

THE GENEROSITY OF GOD

SERIES: THE PARABLES OF JESUS



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Matthew 20:1-16
Third Message
Paul Taylor
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Matthew 20:1-16

I want to get started with a little activity. I need two volunteers.

For the first volunteer, I will ask you to throw this ball up in the air and catch it. You don't have to throw it very high. Only as high as you can confidently catch it. If you succeed, I have a prize for you.

Congratulations on succeeding. Your prize is \$20. Enjoy!

For the second volunteer, I will ask you to throw this ball up in the air and catch it. Again, you don't have to throw it very high. Only as high as you can catch it. If you succeed, I also have a prize for you.

Congratulations on succeeding. Your prize is \$1. Enjoy!

Now I have a question for the rest of you: How did that make you feel? What is your emotional response to what you have just witnessed?

Most of us probably felt like that situation was unfair. It wasn't right for me to give different amounts of money to people for doing the same thing. There is something within us—deep within us—that wants everyone to be treated the same. I suspect that if you did this exercise in different cultures around the world, the response would be the same. What you have just witnessed is unfair.

I say that because Jesus told a similar parable in a very different culture two thousand years ago, and the response was the same: that's not fair.

This morning, we are continuing our summer series on the Parables of Jesus. These are stories Jesus told that are meant to highlight some spiritual truth. They are usually provocative, surprising, or upsetting, and Jesus uses that discomfort to stir something within us.

Jesus was a master storyteller. He knew how to connect with people in a deep way. His strategy here is to place his story in a context everyone knows very well:

the workplace. He describes a situation that today could potentially result in accusations of unfairness and a civil lawsuit. The conclusion of Jesus' story is a statement that is about as controversial and unfair as you could make. The last will be first, and the first will be last.

For us, it raises some deep questions. Is God unfair? Does he treat some people better than others? Who are we in the story? Are we the last who have been bumped up to first place? Or are we the first who have been moved down the list to last? How do we view people who seem to get better treatment than us? And what can we learn about God through our workplaces and the inevitable injustices that occur there every day?

This morning, we'll start by working our way through the story. We want to look deeper at some of the tension points Jesus creates and how we react to them. I think we'll discover some surprising things—mainly about ourselves. We'll also reflect a bit on why Jesus chooses to place so many of his stories in the workplace and what it says about how we encounter God in our places of work.

The story

The story begins with a comparison. All of the parables are metaphors, but not all of them explicitly call out the comparison. This one does.

Matthew 20:1:

“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.

Notice that the comparison is a bit awkward. The kingdom of heaven is like a master. It's not as clean as we would like it. Jesus doesn't specify, but it seems likely that God is meant to be compared to the master. What we're going to discover is that this kingdom works in an upside-down manner. The master does things differently than people might expect.

But first, we see a day in the life of the vineyard. It's probably harvest time, given the amount of labor needed.

Matthew 20:2-7:

After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’

We hear about five waves of people being hired. The first is at 6 am, then 9 am, 12 pm, 3 pm, and finally, 5 pm. When we read Jesus’ parables, we want to pay special attention to what is out of place or unique. Notice the questions that the story raises in your mind. If you’re asking the question, there’s a good chance the author is trying to get you to ask those questions.

One of my questions has to do with the last people hired at 5 pm. Why were they still waiting for work? The master has the same question and asks them, but their answer doesn’t address everything. Had they been there waiting all day? It doesn’t seem likely, or the master would have hired them earlier. During harvest season, there would have been plenty of work. Why didn’t anyone hire them? Were they known to be bad workers? Or are they just making excuses?

Think for a moment about your workplace. In most organizations, there are people who work hard and people who don’t work as hard. Very capable people and not so capable. Good managers. Bad managers. Ambitious people who start work at 6 am. And some who may not care about working until late in the day.

Each industry also has its version of social levels. In software development, there are engineering leads, product managers, engineers, and QA. In a restaurant, there are front-of-house, back-of-house, cooks, and bus staff. In a law firm, there are partners, associates, paralegals, and admin staff. In medicine, there are doctors, nurses, schedulers, and admins. The list goes on and on.

The point is that we can all relate to different people in the workplace. Jesus is painting a picture that immediately resonates with all of us. We may even put

ourselves somewhere on that list. I may not have been in the first wave, but I certainly wouldn’t have been in the last wave.

Those are all the emotions that Jesus ties into. Emotions we are very familiar with. Then he springs the surprise.

Matthew 20:8-10:

And 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.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.

Many commentators say that the point of this passage is the extravagant generosity of God to give a full day’s wage to the laborers who only worked an hour. And if you haven’t received the generosity of God, you need to hear that part of this story.

