

THE ATTITUDE THAT DISQUALIFIES

by David H. Roper

God owes us nothing. He does not owe us happiness; he does not owe us success; he does not owe us the good things of life. He has the right to do what he pleases with us, even though it may not please us. But the amazing thing is, that, though he does not owe anything, he deals with us so graciously. He delights to give. He is willing to bestow honor and blessing and glory on us, yet somehow we still feel that God owes us something. I have discovered that this is the attitude that disqualifies us from blessing. Because God owes us nothing, He is not in our debt, He has the right to do with us as he pleases.

Now I would like to have us look at this parable in Matthew, because I think that this is a pointed rebuke of that attitude. (Here is another one of those confusing chapter divisions, because the thought really begins with verse 23 of chapter 19.) Chapter 19, essentially, is an account of the rich young ruler who faced the necessity to forsake his own life to follow Jesus Christ. He rejected the Lord's invitation and went away. There follows the Lord's comments about this young man. And it was this that provoked Peter's words in verse 27, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you, what then shall we have?" In other words, in contrast with the rich young ruler who went back to his wealth and turned his back on you, we have turned our backs on our homes, positions, prestige, business, and are following you. *What shall we have?* What will we get out of this? What will accrue to our benefit because we have done this? Now this is the attitude that disqualifies. In a display of grace, the Lord answered Peter's question directly, and he assured him that he would be rewarded. Then he moves to correct Peter's attitude in these twice repeated words, "The first shall be last, and the last first," i.e., "Many of you who think that you are first will go to the end of the line. And many of you who are last, at least in terms of human estimate, will be first." And then he relates the parable which is a rebuke of the attitude that will disqualify us.

We should begin by identifying a few of the components of this parable. The most obvious, of course, is the vineyard. Here the Lord is referring primarily to the nation of Israel. And since he was talking to the apostles who had been sent out into God's vineyard, this is the primary application of this passage. But today, the nation of Israel has been set aside. God is working among the Gentiles, and so the application today in its widest sense would be the world. This is the field. This is where God is working. The *workers*, obviously, are the disciples, because they are the targets of this parable. They are the ones who initially possessed the attitude that the Lord wanted to deal with. But today he is speaking to us, and for the past twenty centuries this parable has spoken to anyone who follows the call of Jesus Christ. The third component of this parable, the *householder*, is obviously God the Father, the ruler of the house, the Sovereign Lord of the universe.

This parable reveals some things about God, and about the men who were sent into the field. The first is that *the householder is sovereign*. He sends the workers out; he establishes their wages. He affirms in verse 15 that he has the right to do as he pleases. He says, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" The unavoidable conclusion is that the householder is sovereign. He has the right to do as he pleases with his vineyard

and with those who work in the vineyard.

We are dealing here, as Paul says, with One who "accomplishes all things according to the purpose of his will." He does not ask advice from the workers; he does not check out his plans with them; he does not submit them for approval. *He is sovereign*. It does say that he made an agreement with these men, but the force of the word is, he agreed to give them what was right (because a denarius a day was the accepted wage) and they agreed with him. They came to a meeting of minds that this was an equitable payment for the day. It was all on his initiative. He set the wage; he set the time of day when they would go to work, the particular place in the field where they would be placed. He sent some out to bear the heat and the burden of working throughout the entire day. Others were relieved of that heavier responsibility, and had a less difficult place of service.

God has that right today. He has the responsibility of ordering the world and his servants. Therefore, he is going to put us where we can be most effective to him. The potter has the right over the clay. He is deploying people to *his* advantage, not to ours. And he does not even ask our advice. Now doesn't that hurt our sense of propriety that God has not asked us where we want to be, or the particular circumstances in which we choose to serve him? Some of us have the privilege of serving God in a home, where we are secure, and where there is love and acceptance and peace. But not everyone has that privilege. Some are called of God to be in difficult home situations. Does God have the right to put us there? Can we argue with him about that? Some of us are called upon to work in businesses where there is harmony and a feeling of comradeship and acceptance of our Christian position. In other cases, men are called to work where they are constantly under fire. Their relationship to Christ is always under attack. But doesn't God have the right to put men there, if he chooses? Some of us have health, but others do not. Yet doesn't God have that right? God is Sovereign. He will do as it pleases him. We can't argue; we can't complain; we can't murmur as these men did in the parable.

