line question is, "What is going to be in this for us? Is it worth it to follow Christ?" Jesus' reply is classic:

**Matthew 19:28-30** <sup>28</sup> "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's

sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last; and the last, first."

Jesus says, "You will not get paid by the hour, but I will pay you ... just not in the way you expect." We can get paid wages "in this life" or we can receive payment in eternity. Jesus says that's when He's handing out the rewards.

Much like us, the workers in Jesus' parable in Matthew 20 had a series of problems and mis-placed perspectives that generated their discontent. I've identified three attitudes that we must change if we are going to serve Jesus Christ effectively in the twenty-first century:

**First, we must jettison a consumer mentality.** We must reject the "what's in it for me" mentality and begin to serve from a pure heart. Our focus is not on what we can get, but what we can give. God will pay us a reward, but not a wage. And the reward is bound up in the work itself.

Do you remember Jesus' comment to the disciples when they found Him talking with the woman at the well in John 4? They had brought him a Big Mac from the McDonalds of Samaria and He said He wasn't hungry: "*I have food to eat that you do not know about*" (John 4:32). There was a fulfillment He received in doing the work of His Father. Ministry satisfied Him in a deep, soulful way that far exceeded what food could provide.

**Second, we must jettison the competitive mentality.** We get into trouble when we begin comparing ourselves with others. That's what happened to the day-workers in the parable. They stopped relating rightly with the owner and started comparing themselves with the other workers.

There are two sources that feed a competitive mentality: unrealistic expectations and incomplete information. Unrealistic expectations come when we don't deal with truth. The first group of hired workers had an agreement with the owner for a specific salary for specific work. But somehow they believed that they were due *more* because he chose to be gracious to the workers he hired later in the day. They also had incomplete information about the character of the land-owner. He was a gracious man who could do what he wanted. His actions were not dependent on the expectations of the workers. The land-owner said, "*Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?*"

Stop comparing yourself with others. Allow God to bless them according to His will and to bless you in His timing as well. Get to know the heart of God, and find your calling and identity in who He is and whose you are.

**Finally, jettison a critical mentality.** We ought to declare the ministry a "no grumbling zone." Cultivate an attitude of gratitude in your heart that relates to God as your gracious and loving heavenly Father. Learn to be thankful in the little things. And trust God that all accounts will truly be settled in heaven.

Material possessions can really skew our thinking. A hotshot young lawyer bought his first BMW and decided to show it off to his associates by parking in front of the firm where they could all see. As he started to get out, a truck sped by and took the car door right off. A couple of co-workers saw this and came running to his aid. As they

approached, he was sitting there crying *"My brand new BMW!"* One of the co-workers looked down and said, *"Forget about the car, do you know your arm is missing, too?"* *"Oh no,"* he screamed. *"My Rolex!"*

Keep an eternal perspective. Some things really *do* matter.

Till next time,

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