God’s love is like a waterfall of extravagant grace that flows down upon us all. None of us deserve God’s grace. If you haven’t experienced that, then we would love for you to discover it for the first time. It doesn’t matter whether you’ve worked hard all your life or been broken and rebellious. God is there with unconditional grace.

You may have made mistakes—we all have. You may currently be making mistakes—we all are. You may think that you are not the kind of person God wants on his team—and that’s true for the rest of us, too. God didn’t reach out to any of us because of what we could offer him. God’s love is always the story of mercy, forgiveness, and generosity.

God treats all of us the same.

That is absolutely the undercurrent of this parable. Don’t miss it. However, there is another, more challenging side to this story that I believe is Jesus’ primary goal. Because most of us read this story and don’t react with amazement and gratitude for the people who only worked an hour and received full payment, we read this story as an injustice.

This is the part where we all say, “That’s not fair!” Notice how the story plays out. Jesus says the master pays them “beginning with the last, up to the first.” In

the beginning, we were excited because if the people who only worked for an hour received a whole day's wage, we assumed that those who worked an entire day would get a bonus. But our excitement quickly fades when we hear that everyone receives the same. How could someone who worked 12 hours earn the same as someone who only worked an hour?

Jesus' parables are not just ideas wrapped up in story form. Many are diagnostic tests meant to get through the defenses we usually use to protect ourselves and expose what is true in our hearts.

Here's my question for you: Who do you resonate with? Is your thought, "Good for those guys who only worked an hour—they scored!" Or is your thought, "How unfair to those who were first?"

In this room, we are mainly a community of "firsts" rather than "lasts." Most of us probably feel the injustice of those who worked extra hard rather than the joyful surprise of those who only worked for an hour.

Someone recently told me a story about a project they worked on at work. They poured a lot of effort into making something work, but when their manager presented it up the chain, they didn't receive any of the credit. The manager seemed to subtly take responsibility for all of it.

What do we do with injustice in the workplace? It happens all the time. In small ways, like not being given credit and in larger ways, like unfair termination or prejudice. How do we respond when others are getting treatment worse than we are? Where does that sense of indignation go?

For the laborers who worked 12 hours and received the same pay as those who only worked an hour, they did what many of us would do. Raise it up the chain of command.

Matthew 20:11-12:

And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, '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.'

Notice that we don't hear from the workers who received a full day's wage for only working an hour. That's why I'm convinced that the focus of the story is not on the last who became first. It's on the first who became last.

We are told they "grumbled at the master of the house." Some translations say "grumbled against." They are upset. They are not confused or concerned. They are angry.

The master's actions have triggered something within their hearts. He has struck a chord. And for most of us, the story strikes a chord as well. We are probably drawn to situations in our lives when we have felt like the victims of injustice. If we have allowed it to, this story has exposed our hearts. We are laid bare.

That's why, in response to their grumbling, the master goes straight to their heart.

Matthew 20:13-16:

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take 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?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last.'

The master goes through a list of reasons why their situation isn't unfair. He gives a legal explanation: "I've done you no wrong." He gives them practical advice: "Take your pay and go." He gives an economic explanation: "Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?" He gives a personal explanation: "Can't I be generous?"

But the real thrust comes when he asks them a question about themselves: "Do you begrudge my generosity?" The master makes it clear. The problem isn't with his behavior. The problem is with their heart. He is not the issue. They are the issue.

The conclusion of this parable is the upside-down economics of the kingdom of God: the last will be first and the first last. Last first and first last is great if you are last. But it's not so great if you are used to being first and must watch others move past you in line. Once again, I suggest that most of us are used to being first. Most of us think we work hard, are good people, and deserve to be treated well.

That's what this story is about: the people who worked out in the sun for a full 12 hours and found themselves getting paid the same as the ones who slept in, had a late lunch, and worked for an hour in the evening shade.

It's about the person who caught the ball and got \$1 when someone else did the same thing and got \$20.

It's about those of us who work hard to live by God's principles. We care about being good people. We try to sacrifice and pay attention to others. We play by the rules. We are the good guys. And because of all that, there is some part of us that believes we deserve to be treated well. We ought to be paid a little extra. We shouldn't get sick, face pain, lose our jobs, or see our friends suffer. We've worked hard. We at least deserve to be treated as well as others.

That's what this story is about. It's a diagnosis of the begrudging within our hearts. Yes, God is generous. Yes, he gives lavishly to those who don't deserve it. But, sometimes, that bothers us. Maybe not because we don't want others to get good stuff. But it mostly bothers us when we don't get what we think we deserve.

