

The generous master / Extended not resented * Matthew 20:1-16
March 24, 2019 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

When I was in high school we had to read a book by George Orwell – a lovely little book called *1984*. Has anyone else read that? Now when I say lovely, I mean weird. What a weird and unsettling book that is.

But there was another class that was reading another Orwell called *Animal Farm* and as I got older, I kept hearing how good *Animal Farm* was and so I got my hands on a copy and read it. *Animal Farm* is way better than *1984*.

The book tells the story of how the pigs take over the farm with the intention of creating a just and equitable society for all the animals. They'll all work together for each other's benefit and the motto that holds them all together is 'All animals are equal.' In time though, the pigs start treat themselves than the other animals and before long, they have become tyrants, ruling under the pretense of equality. They actually rewrite their motto and then scrawl it huge letters across the barn 'All animals are equal but some are more equal than others.'

That phrase has always stuck with me. All animals are equal but some are more equal than others.

And that phrase neatly captures the issue at the heart of this passage. Jesus tells this parable to remind His followers that "All believers are equal and there are NONE who are more equal than the others." If you look just before and just after this passage, you see the disciples jockeying for position in the Kingdom of God and this passage is pretty clearly intended to tell Jesus' followers not to begrudge another's faith or to think that you deserve more grace than anyone else.

But here's the thing – I can't really picture that being an issue for any of you. I think that if a person came to faith, say late in life, or out of a really sensationally sinful past, we would rejoice, rather than resent it. I'm pretty confident that you don't secretly rank each other in terms of spirituality and then look down your nose at one another, based on your 'spiritual rigor.'

So I really think that this passage is going to mean something different for us than it did for the disciples when they first heard it.

So what does it mean for us? Let me put it to you like this – the question for us at the heart of this passage is this: what are you doing with God's undeserved generosity?

Join me in Matthew chapter 20 and we'll think together about that question. Matthew 20, starting in verse 1.

NIV Matthew 20:1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner (if you're into writing in your Bible, underline that, because this is what the whole story is about – Jesus is describing how the kingdom of heaven works. Jesus is describing who God is and we can't lose sight of that). "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.
2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

A denarius was the going rate for a day's work in Jesus' time, so these workers have agreed to go and work for fair pay.

3 "About the third hour (the third hour from sunrise, so like 9am) [the landowner] he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing.

4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.'

Notice that he doesn't specify WHAT he'll pay them – only that he will pay them appropriately.

5 So they went. "He went out again [around noon and three] about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing."

6 About the eleventh hour (so an hour from quitting time) he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

7 " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered." He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

9 "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came (probably expecting to get \$14) and (and believe it or not!) each received a denarius.

They worked about 60 minutes and yet they were paid 'for the whole day!' That's amazing isn't it? A whole day's pay for an hour of work? Wow!

Well when those who were hired first saw this, they thought – oh, well, if they're getting more, then surely we will too!

~~10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more.~~

But each one of them also received a denarius.

11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

12 '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.'

The landowner I think understands where they're coming from and he says -

~~13 "But he answered one of them,~~ 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? (It's implied – you have been paid a fair day's wage, just as we agreed), so...

14 Take your pay and go.

But... and this is the key to the parable –

I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

16 "So [Jesus says] the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Mat 19:30-16 NIV).

Let's pause and unpack this parable a little. What's the point? Parables usually have one central idea and in this case, it's the unexpected generosity of the landowner, right? The parable is not primarily about how to pay your employees, the parable is not primarily about how the first set of workers was treated; this parable is all about the unexpected, undeserved generosity of the landowner.

Here he is, going out first thing in the morning, to hire a group of men to work in his vineyard. The realities of the time meant that every man in that marketplace was living in a precarious situation. They were day workers. They had no promise of steady pay. They were lower than slaves in the social structures of the time, because at least slaves knew where their supper would come from. So these men are all dependent upon the work that another person could give them. And here comes the landowner to promise a full day's work and a full day's pay. This is good.

And then three hours later, the man comes back to the marketplace and look at what it says in verse 3 – he 'saw' others in the marketplace standing around. Now scholars are divided as to whether or not the man actually NEEDS extra help, but I'm tempted to think that this man sees that they need work, thinks to himself, I can afford to help them, and then sends them off into the field. And he does it again at noon and again at three. And I have a hard time believing that he would have been so clueless about the amount of work that had to be done that he had to go back four times.

