

MBC – 5/15/2022 - Pastor Doug Thompson
“*Saved in the Eleventh Hour*”
Matthew 20:1-16

Turn with me to **Matthew 20** this morning. I want to shine the light of God’s Word on a question that some of you have asked at the most painful times in your life – about the people you love the most in your life:

“Can God, and does God, save some people in their last dying breaths?” People we love dearly, but who have rejected God and all our attempts to share the Gospel with them – and now they are on their deathbed in the flickering twilight of semi-consciousness: Is there any hope that God might cause the Scriptures they’ve heard to germinate and produce faith in Christ? Could it be that even though we don’t get as much as a squeeze of the hand in response – we will still see them again in heaven?

- This is very personal to me as a pastor, because I’ve been at the bedsides of unbelievers surrounded by Christian family members wondering if there was any hope for their unsaved loved one. Would it do any good to present the Gospel one more time? Or even *pray* for their salvation?
- And it’s personal to me because I’ve lost both my mom and dad. I had shared the Gospel with both of them, but neither of them, as far as I know, put their faith in Jesus Christ before they died – *as far as I know*.

*The last communication I had with my dad was a FAX I sent to his hospital room. The nurse said she would read it to him, even though he didn’t appear to be conscious. In the FAX I told him I loved him, and I quoted Jn.3:16.

I can’t say that my Dad *is* in heaven—but I can’t say that he *isn’t* because I don’t know what God might have done in my Dad’s heart in his final moments on earth. But I do know that God is powerful and compassionate beyond my comprehension. And that’s what we’re going to look at this morning. Back up one verse to the last verse of ch.19--

- Matthew 19:30–20:16 ³⁰But many who are first will be last, and the last first. ¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁵So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹²saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’ ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last

worker as I give to you. ¹⁵*Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?* ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Context:

Down in L.A., they would call this the parable of Home Depot! You see the day workers lined up down there in the parking lots, hoping that someone will pick them up and give them a day’s work. I’ve hired these guys myself.

And just like this parable, if I picked up one of these guys at 8 in the morning and he had been working all day and then I brought one of his buddies to join him at 4 in the afternoon, the first guy would think that he should make a lot more than his buddy when 5:00 rolled around.

But Jesus isn’t teaching on labor relations here, He’s talking about salvation. What is His point?

- This parable is bracketed on both ends by the statement: *“The last will be first, and the first last.”* Jesus gave this parable to illustrate this statement. Peter had just told Jesus that unlike that rich young ruler, he and the other disciples had left everything to follow Him – so what would they get for making that sacrifice?

Jesus is very patient here. He tells His Disciples that they will be abundantly blessed in this life and the next. But then He adds, *“But, many who are first will be last, and the last, first.”*

*What did He mean? This is a warning to Peter and the others against spiritual pride. Salvation was just as impossible for them as it was for that rich young man, and the only reason they were following Jesus is because He called them – just like the man calls those workers in the parable – and Jesus is warning Peter and the other disciples not to get too big for their britches; not to think that just because they were some of the *first* to follow Jesus, that they would be *entitled* to *greater* reward than any latecomers to the Kingdom of God.

- Others would come along later – 3,000 more on the day of Pentecost, then Gentiles would start coming, and then some from every nation, tribe, and tongue would be added to the church, right up until He returns. And according to this parable every one Jesus calls, whenever He calls them, receives the same paycheck - justification – the same gift of eternal life. We say that the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

That workday in the parable represents the entire church age – until Christ returns, but it can also represent a person’s lifetime. I.e., God calls people to salvation at different times in their lives: some early and some late. God called my daughter Sara when she was about 3 years old, but He can call a person at the eleventh hour—even on their deathbed—if He chooses. And if He does, that person is just as saved as the person who has known Him and served Him since childhood.

