

Was Paul Some Kind of Knucklehead or What?

September 20th, 2020 Scriptures: Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16

I don't know why, but it was the word "Knucklehead" that came to my mind when I first read the words from Philippians 1 specifically when Paul makes a statement near the end of this morning's text from Philippians so I looked it up, but first let us pray!

Knucklehead: A **knucklehead** is a dummy or a numskull. **You** might criticize your friend's baking skills by saying, "**You** used salt instead of sugar, **you knucklehead!**" **Knucklehead** is an informal term that can come across as joking rather than insulting, depending how **you** use it.

My intent was not to insult the Apostle Paul but jokingly say – "What were you thinking!" I also found this:

"**knucklehead**," **meaning** a slow-witted person, is classic US slang dating back to the period of World War II. Apparently "**knucklehead**" arose as a variant of "bonehead," **meaning** that a stupid person has a thick skull impervious to listening or learning.

So what is the specific line of this morning's text that brought this suggested tease upon the Apostle Paul into my mind? Here it is:

Phil 1:29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for Him,

So what do you think? It's really true that Paul is saying that not only has God given you the amazing privilege of believing in Jesus Christ, (first off – Is that how you see it? Is it an amazing privilege or just part of your heritage) but Paul is also saying that God has also given us the added privilege of suffering for Him! When I first read those words I heard myself saying, "How many people are going to think that suffering for Jesus Christ is a privilege?" That is just so plain sounding stupid - at least to non-believers and perhaps many believers as well. Not the greatest recruiting tool in the wonderful bag of enticements to inherit eternal life. Knucklehead Paul.

Then of course we switch over to this morning's gospel lesson taken from Matthew and chapter 20. It's the parable that unless you see it through God's eyes makes little or no sense either. Adept Christians have come to see rather quickly that this particular parable, here in Matthew 20, the first 16 verses, is really all about God's grace. It stands as a foundational building block upon which the Kingdom of God happens to be built! I suppose when we try to analyze it, grace is by most all standards a knucklehead idea. Another word that I found in the Thesaurus for knucklehead is the word "foolish." It's a synonym, foolish! Foolish is the word that often is used by Paul when trying to explain God's grace, freely given to all humanity, though isn't it?

1Co 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1Co 1:23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

1Co 2:14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

This parable in Matthew 20 presents the nature of God's grace (which by the way, is not understood or accepted by the major players in this particular parable) as the employer with the time of harvest drawing ever closer and closer in other words as the end of all time is approaching – continues to seek laborers to go into the fields, (think Mission fields, it would be appropriate) to accomplish the task of finishing the harvesting of any and all fruit.

And whether one has been a missionary their whole life perhaps like John or Gwen Haspels, or whether someone has gone to work in the kingdom for only a little while or even believed for simply a short period of time they are all going to be paid equally because of God's grace. All will be getting the same pay, all are privileged to receive entrance into God's Kingdom (which according to this parable starts now and not when the harvest is completed).

Here's the clue to this particular parable and what Jesus is teaching. Everyone who loves Jesus and attempts to obey Him is going to inherit eternal life. Everyone! That's the payoff and it's all a free gift, given by God's grace alone, the Bible teaches, able to be delivered because of the death and resurrection of God's one and only Son, Jesus Christ. This particular parable hinges not on the amount of work being done but rather the ability of the Master to deliver what He has promised and that He will be fair! (Will not the Judge this world do what is right? Gen. 18:25) Not only that, He has the right to pay whatever He wishes (in this case eternal life) in order to get as many into the vineyard as possible right up until there is no more time to draw people in.

Jewish law required that employers pay their laborers at the end of each and every day. Everyman's need was basically the same. Every man needed to feed his family. A denarius was a day's wage and would buy a day's worth of food for the family. Take a look at verse 7:

Mt 20:6 About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' Mt 20:7 " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

The day was over at 6p.m. and the eleventh hour would have been 5 O'clock. Working for only one hour right? The picture here is the ending of earthly time as we know it. They get the same pay as those who had started much earlier and worked all day. So

would we say that this Master was a knucklehead? Was He being stupid or foolish with his resources or could we say rather than being thick headed He was simply being generous? Very generous!

Notice something else here that is also worth mentioning. Take a look at verse 13:

Mt 20:13 “But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?”

I’m wanting us to see Jesus use the term “friend” here. Jesus isn’t addressing anyone who hadn’t been working for the harvest, rather it’s everyone who had. We can’t make this into a claim for universalism! Also this is one of only three times in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus uses this term friend. In each case when Jesus uses this term, the person being addressed is in the wrong. (Matthew 22:12, 26:50). “I am not being unfair!” In addressing one of the employee’s as friend Jesus is suggesting that the owner’s generosity should not be a reason for jealousy among the others and claims very clearly “the issue isn’t fairness, the issue is my generosity which you are not entitled to question. I have been faithful and fair to our agreement. How is that not being fair?” Generosity can never be misconstrued as injustice or unfairness.

Jesus overall is signaling the fact that in God’s kingdom things are not as they are in the kingdom of this world. God’s kingdom is different than the kingdoms of this world. Notice one final point. Paul and Jesus are affirming the same thing, and notice that Paul links true belief with suffering. They are inseparable in this lifetime:

Phil 1:29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for Him,

Why is this so? In this world anyone who truly has believed in Jesus Christ seeks to be just like Him. That means trouble, any way you cut it, right here in River City, until the Kingdom has fully come! May it be so... amen.