

Sermon 3: The Generous Employer (Matthew 20:1–16)

If Jesus' parables give us a glimpse about what God is doing in the world, it seems that God appears to be a little on the wild side. God is like a sower who sows with abandon without prejudging the soil. The seed lands helter-skelter on the path, on rocky ground, amidst thorns, but also in good soil (Matt. 13:3–9). God is like a shepherd who cares as much for one lost sheep as for the ninety-nine who are safely tucked away in the fold (Luke 15:4–7). God is like a king who forgives a debt of 10,000 talents, enough to wipe out most Fortune 500 companies (Matt 18:23–35). God is like a vineyard owner who pays as much for one hour of work as he does for twelve-hours of work.

The parables tell us something about God's grace, love, and concern to seek and save the lost. The last parable, however, tends to rub most of us the wrong way, particularly, if you consider yourself a twelve-hour worker in God's kingdom harvest.

1. The Situation

The farmer in this parable is not a big-time operator. He attends to how the harvest is faring himself and does all the hiring himself. He makes *five* trips to the marketplace where day laborers gathered hoping to land a job. One can tell the economy is not going great guns when workers are unemployed at harvest time, a time when labor should be in high demand.

The workers are not in a great bargaining position. The owner is very businesslike in making a clear agreement on the amount he would pay to those hired first. They settle on a denarius for the day, a low but common wage for a workday that began at sunrise and ended at sunset. The first hired, however, were not enough to bring in the harvest, so the landowner enlists others at 9:00 a.m., at noon, and at 3 p.m. If this parable tells us something about God, then God spends a lot of time down at the unemployment office.

The next group of laborers does not haggle over the price of their hire. The owner simply tells them, "I will give you whatever is just." They take him at his word just to have a job. When even these folks were enough to bring in the harvest, he hires more at the eleventh hour when most are ready to quit and head home. The landowner simply tells them to go into the vineyard. They have no idea what they will receive as pay, but anything is better than nothing.

2. The Surprise

The gong rings announcing it is time to knock off. The wages are paid in accordance with the Mosaic Law (Lev. 19:13, Deut. 24:15), and the workers line up to get their pay packet. A ripple of excitement and then consternation surges through the lineup of workers as they see what transpires.

The owner has the one-hour workers come through first, and he gives them the same amount that he promised the all-day laborers. Those at the back of the line must expect a big bonus, but they get exactly the same amount. The owner treats those who had labored through the heat of the day no differently from those who labored only for one hour.

He could have avoided the unpleasantness that followed by paying the all-day workers first and sending them on their way none the wiser and swearing the last workers to secrecy. He goes out of his way to show that all are to be treated equally regardless of the amount of work they had done. This is no way to run a business. We are surprised at the owner but not surprised by the indignant reaction of the workers who complain: “You have made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat!” (Matt. 20:12).

3. Our Work and God’s Pay

If you think that this parable has something to say about how God deals with us humans, then most of us will be miffed. Those who are scrupulously dutiful might demand, “To each his due” (Ps.62:12). They may even expect a bonus.

Jesus’ disciples might take umbrage. In Matthew 19:27, Peter says: “Behold we have left everything and followed you. What then shall be for us?” They expect some kind of special reward (see Matt. 20:20–28). Can you imagine how some might have felt about Jesus’ response to the thief on the cross who simply cries out, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42)? This parable offends.

3.1 The parable seems to go out of its way to show that no one will have priority status in the kingdom, no one has seniority, and no one gets preferential treatment.

I received a letter from my frequent flyer airline that I had lost my elite status. I had not flown enough miles this past year. It was a blow, because I would no longer be able to board the plane in the first group, load my carry-on in the overhead bin, and settle in before everybody else. Can you imagine the reaction if this airline were to announce: “All those who have never flown with us before, we invite you to board first”? The elite flyers standing in the front of the line waiting to board are likely to grouse, “You mean you made them equal to us? What about all those miles we flew; all those red-eye flights we took; all those delays we had to endure?” Another airline lets people board on a first-come first-served basis. Can you imagine the response if they were to announce: “The first shall be last and the last first” (Matt. 19:30; 20:16)?

We sing “God is so good,” but it can be downright irritating when God is just as good to other people who do not deserve it as God is to us who do. We may gripe: “All those church services we attended; all those Bible verses we memorized; all those mission trips we took; all that money we tithed. When it came right down to it, none of it gave us any advantage over others at all.”

3.2 This parable offends anyone who believes that hard work pays off and who looks at salvation as a payoff. It offends anyone who is looking to get an advantage over others.

Labor, we think, is supposed to be rewarded on the basis of its productivity, and it should result in a hierarchy of laborers. If I had been a twelve-hour worker that day, I would have pushed to the

front of the line with my protest sign. But the parable is about God. Can you imagine protesting outside the Pearly Gates with signs saying: “God Unfair to the Righteous!” “God Violates Seniority Rules!”?

3.3. The world of the grumbling laborers (see Exod. 16:3–8) who suffer from stinginess is our world. It is a world where one drives bargains with God. It is a world where one begrudges any windfall of grace that might come to others (see Luke 15:25–32). It is a world where one denies solidarity with others. It is a world where one works to earn status over others (even in the church). It is a world where one serves God with a mercenary spirit and maneuvers to get the upper hand. I can imagine the next day, if there were one, they would employ a different strategy and not sign on until the eleventh hour. If the owner then pays them 1/12 of a denarius, they would complain bitterly, “We were supposed to get a full-day’s wage!”

The parable works as a kind of time bomb that reveals us to ourselves. We can tolerate failure in others, but their good fortune, especially if it is better than ours, is hard to take.

4. Divine Generosity

If this parable reveals something about ourselves, it tells us more about God and the kingdom of God. Justice is served, but mercy is added. The only operative principle in the kingdom of God is the principle of divine generosity. One is not treated by God according to one’s desire but according to one’s needs. Most of us are fortunate that God does not deal with us on the basis of strict justice, sound economics, or our work output.

In God’s kingdom, grace is not parceled out or adjusted to the varieties of individual merit. In Jesus’ day, there was a coin called a *pondion* that was 1/12 of a denarius. Presumably, the eleventh-hour workers could have been paid that, but there is no such thing as 1/12 part of God’s love, mercy, or grace. It is all or nothing.

5. The Reward: Working for God

The wage comes only to those workers who heeded the call from a good employer. The key is not the wages paid out but the call to go into the vineyard and work. The greatest grace we receive from God is the invitation to go to work in God’s harvest (Matt. 9:37–10:1). John Ruskin said that the highest reward for a human’s toil is not what he or she gets for it, but what he or she becomes by it.

Paul writes, “We are God’s fellow workers” (1 Cor. 3:9). I knew someone who said I would do anything and work for nothing just to be working with this great man. He got the job and was paid handsomely. But what greater reward can you want than to be one of God’s fellow workers—working for God and working with God in God’s kingdom field. One does not do this for pay, but by grace one will be rewarded with eternal life.