The key verse in this passage is: ¹⁵*Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?* This parable is about God’s sovereign right to bestow His grace on *whomever* He chooses, *whenever* He chooses. *And this means that we can have great hope for our unbelieving loved ones because it is never too late for God’s saving grace.*

And you and I might never know, this side of heaven, to whom God has given His saving grace.

I read the story of a man, years ago -- who was driving his horse and cart on a cliff-top road when fell off the edge of the cliff, and as he was falling he cried to God for mercy. Later he wrote:

*"Twixt the saddle and the ground,
I mercy sought, and mercy found!"*

According to the story, he lived for many years serving Christ, but the point is this: if he had landed on the rocks and been killed, people would never have known of God's mercy in his life. They would have said, "Oh! Poor wicked man, he perished in his sins and went to hell." And they would have been wrong. None of us knows how another person dies. None of us knows what God might be doing in a person's heart, even in a coma.

- I've been told by doctors and nurses that hearing is one of the last senses to go, and sometimes people can continue to hear and understand what is being said to them, even when they are incapable of responding, so we don't know what transactions are taking place between God and our loved ones, even on their death beds.

I want to give you 5 reasons why we can have hope in God to save, even in the eleventh hour:

1. Because salvation is of the Lord.

Here's a Bible quiz: Who said "Salvation is of the Lord?" Jonah. Where was he when he said it? In the belly of a giant sea creature. Jonah was a stubborn, rebellious, self-willed prophet. It wasn't until he was brought down into that dark, damp, fishy place, that he realized he was utterly at the mercy of God. There was nothing he could do to save himself; he was no Hebrew MacGuyver. If he was going to be saved, God must choose to show mercy and power. Salvation is of the Lord--period.

So if God can save the life of a man in a sea monster's belly, he can save the soul of a semi-conscious person gasping his or her last breath. It's His prerogative. Salvation is a gift of God, and He gives it to whomever He pleases! That is the point of what the landowner said to those who thought he was unfair—

- Matthew 20:15 ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'

I'm glad God is generous with His grace, aren't you? I'm glad that He's the Creator and He can do as He pleases with His creatures. That sounds like what Paul said in—

- Romans 9:21 ²¹Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

We are *all* His clay, He's the potter, and He can make out of us a Tiffany lamp or an ashtray – but praise God that He is merciful on so many – What did John see in heaven?—

- Revelation 7:9 ⁹After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,

That's a lot of Tiffany lamps! Praise God.

*Now think with me: If we doubt the possibility of some godless people coming to Christ on their deathbeds, it could be because we are thinking that salvation is something a person earns or deserves, and a person who has rejected Christ for a lifetime, doesn't really *deserve* to be saved.

- Now you say, "Oh I would never think that! I know that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone!" But imagine someone you care about lying in a hospital bed. It looks like he won't make it, and someone in the room asks you, "Is he a believer?" What thoughts go through your mind? You think: did he love God and His Word and worshiping Him, did he believe in Jesus and His death and res.; did he love other Christians; did he serve Christ; was he baptized, etc.?

I.e., What did he *do*? Did he *do* enough to be saved? And if not, since he's 'done with any doing,' there's no hope.

*Never *ever* think of salvation in terms of whether or not a person has done enough for God to save them. Salvation is all about what Christ has done! All of those things: faith and love, and worshiping and serving are biblical *evidences* of salvation that God has done something in that person! But they don't *cause* salvation. Salvation isn't a check-off sheet, and if we can check all the boxes, then God is obligated to save us. *Salvation isn't something that comes up from man, but something that comes down from God!*

- Rom.6:23: "The free *gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." "For by *grace* you are saved."

In Jesus' parable, those envious, grumbling workers represent people who see salvation as a reward instead of a gift. It's something you earn, and something you deserve.

Think about those men who were hired earlier in the day (they were last to be paid) – how did they feel when their 11th hour buddies got paid a full day's wage for an hour's work? They were thrilled! High-fives. Why? They were thinking: "If the boss was that generous to those guys, obviously, he's going to be even more generous with us!" But when they got exactly what the other guys did, they were indignant. Why? They had worked longer and harder--they thought they had *earned* more. That's why it didn't seem fair to them!

