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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 20: 16 So the last will be first, and the first last.

GOD'S JUDGMENT - AND OURS

If the Bible has anything at all to say to us, it is to place before us the mind of this mysterious "Other" whom we call God. But so much of the Bible has become so familiar that ordinarily it fails to startle us with its "otherness" at all. It speaks of loving our neighbor - of showing mercy to the poor and neglected - of the dire consequences of sin - and of the glories of eternal life. And as it runs along, we run alongside nodding cheerily and often sleeplily: "Fine thing, the Bible - it says just what it ought to say - it says just about what I think about life too. And the mind of this "Other" - the mind of God - does not seem strange or alien at all.

That is, until you come running along and collide with a passage like this Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard with its haunting refrain: SO THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST LAST. And then even the most self-contented Christian realizes that he has had a head-on collision with an entirely different way of looking at things - with God's way of looking at things. For GOD'S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS. There is a radical difference, for example, between our way of judging people and God's.

You know how we judge people. We stand in the middle of our world and draw a horizontal line across it - normally just about at our eye level. This horizontal line is the standard by which we judge others. Those who come up to the line, we approve. Those who fall below the line, we disapprove. Every day of our lives we go about judging other people on this horizontal basis - approving or disapproving our children's friends - approving or disapproving the actions of our neighbors - approving or disapproving the lives of those who are members of our church. If a man measures up, he's fine. If he does not measure up, he is an undesirable or a bum.

So in our schools. The horizontal line is the passing grade - the diploma at the end of the course. Either a student measures up to the horizontal standard, or he fails.

So, too, in our courts of law. Here again the horizontal line is drawn. Those above the line are good, upright citizens who pay their taxes and keep out of jail - those below the line are suspect; shady characters, criminals. Granted that some attempts are made in our courts to judge on the basis of motive, and granted that no other system of justice is possible, humanly speaking, than this horizontal basis where a man either measures up or he doesn't measure up on the basis of the evidence at hand — GOD'S JUDGMENTS are still radically different even from the highest standards of justice in our courts.

We do well, then, to take a closer look at this parable where the basis for God's judgments is made clear. No doubt our first reaction to this story is that it is certainly a crazy, mixed-up way of running the world if this householder in the parable is supposed to provide a clue. This peculiar householder, we are told goes out early one morning to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. They agree to work for a denarius - the going wage for a day's work at the time. Then at various intervals during the course of the day, he finds and sends other laborers into the vineyard - hiring the last group just before quitting time.

Then comes the reckoning. The Householder calls those who were hired last to be paid first and gives them exactly what the first had bargained for - a denarius. The same quaint procedure follows with the rest until those who had been hired first come for their pay, and they receive exactly what they had bargained for - a denarius - the same as those who had worked only a small part of the day. Immediately there is murmuring - something about the injustice of it. But the householder is unmoved. And Jesus concludes it all with, SO THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST LAST.

You see the same thing happening in the story of the Prodigal Son. The elder brother worked under a kind of contractual arrangement with the father. He stayed home - minded his p's and q's - saved his money - went to church regularly, and so on. But when his father threw a party for the prodigal brother after he had left home - sowed his wild oats - squandered his money - and ended in a pigsty instead of a church — well, then, jealousy raised its ugly head and the elder

brother cried out: That isn't fair! You are not being just!

So we come face to face with a vivid description of the difference between GOD'S JUDGMENTS AND OURS. God's way of judging people is based on tests radically different from ours. Whereas our judgments are generally pronounced on a horizontal basis, God's judgments are invariably based upon vertical standards - each man by himself without regard to others.

The first thing we must see is that God's judgments are based not so much on what a man actually accomplishes as upon his motive. God measures a man's worth not so much by the results of his labor as by the motives behind the results; for God is possessed by the apparently strange notion that once a man's motives are right, the results will take care of themselves.

How many times shall I forgive? Until seven times? - No, Jesus replied, seventy times seven - and He didn't mean that we could stop forgiving the four hundred and ninety-FIRST time! Get forgiveness into your very system until it is the controlling motive behind your actions.... There is a play called The Visit which illustrates this vividly. An old, filthy-rich woman has come back to her home town to revenge herself upon the lover of her youth. Years before he had thrown her over, betrayed her, loved her and left her. And now her whole life is possessed by this hatred for him. She is, as it were, nailed fast to this one motive of hate. She has been divorced and married again and again, but it is always the same thing over again. Her hatred will not let her love. But her former lover repents. The call to repentance reaches him, and his miserable, guilt-laden life is made new at the last moment. For him there is a future, even though he must die.

So God searches the depths of the heart! Here is a man, for example, who gives $1,000 or $10,000 to a worthy cause: hospital, children's home, church. Measuring this man horizontally, the community calls him a philanthropist because he gives so much more than the rest of us. God might call him a philanthropist, too, or He might call him a miser - depending upon the motive behind his apparent generosity.

Or bring it down to our level. You and I are curious to know what others in our situation are contributing to the church. Why? So we can measure our giving horizontally against the average. It's nonsense! One dollar a week may be a sacrifice for one, and no more than a tip to a hat-check girl for another. Behin the concrete evidence which is seen by others is the unseen motive - and that is what counts in God's eyes. Not, how am I doing in forgiveness or kindness or patience or generosity in comparison with others, horizontally - but in vertical terms, in terms of me, alone, and God. And God, looking down behind the visible evidence into the motives of a man to see what is going on there leads Jesus to conclude: SO THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST LAST.

The parable also suggests another standard of divine judgment - according to the measure of each man's opportunity. And again the outward evidence may be totally misleading. Some men are born with brains and health; some have the advantage of good family and devoted parents, of financial security and education. Others, however, neither so strong nor so talented, may be crippled by circumstances from the very start - handicapped by a broken home, poor health, a colored skin. Perhaps they would serve God but cannot serve Him as they would. NO MAN HAS HIRED US... Some of us who seem to be such very nice, honest, sincere, kind, clean-living people, may in fact have made so little of our opportunities that we are worse off in God's eyes than the psychopath who is in prison for attacking a 10-year-old girl. Can it be possible? Remember that Jesus gave more encouragement to a streetwalking harlot than He did to the priest in the temple. NO MAN HAS HIRED US -- what a world of tragedy is contained in that little sentence. The opportunities which you and I may take for granted as our birthright are denied by heredity or circumstance to others.

It's just that you and I judge a person by horizontal standards. Possibly we have to. A man is honest or he is a thief - he's sincere or he is a hypocrite - he is dependable or he's unstable. And we hire and fire, recommend or condemn on the basis of it. In our world we have to have some horizontal standards to keep

order in our communities. But don't jump to the conclusion that God judges by the same horizontal standard. The point that Jesus is making is that there will be surprises in store for all of us. For God judges a man vertically - according to his motives and according the the measure of his opportunity.

And isn't it the greatness of the Gospel - the greatness of God - that He gives us another chance - that He keeps calling to us not to go on loafing in the market place of life, but to enter into His service and set our life on an altogether new level? Isn't that what really matters - that you, personally, have heard His Voice. Listen: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A HOUSEHOLDER WHO WENT OUT EARLY IN THE MORNING TO HIRE LABORERS FOR HIS VINEYARD.... Amen.