

Sermon on Parable of Workers

Matt 20:1-16

Sept 20th, 2020

When my brothers were children, they always looked at what the other one had been given. This happened at Christmas time especially, and they were often jealous and wanted what the other one had. I think we all have our own sense of justice, of what is fair and right and just. Most of us want at the very least what we feel is due to us and many of us can have quite strong opinions about what we feel other people deserve – both good and bad. It is difficult sometimes not to hope that someone who has wronged us, or even someone who we don't even know who has done something wrong, gets their comeuppance.

I believe that our sense of justice, of what is right and wrong is part of us being made in God's image. He after all is the judge of all things. But God's judgement is always tempered by grace and mercy and sadly ours is not.

I am as guilty as the next person of sometimes wishing that I had what someone else has. Not just material things but talents and gifts. I would love to be able to sing well and to be able to lead sung worship for example. I guess I am no better than my little brothers looking at each other's presents and wanting what the other one had.

And our parable today speaks right into our human condition. Again, like the parable that John spoke so powerfully on last week, it is a parable about the Kingdom of God. It is a parable about the very nature of God. And again, it is a parable that has been misnamed. We often know it as the parable of the workers in the vineyard but we should call it the parable of the compassionate employer! So we know the story, the master goes out in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. It was the practice in the middle east then and still is today that men who don't have regular employment would gather at a certain place early in the morning in the hope that someone would come along and give them work. The master comes, picks

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some men, offers to pay them one denarius, which at the time was an accepted living wage for a day's work, they agree and off they go to the vineyard. The master comes back another three times to find men still standing there, not having been offered work by anyone else. The second time he comes he offers to pay them what is just – so they were almost certainly expecting only to be paid for part of the day. Now there are several things to say about this situation. Firstly, it is pretty humiliating to be standing around desperately hoping for work so that you can feed your family and more humiliating as the day wears on and you still haven't found any employment. Every time the master goes back the men are standing waiting, not sitting down, lolling about but standing ready and waiting and hoping for work. In the normal run of things, by lunchtime anyone who still has not been offered work will give up and go away. But here were men so desperate that they persisted and stayed even as the chances for any kind of work and the amount they might earn grew slimmer and slimmer.

Now when it comes time to pay the men we discover that the master has in fact got a steward. Now normally it would be the steward's job to go and hire men in the morning, but this master was a person of commitment and compassion. He did the work of the steward himself, he saw the men and their need for work and his compassion drew him back to the market place again and again to see if those men who were left had managed to find work. His heart went out to them.

The next surprising thing was not only what the men were paid, but how they were paid. Usually those receiving the most would be paid first, so naturally those employed first thing in the morning were expecting to get their wages and be on their way. And if that had happened, they would have had no complaints against the master because they would not have seen what the

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others were paid! But the last were first and were paid the living wage. Not what they had earned – they had barely worked at all, but what they needed to feed their families. What they needed not just materially but so that they could hold their heads up and not be ashamed or feel that they were failing. When it came to those who had worked all day of course they expected more – wouldn't you? I would have been most aggrieved. But they received exactly what they had agreed to work for. They weren't short changed or hard done by. They had the dignity and satisfaction of doing a whole day's work for which they were paid a fair and living wage to which they had agreed. How is justice defined here? It is defined by the compassion of the master, by his deep concern for the dignity of those in need and for their welfare. The workers who had only worked a short time had hungry mouths to feed and bills to pay, just as much as those who had been fortunate enough to be hired in the morning.

This compassionate master as we have heard wasn't aloof, sending his steward and not caring about the workers. Obviously, the master is Jesus, our God who is not aloof, uncaring about the needs of the world but knowing what our needs are and reaching out to us. This is a wonderful picture of the kingdom of heaven where grace is offered to those who need it. There is an obvious warning here too. The warning is to all those who think that they know better, who believe that their judgement and sense of justice is right, and God's is wrong. It is a warning against those who want to deny those in need because they don't think they deserve to be helped. Jesus seeks out those in need and offers them salvation.

Simeon was a righteous, godly man who had served God all his life and had waited faithfully for the Messiah to come. In Luke chapter 2 we see him holding Jesus in his arms, the fulfilment of his life. On the cross the thief, who

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presumably had led the very opposite of a good life, who said himself that he deserved to be crucified, repented and Jesus told him that he would be in heaven with him that very day. That is grace, God loves the righteous and the unrighteous equally. As the hymn says, the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

The story, like so many of the parables is missing an ending. We don't know what happens next. Do the disgruntled workers repent or do they rise up against the master, or maybe they do what we mostly do, side off grumbling.

The challenge is to ask ourselves, where are we in the story? Are we grateful to work for the Lord and accept His grace and generosity towards us, or are we comparing ourselves to others and feeling aggrieved that they have received something we don't think they deserve? Or thinking that we deserve more than we have been given? Or are we like the workers who came late in the day and are overwhelmed with gratitude that Jesus has come to us and given us what we needed, that He has restored our humanity. In our sinful nature we are prone to both pride and envy and these are things that God abhors. So, let us determine that we will be thankful people, grateful for all that God has given us and not looking at what He has given anyone else, rather rejoicing with others and being glad for them. Let us determine that we will be people of grace, who want people to get what they need and not necessarily what they deserve. Let us be people who willingly submit our often faulty judgment to the judgment and mercy of God who sees people's hearts, remembering that He sees our hearts as well and in His mercy and grace forgives us and gives us what we need and not what we actually deserve.