And if we're honest, sometimes you and I have the same struggle--Is it fair that some person who indulged every lust, squeezed every drop of pleasure out of the world; never sacrificed anything for the kingdom of God; never took up their cross; but at the last minute of life, trusted Christ—and then goes straight to heaven, just like us? Is that fair?

*No it's not fair—it's grace! And aren't you glad that God is *gracious* to you, instead of *fair*?

Why all workers get the same pay--

Don't miss this: If all the workers got the same pay, regardless of how long they worked or how hard they worked--whether they were stellar employees, or clock-watching, bums, then Jesus is saying that salvation has nothing to do with how long or how hard you and I have worked! We all get the same salvation because it is based on Christ's work--not yours or mine! God doesn't look at your check-off sheet, or your timecard. ***He looks at His Son:*** Lived a perfect, righteous life--check. Obedient unto death, even

death on a cross--check. Willingly laid down His life as a substitute for sinners--check. Rose from the dead--check. *And if you trust in Christ, your name is on His timecard!*

- No person comes to Christ with more or less merit, and no one is received by Him with more or less grace.

We can hope for the salvation of folks in the 11th hour because salvation is of the Lord!

2. Because God gives the gift of faith.

“Doug, you are leaving something out: We have to *believe* in Christ to be saved. What are the chances that a terminally ill, heavily medicated, godless unbeliever can or will put his faith in Christ when he has rejected Him his entire life?”

Good question, let me ask you: What are the chances that you or I would have trusted Christ apart from God giving us a new heart? Zero! Listen again to this passage you might have memorized:

- Ephesians 2:8–9 ⁸For by *grace* you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing (the grace and the faith); it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Faith isn't our own doing, it is a gift from God – otherwise, we would have something to boast about. But we don't. And if it is God's gift to give, who are we to tell Him who He can and can't give it to? Or *when?*

- Our Arminian friends say that everyone has a free will and they can put their faith in Jesus whenever they are good and ready; and if they're given enough evidence, and a good enough gospel presentation, they will. It's up to them.

Well that is terrible, awful news for some old unbeliever on his deathbed who's heard it all and rejected it all--right? You've already played your best hand, and they blew it off. If it's all up to them, you might as well not waste your breath or your prayers. “Free will” is a horrible doctrine for unbelievers on their deathbed!

I'm so glad that Jn1.13 says that we are “born not of the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God!” No person is beyond hope because no person is beyond the grace of God! Don't limit God's desire and ability to give the gift of faith to anyone He chooses, at any time.

- The same God who opened Lydia's heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul--can open the heart of a dying person.
- The same God who removed Saul's spiritual blindness--Saul who was a Christ-hater and Christian-killer--can cause a dying person to see Christ, moments before they actually see Christ!
- I can give you a couple of illustrations of two men named Chuck; A few of you remember Chuck Beighle. When I first met Chuck, he was a crusty, foul-mouthed, chain-smoking old codger. He was in his late 60's and had just had a stroke and couldn't speak. He had zero interest in Jesus Christ, but I went to his house and shared the Gospel with him. He began coming to church with

Carolyn, his wife, and God saved them both. Chuck slowly got his voice back, and he became one of the sweetest old saints you could ever meet. He got involved in AWANA – he was the ‘grandpa AWANA leader.’ When God took him home, his memorial service was packed with people testifying to his ministry in their lives.