Not only is God Sovereign (and this, by the way, is substantiated all through the Scriptures), he is also *just*. He does what is right. We can't accuse him of playing favorites. He always settles his accounts. Now he may not do it when we think he should, or as he should, but he always settles accounts. The Scriptures say, "Will not the judge of all the world do right?" We get our idea of justice from God. And if we know what is right, certainly God must know what is right. This is a matter that we may have to take by faith, because we do not always see God making payment, but he says he will. He is always just; he is always fair. The book of Hebrews says. "God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints. He will certainly reward faithful service and life. But again, this is not a debt that God owes, it is because he is gracious.

Now there are some things that we can learn about men from this parable as well. The Lord speaks of these men in terms of five classes, or working orders: one group who went out early in the morning at six o'clock; another group that he called at nine o'clock; a third at noon; another group at three in the afternoon; and then this final group who went out at five o'clock, at the eleventh hour. At six o'clock the working day ended and the men came to the husbandman to be paid the day's wages. They are paid the same wage. It is significant that as the Lord told the parable he began with those who came at the eleventh hour and paid them first. If he had paid those who came at six o'clock first, there would not have been a parable. They would have received their wages and gone home. They would have received the wage they agreed upon and they would never have known what the others received. But the Lord deliberately stated the parable in this way to highlight the attitude of these people. They truly had served in a more difficult place, had borne the heat of the day, but they received no more than the others because

God owed them no more. He was not in their debt. Their attitude is obvious from the response of these men. For one thing, they were preoccupied with themselves. They had a little ledger in which they kept account of all that they had been doing throughout the day. They also had another ledger in which they had entered records of what everybody else had done. And on the basis of comparison they reckoned that they had more coming. The householder wasn't fair. He had dealt with them harshly. They didn't get their rights; they didn't get what they deserved. This is the attitude that disqualifies us from God's blessing, and is the attitude that God wants to root out.

There were terrible consequences in their life, the same consequences that befall us when we are consumed by thinking such as this. The first is that they were *robbed of their joy*. They began to complain and storm about, stamp their feet, and demand their rights. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? And this, in the face of the command that we are to do all things without murmuring or complaining, that we may be blameless and innocent children of God in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom we shine as lights in the world. Beyond question this is one reason why we turn the world off, we are guilty to a man of having disobeyed this command. We become angry at God because of the circumstances in which he has placed us--our business, our homes, our place of service, and we complain. And essentially we are no different from anyone else in the world.

The second consequence of this attitude is that it makes us resentful of others, and eventually it becomes resentment directed toward God. We see other Christians receiving good things, we take that little ledger out and note that other people have some of the things of which we have been deprived. Some haven't endured quite what we've endured. They haven't given up nearly as much as we've given up, and look what God has given them. And so we get resentful, and we sulk. It all springs out of this attitude that God owes us something special.

Now in thinking this through in experience, I have tried to pin this attitude down, and several things come to mind. One is the idea that because we have endured a certain amount of suffering, whatever it may be, God owes us the same amount of blessing. But that is not true, because, again, God owes us nothing. Or sometimes it works like this. because I have logged X number of hours in prayer, God owes me an immediate answer. Or sometimes like this: Because I've given up so much, now it is your turn, Lord, to give me what I have coming. And when he does not supply immediately, we begin to get resentful, and we lose the spirit of thankfulness and joy.

The book of Haggai gives a good illustration of what we are talking about. The nation of Israel had been in Babylon seventy years and they were returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple under Zerubbabel, the civil leader. They built the foundation of the temple and began to institute the temple sacrifices. But then because of pressure from their enemies, they stopped building, left the foundation, and no work was accomplished at all on the temple for 15 years. They devoted most of their time to building their own houses, "paneling their own houses," as Haggai said, building beautiful homes for themselves and neglecting the Lord's house. The result of their disobedience was personal and national disaster. To quote Haggai:

Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages earns wages to put them into a bag with holes.

