

Chosen

Sunday, September 20, 2020 at The First Congregational Church of  
Marshalltown, Iowa

Matthew 20:16 "So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called,  
but few chosen."

- Introduction

One of the teachings of Scripture is that, in addition to natural skills, the Holy Spirit gives people gifts to be used for the benefit of others. They include gifts such as healing and prophecy, and also hospitality and service. Some gifts are more fun and dramatic than others, and it can be tempting to envy people who have gifts or skills that I wish I had. For example, Shelly has a wonderful ability to gain the attention of a room full of children. She calls out, "when I am talking, you are...?" The children all cry out, "listening!!" I've tried to do the same, but they just keep talking. It is a moment in which I can be tempted to be envious, but then I am reminded of this text and I realize I have no excuse for envy considering how blessed I actually am.

- Set the stage

In our text for today, Jesus offers a parable regarding the nature of the Kingdom of God. He says that the Kingdom is like a landowner who hires day laborers, several times during the course of the day, and then pays them all the same wage at the end of the work day. Those who worked the full day complain that they deserve more because those who worked only a couple of hours received the same wage. The landowner responds by reminding them that they were paid a full day's wage and how he pays the other workers is his business.

- Other uses of the phrase

The word means to be elect, a favorite, chosen for special honor and favor. The phrase Jesus quotes is one that did not originate with Him, but is an ancient colloquial expression found beyond the borders of Israel. For example, centuries before the Lord Jesus, Plato used a variation of the same phrase in the book, The Hard Sayings of the Bible:

"Plato quotes one with reference to the mystery religions: "Many are the wand-bearers, but few are the initiates" <sup>40-19</sup>; that is to say, there are many who walk in the procession to the cult-center carrying sacred wands, but only a few

are admitted to the knowledge of the innermost secret (which confers the prize of immortality)"

There are many applications and variations of the phrase, indicating that an offer is granted to many, but few actually reach the goal. Jesus applied it to this parable.

- Application: watch the envy. You've been chosen for great grace (Ephesians)

One application, I believe, is that envy has no place in the hearts of anyone who has received the great grace that we have received. This parable, like the one of the prodigal son, is counterintuitive. In that parable we tend to identify with the good son, who is outraged at the extravagant welcome his no-good little brother received when he returned after wasting his entire inheritance. But the point of the parable is that, in the presence of a holy God, we are all prodigals receiving a welcome far better than we deserve.

So also with this parable, we tend to identify with the good workers who want more money, but in reality we are the workers getting more than we deserve. Many are called by the Gospel, but few receive it and follow Jesus. They are the chosen and receive such grace that, if they understood it, would know they have no place to be envious of anyone, considering the value of the salvation they have received. Life, as many have said, is not fair, but having the Presence and promises of God in Christ are worthy more than anything this world can offer. The Apostle Paul, who gave up much of what this world has to offer, wrote this at the beginning of Ephesians (1:1-2): "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love..."

- Conclusion

Jesus told parables to explain what the Kingdom of God is like, or what God is like. In this parable He said God is like a landowner who pays some workers a fair wage and others He pays extravagantly. The point is that we, in Christ, are the ones treated extravagantly, and the more we understand the grace given to us, the harder it is for us to be envious of others.