- The other Chuck was Chuck Rikalo who just came to our church for a short while. He was in his 60’s too; big, tough, ex L.A. cop. He had been a mean guy too. His kids told me that he physically abused his wife. But they began coming to church, and God gave Chuck the gift of faith. Absolutely transformed him. His wife and kids told me every time they saw me, “You just have no idea how much he has changed, he’s not the same man!” Chuck and his wife Pat moved to Sandpoint, Idaho years ago, and Pat still sends a Christmas card every year thanking our church for having a part in his salvation. A few years ago she included a big newspaper article with Chuck’s picture and an article about his ministry as a volunteer chaplain sharing the Gospel with prisoners.

I’m saying that *because* faith in Christ is a gift that God gives to whomever He chooses, whenever He chooses, no one is beyond hope. And the third reason there is hope—

3. Because God desires to save lost sinners—

Yeah, but does God *want* to save people who ignored Him their entire lives?

- 2 Peter 3:9 The Lord . . . is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.
- 1 Timothy 2:3–4 God our Savior . . . desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

This is the heart of God; He desires that every lost sinner would repent, turn to Christ and be saved. No, that’s not His divine decree – otherwise everyone *would* be saved – but that is His heart’s desire—

- Spurgeon said this: “Beloved, there is nothing that so delights Jesus Christ as to save sinners . . . you misjudge Him if you think He wants to be argued with and persuaded to have mercy; he gives it as freely as the sun pours forth light.”

When the day comes that you are standing at that hospital bedside and it’s breaking your heart to think that loved one might slip away and die without knowing Christ, you can know that God is more compassionate toward that person and their eternal destiny than you are! I’m not promising you that they will be saved, but God Himself said in—

- Eze 18:32 For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.”

I don’t think any of us grasp how *willing* God is to forgive sins and show mercy. Do you remember Jesus speaking to that Samaritan woman?

- John 4:10 ¹⁰Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, [oh, if you only knew!] and Who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.”

“If you would have asked, He would have given!” I’m saying that when you are looking at some poor person ready to slip away into eternity, you can know that God has the power and the desire to save them. We sing that hymn that says, : “He is able, He is able, He is *willing*, doubt no more.”

4. Because God desires to save the most unlikely sinners.

“Yeah, but this guy was the most godless piece of work you ever saw!”

That really is His specialty, isn’t it? God loves to do what we think is impossible.

- My sister in law is at a woman’s conference down in S. Cal. And just heard Rosaria Butterfield speak. She wrote a book entitled, “Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert.” She was a tenured professor at a liberal east coast college. She had a lesbian lover and they opened up their home to gay activists – but through the love of a Reformed Pastor and his wife – God saved her. She is a mom and a pastor’s wife. I call that an unlikely convert. But when Janice and I went to my 20th class reunion (years ago), most of my classmates thought I was a pretty unlikely convert too!

I think of Manesseh, the most wicked king in the entire history of Israel and Judah. He literally set up pagan idols in the temple of God, he sacrificed his own sons as burnt offerings to Molech, and led the nation into worse idolatry than the pagan nations around them. The Babylonian captivity is blamed on Manesseh. But he repented and turned back to God, and God forgave him.

- The horrible, cruel, idolatrous Assyrians in Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah – and he was shocked!

In Lk.14, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a dinner party, and who does the King invite to His party? The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. I.e. the most unlikely, undeserving, and the most *unable* to come on their own. And God calls these people into His kingdom to prove that what is impossible with man is possible with Him--

- 1 Corinthians 1:26–31 ²⁶For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

So never say about any person that they are too stubborn, or too old, or too sick for God to save them. One of the most touching things I’ve ever seen was a home video of Ed Breazeale, baptizing his own dad, who came to know Christ at the age of 80! Don’t ever lose hope that God can save the most helpless, hopeless person. *That is His forte!*

5. Because God delights to answer the prayers of His children.

What did Jesus teach us about prayer in Mt.7? God is our Father, so ask, seek, knock, and it will be given to you! And why did James say that it's not given to us? Because we haven't asked for it! God saves sinners, He delights to save sinners, He delights to save the most unlikely sinners, and He delights to answer the prayers of His children, so we have scriptural warrant for great hope that when we pray for the salvation of our loved ones even when they appear to be hopeless--God *delights* to answer those prayers!