Haggai's prophecies stirred them up to begin to rebuild the temple. Two months passed and the wine vats and wheat bins were still empty. And the people began to get resentful. Their attitude was this: "Lord, we can

understand why, when we were disobedient, you brought decay and destruction into our lives. But now we're obedient. So when does the blessing come?" Haggai went to the priests and said, "I have a question that I want you to decide: a message that I want you to deliver to the people. When you carry holy flesh [i.e., the flesh that they were taking to sacrifice] in your tunic, and your tunic happens to brush something that is unclean, does that clean tunic make the thing that you touch clean?" And the answer was obvious. No, it doesn't. "Now," Haggai says, "If you touch a dead body, and you become unclean, and you touch something else, does that object also become unclean?" and the answer is, "yes," it does. An unrighteous person will contaminate everything that he touches and his own life will be affected by it. But because a person is obedient and faithful that does not necessarily mean that everything he touches is going to be set right. Because God said, *I am the one that will bless you*. The blessing did come, but it was not because they had earned it, it was not because they were righteous; it was out of grace. God owed them nothing.

Now the solution to a wrong attitude, of course, is a right attitude. Paul says, do not adopt the attitudes of the world (because this is the attitude of the world--a kind of debit/credit type of relationship). Paul says, don't adopt that attitude, but let your minds be molded from within. Let the Holy Spirit correct your attitude. And what should our thinking be? First of all, *we must not think in terms of rights and privileges*. It is all of grace, from start to finish. Where did we ever get this idea that God owes us something? At what point in time have we paid back an infinite debt so that God is in debt to us? When have we balanced the scales so that now the balance is tipped to our favor? A hymn writer says,

*But drops of grief can ne'er repay
The debt of love I owe.
Here, Lord, I give myself away,
'Tis all that I can do.*

This is the logical conclusion that we come to when we realize that we owe an infinite debt. All we can do is give God our lives to do with as he sees fit; thank him for what he gives us out of his grace, but expect nothing.

Secondly, *we must not keep an account of our works, or the work of others*. In the Lord's inimitable way of saying things, don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. We have this temptation to sit down and credit to our account the things we have done for God this week, and thereby put him in our debt. But we must not do that. There is an interesting parable in Luke 17:7, The Lord says to his disciples,

Will any one of you, who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in from the field, "Come at once and sit down at table?" Will he not rather say to him, "Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink?" Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."

God is not in our debt; we have simply done the thing for which we are basically responsible as servants--nothing more.

The third principle is that everything is of grace. We deserve nothing, but God has seen fit to give far beyond what we can ask or think. God is so gracious in his dealings with us.

Have you ever wondered what is indicated when the Bible refers to a time when we stand before Jesus Christ and we will take the crowns that have been given to us and throw them at his feet? As a child this used to concern me. In the first place, I never could imagine what he would do with all those crowns, but obviously he is not talking about literal crowns. This is a symbolic reference to the reward that will be ours as a result of faithful activity. And of course, what he is saying is that we will know we don't deserve them. We have simply done what was expected of us. Whatever circumstance God put us in, that's all right. Whatever place of ministry, that's all right. "If we have been faithful in that place, we don't deserve anything. We've only done what is right. All the honor, all the glory, belongs to you."

Now that is the attitude that we will have there, because there we will see the enormity of our sin, and the infinite extent of the gift of Christ and there will be no question of our worth. There will be no doubt in our mind about what we deserve. But now, the Scriptures say, we can have the same attitude. And it is the attitude that enables us to be thankful that enables us to be genuinely humble, because we realize exactly what we are worth. The attitude that sets us free to accept life as it is. "God owes me nothing; it is all of grace."

Catalog No.175

Matthew 19:23-20:16

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