**Aspects of serving the Lord-Matt. 20: 1-6 (page 987 in pew Bibles) & Phil. 1: 21-30 (p. 1178)**

 I wonder what you made of the grumbles of the first lot of workers (v.12) in the well known parable about the labourers in the vineyard. “These men, who were hired last, worked only one hour” they said “ and you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” (v.12). They had been slogging away all day and it seemed so unfair that they should be paid the same as the late arrivals. Even people serving the Lord for years may feel the same when the ‘Johnny come lately’ swans in and seems to be as appreciated as they are. We need to look at the context, after the Rich Young Ruler had had failed to give up his wealth to follow the Lord Jesus, Peter said (Matt. 19: 27) “We have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?” Jesus said you “who have followed Me, will inherit eternal life.” (vv28-29) What did this mean? The Lord Jesus explained in Jn. 17: 3 “Now this is life eternal: that they (the disciples) may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you sent.” By “knowing” He meant a face to face relationship or friendship with the Father and the Son, which would make for a special sort of life-life at its best. “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” Jn. 10: 10.This “life to the full” would be experienced now and after death-hence “eternal”. This reward comes NOT because of the amount or quality of service, as the labourers imagined in the parable, but by “faith” and because of God’s grace. The vineyard owner asked “are you envious, because I am generous? (Matt. 20: 15). God’s unconditional love for us is often so hard to fathom. In a discussion group, at the Christian house party I attended last week, one person had been struggling to get her head round this idea, though she did remark that her husband was so often there for her, even when she was at her most crabby, that he must be displaying something of unconditional love for her. That realisation seemed quite a step forward for her! This general point about the reward of eternal life through God’s grace and our faith and NOT through our service then leads on to particular aspects of service in Phil. 1: 21-30 (p 1178).

 Here Paul shows, firstly, in v 29 that it is God’s gift to us to believe but, also, to suffer for Him. Secondly, believers must conduct themselves wisely to show that they live worthily of the Good News (Gospel) stating that faith in Jesus leads to eternal life (v 27a). Thirdly, believers need to contend for this Good News by standing firm and united. (v 27b).

 Firstly, faith “ has been granted (to us) by God on behalf of Christ to believe on Him but also to suffer for Him” (v. 29) Believing on Him means repenting of our rebellion and sin against God and committing ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith. Believing is something given to us, as we cannot manufacture it. This involves an act of our will to take up His offer. This will lead to suffering for Him. In the UK, previously, it could be quite subtle –being given the cold shoulder by some, or being ignored by others. There might be the dismissal or mocking of Christian truths and views. Here now, it may even lead to the loss of a job or promotion, while world wide there is active persecution even death. This is all part of the cost of discipleship. It may seem hard that this is part of God’s gift to His followers, but He, also, gives us the means to endure and survive suffering by his Holy Spirit, which helps in our transformation to become more like Him.

 Secondly, Paul in v 27a writes “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” This means that if, by faith, we have experienced (in its varied forms) God’s love, forgiveness and guidance, our lives should show this. To put it another way, if the Lord Jesus dwells in our hearts-His qualities should shine out of us. We could think of the Fruits of the Spirit “love, joy, peace…” Gal. 5: 22. We should not be deceitful, prone to back biting, grumbling or sniping at others, but be generous, loving, forgiving, helpful, showing sympathy and integrity. Last week, I met someone else, who described himself as a bit of a duffer and not the one you would think of to set up a successful firm of solicitors. Recently, one other solicitor was talking about this firm: “Do you know they start each day by praying together? Extraordinary! On the other hand, it’s the only honest firm in the city.” What a tribute to this Christian solicitor’s integrity and the way he showed the Gospel works, as it were. Indeed, he was pointing others to the Lord Jesus

 Thirdly, in v 27b Paul says he “will know that you stand firm in one spirit contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.” When he wrote it was the basic truths that needed defending, as there was no New Testament to refer to. In v 30 Paul reminded them “you are going through the same struggle you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” The opposition came from the Jews who could not accept that Jesus was the Messiah, while the Romans were always opposed to any beliefs that denied the supreme authority of the Emperor-to them this might seem like treason. He urged believers not to be “frightened in any way by those who oppose you.” (v. 28), which showed God was enabling them to stand firm so that they would be delivered by God. Their lack of fear showed how wrong were those opposing them and what a disastrous future might lie ahead of them. What was true THEN is true for us in the hostile climate of opinion NOW. There was a time when you could disagree with those hostile to Christianity in a somewhat agreeable way. Latterly, opponents claim to be upset or offended, as if one was threatening to destroy their whole persona-hence the rise of “cancelling” those who express views contrary to theirs Consequently, speaking for myself, one hesitates to stick up for the truth. There is the danger of fuming within and being highly critical of those who seem to be enemies-whereas we should be praying them. Very recently, I was greatly convicted about this, when thinking of those who support same-sex unions.

 How can we apply any of what we have studied to our lives as Christians? Firstly, we can be thankful to God that He has bestowed on us the gift of faith and its corollary of suffering. Secondly, we need to be sure of what we believe, as we worship, pray and study His Word with others. Then we can stand firm, united in one spirit, as we contend or explain, as one man, the Good News . Thirdly, we can show that the Gospel works by the way we conduct our lives, as we show the fruits of the Spirit-“love, joy, peace…” What a challenge!