- Paul must have believed that because he said: Rom 10:1 "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them (my Jewish brothers – who would love to see me dead!) is that they may be saved."

I'm not saying God has *promised* to save every person we pray for--but the God I know from Scripture would love to see the expression on our faces when we get to heaven and see people there that we never expected--because of our prayers!

- A few days before my Dad's funeral, I did the service for Dale Reiter's Dad, Perry. Dale's Dad was a lot like my Dad: crusty on the outside, soft on the inside, and never made a profession of Christ before he went into the hospital for the last time, but several years before they passed away, Dale and I made a pact to pray for the salvation of each other's Dad. I know that God heard those prayers, He is the One who saves, and He delights in the prayers of His children.

So we never give up praying or sharing the Gospel with anyone as long they still have breath.

But we don't have to wonder whether or not God can save sinners at the eleventh hour, because Jesus did just that just moments before His own death—

The thief on the cross.

- Luke 23:39–43 ³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

This man wasn't a good person. He was a robber – possibly a murderer, and he was guilty of treason against Rome or he wouldn't have been crucified. He was a bad man, unrepentant, irreligious, and moments away from death and Mk. 15:32 tells us that both of these men were insulting Jesus.

*But something happened to him as he was hanging there in indescribable pain: He recognized his own sinfulness, he saw that God is to be feared, he saw the sinlessness of Jesus, that Jesus was a King, that He had the authority to forgive his sins and let him into heaven--and he asked Jesus to do so!

- How in the world did that happen to a man whose body is being pulled apart as he is hanging by nails? *God gave Him a new heart.* He opened his eyes to see Jesus for who He is, and *gave him* the gift of faith to trust in Him.

A few minutes later a Roman soldier came along with a huge wooden mallet and shattered his legs and the legs of the other criminal, and they both suffocated and died. One went to hell, but the other went to heaven. What made the difference? Was one better than the other? No.

- God opened one of the criminal's eyes and gave him the gift of faith to believe in Jesus, in his last dying breaths! And beloved, the way of salvation has never changed. No one is saved in any other way than that dying thief was saved, by the sheer mercy of God. If you know Christ this morning as your Savior and your Lord, whether you have known Him for decades or days, you were saved in the very same way that thief was.
- This is why we can have hope for those we love and care about as long as God gives them breath, because: salvation is of the Lord, God can give anyone the faith to believe, He delights to save the most unlikely sinners, and He delights in the prayers of His children—so never give up praying and sharing the gospel.

But this story cuts the other way too, doesn't it? There were two thieves—

And Augustine said that this story teaches us two truths: 1.) "Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. 2.) Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned."

You get what he's saying: "The thief who was saved in his last breaths shows the limitless mercy of God and it gives us hope for any of our loved ones. But the thief who died in his sins reminds us to never, ever presume on God's mercy – to never, ever be flippant or careless about your soul."

No one held out more hope for lost sinners than Spurgeon. But he also gave this warning—

- *"Undoubtedly, there are death-bed conversions; but it is to be feared that, in the great majority of cases, people who wake up so late to a true conviction of their condition will find that, while they seek grace, "Jesus the bridegroom" will have already come. The poor head may be so distracted with pain that the mind may not be able to catch the idea of what faith in Christ really is; mental capacity may wholly fail in that dreaded hour. The risk is so great that none but the fatally foolish will postpone till then the preparation for the King's coming."*

Don't count on having a lifetime of sin and then getting some last minute fire insurance. My friend, God won't be mocked. Today is the day of salvation. Today if you hear his voice, "do not harden your hearts." (Hebrews 4:7) Flee from sin and run to Christ today. Today.

And if you do, what will you find?

There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains,
The dying thief rejoiced to see, that fountain in his day,
And there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away!

There is a fountain . . . it's still flowing.