It's hard to view others as equals.

I want you to imagine someone who has hurt you—not an evil person, but someone you have a hard time with. Maybe the hurt is unintentional. Perhaps it's on purpose. Most of us have a few people in our lives who, for one reason or another, get under our skin more than others. Their particular brokenness rubs up against our particular brokenness in ways that sting a bit extra.

Imagine that person. Isn't there a part of you that thinks you're better than them? That you deserve more? That they aren't quite as worthy?

It's hard to view others as equals.

The apostle Peter had to learn this lesson the hard way. God showed up for him. He received a vision. He had to travel to the kinds of people that he thought he was better than. A Gentile. And a Roman soldier at that. The symbol of all the oppression that his people were experiencing. But God changed Peter's heart after the encounter.

Acts 10:34-35:

So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

It's hard to view others as equals.

In most of life we are always taught to evaluate. Grades. Salaries. Performance reviews. Different levels of responsibilities. We do the same thing at church, assigning more or less spiritual value to different activities. This person is preaching. That person is an elder. This person is leading a Bible Study. We make these things matter.

It's hard to view others as equals. And we carry these things into all the parts of our lives. But this parable isn't about solving the problem. It's not a recipe for viewing others as equals. All Jesus is trying to do here is to help us see the state of our hearts.

So what do we do? How do we change? What does repentance and transformation look like? We don't fix ourselves. We don't try harder. We throw ourselves on the grace of God and the work of his Spirit to transform our hearts day by day in small and large ways. It is God's work in us.

But where does he do that work? What are the tools that he uses for transformation?

Learning at work

Here's a secret. Mostly, spiritual transformation doesn't happen from listening to sermons. This is where you hear the word of God proclaimed. It's where God helps you to see the truth. But it's mainly in the rest of your life where that truth sinks into your heart. The sermon is necessary—that's where we encounter God through his word. But it's mostly through our work, friends, family, and activities that we learn to walk with God in practice.

There's a reason so many of the parables have to do with the workplace: shepherds and vineyards and building, gardening, buying, and selling. That's where a lot of our life is lived. And because so much of our life is lived there, that's often where God meets us.

Dallas Willard claims that the workplace is your primary place of discipleship. That makes sense because, for most of our lives, we spend more time at work than in any other single sphere

The problem is that many of us don't recognize this fact. One of the most dangerous tendencies I see is what I call disintegration: the compartmentalization of our work lives and our faith lives into different chambers of our lives. There are some deep historical reasons why we are susceptible to this—some of them date back thousands of years.

But the result is that we don't see what God is trying to do in us when we're at work, and we don't see what God is trying to do through us with the work we spend our time on.

This is why we have an entire track as part of the Leadership Institute focused on integrating our faith into our workplace lives. We learn how God views our work and what he is doing. We spend time reflecting on how we show up at work and what God wants to teach us. We consider the effects of our work and how we can partner with God's redemptive purposes in the world. And we practice recognizing God's presence every day, even when we're at work.

We will have another interest meeting for the Leadership Institute program on Sunday, August 11. If you're interested, I'd love to see you come by and learn more. You can also check out the program at pbc.org/institute and fill out the interest form.

Of course, work isn't the only place where God transforms our hearts. But it's one of the most powerful and overlooked spheres where God is at work.

Conclusion

We started this morning by rewarding a few individuals for successfully throwing and catching a ball in the air. But because their rewards were different, we felt the whole thing was unfair.

This is related to a parable Jesus told about laborers who worked for different lengths of time yet received the same wage. He concluded that in the kingdom of God, the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.

However, each of these stories differs from God's grace in an important way. Each focuses on what was earned—a reward or a wage for a task done successfully. That's not how grace works. Grace is given. None of us have worked for it.

So even if I've worked harder than you, or more likely that you've worked harder than me, God's grace has nothing to do with my effort. That's the real scandal of the whole thing.

And it's that scandal of the gospel that leads us to rest in God's love. It doesn't come naturally. We need the injustices of life to help us recognize the brokenness of our hearts. We need to see that when you scratch beneath the surface, many of us don't really believe in grace.

A lot of that opening of our eyes happens in the workplace. It happens through relationships with co-workers, bosses, and the people we serve. Often, we get to see who we really are through the challenges and successes of work.

When our eyes are opened, we can turn back to God. We see our brokenness. We recognize that we are begrudging the generosity of God. It becomes clear that we think we're better than others. And we turn back to God in repentance.

We can only rely on God's grace. We can stand in the waterfall of his favor and welcome anyone else who, through faith, would stand under those waters alongside us.