And then he shows up in the marketplace at five and he sees guys standing around and he says, verse 6 - 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' Now the KJV translated that standing around idle and so these guys have got a bad rap – like they're the bums drinking cheap wine and sleeping in til noon – THAT'S why they haven't been hired. But the landowner specifically says 'why have you been here all day?' And they answer:

7 " 'Because no one has hired us.' Now think about that for a minute. No one has hired them as day workers. Why? It's possible that they are drunks and bums but I think it's just as likely that they are the least desirable workers that showed up that day. If you're going to hire guys to work in your fields, you want the healthy ones, the strong looking ones, the athletic looking ones who can bear the heat of the day – and these are the leftovers. The dregs that nobody else wanted. They're the gross looking strawberry at the bottom of the basket that no one wants.

And so the man says – you too, go, work in my vineyard. At this point, I think John Nolland is right – he's thinking more about their need to feed their families than HIS need for people to work his fields.

As noted at v. 7, the landowner appears to have provided work for all the unplaced workers. The landowner was already being significantly other-centred in his hiring pattern (they needed work); he continues to be so in his payment pattern (they need the pay that would have gone with a full day of employment)" (John Nolland, NIGTC, 20:15).

And then of course, it's pay time and he gives these 11th hour workers a whole days wage. Of course they don't deserve it! They've only worked an hour. But what does he say? It's my right to be generous if I choose, and I'm choosing to be unexpectedly, extravagantly generous.

Now, go back to verse 1 – what's this story about? This parable is about how the kingdom of heaven works. This parable is about WHO God is. And it just screams: God is unexpectedly, undeservedly,

extravagantly generous! God subverts our worldly expectations of what is fair, in order to be generous to undeserving people.

Let's pull this out of the world of the parable to think in real life terms.

None of us DESERVES God's generosity.

He gave us life, He gives us life every day and yet we all naturally choose to live our lives for ourselves rather than Him. It wouldn't be "fair" for us to receive grace; we've done nothing but resist God.

You know, I remember a few years ago, Julie as working walk in clinic one night so I had the kids all by myself. And they were being especially difficult. Like, I don't know if your kids used to do this, but they'd climb up on the back of the couch and lie there on the top like a lazy jaguar. And I'd say 'get off the back of the couch, get off the back of the couch, get off the back of the couch' and next thing you'd know, I'd look back and guess where they were – on the back of the couch. They splashed each other in the bath, they knocked balloons out of each other's hands and were just generally poorly behaved.

And a little later on, they had the nerve to look up at me and say 'can we stay up a little later for a little more TV?' And I said 'why on earth should I let you stay up when all you've done is ignore me? Give me one good reason why I should be so generous to you.' Now they didn't have an answer. Fair is fair meant they should go straight to bed.

But you know what hit me? What they should have said? "Because you're kind, daddy."

In that moment, it struck me, the only hope they had to stay up a little later was not in them. They had done nothing but disobey and rebel; the only hope they had was in me - would I be kind and generous and forgiving enough to let them stay up a little longer?

And that's the whole point of this parable. God is exceedingly generous. God is unexpectedly generous. None of us deserves His favour; frankly, without Jesus, we are more like kids who prefer to do the things that we want and so deserve to go straight to bed.

But this parable shows us that *God is exceedingly generous to people who don't deserve it*.

Instead of holding us accountable for sin, God chose to come to earth, in the person of His Son, to bear the cost for sin and give us life. Real life. Eternal life. Fair is fair means that we should have had to pay for our own sin, God is SO generous that He repaired the relational breach that we had caused between us and Him, so that if only we would receive His generous gift, then we would become His children and His people.

God is exceedingly generous to people who don't deserve it. If you've done something in your past that haunts you like a skeleton in your closet – "God could never forgive that." If you've consistently lived for yourself and ignored God, and sense Him inviting you back to Him – listen – He is like a landowner that pays a full days wage for an hour of work. He will be that generous to you, if you will only receive it.

Now, the question that remains is this: what do we do with this generous gift? Once we have admitted our need for God, received the overwhelming grace of God with the joy and gratitude that the eleventh hour workers must have felt, what do we do with it?

The simple answer is this: God's undeserved generosity should be extended not resented.

The first generation of believers, I think, really needed to hear that last part – don't resent people who come to faith after you. They could very easily have said 'oh, well, were YOU at the Transfiguration? Were YOU at the empty tomb? Were YOU there when He gave us the great commission? Well then, you don't belong to the club. And then they could have treated these new believers as second class citizens. Sure we're 'all equal' but we're more equal than you. Don't believe me? Just look at the end of chapter 19, Peter seems to want to be sure that they'll get special treatment because of all the things that he's given up, and then at the end of chapter 20, James and John's mother comes to Jesus as says 'give my boys prominent positions in your kingdom, wouldja?' (Geez, thank mom).

It's like with this parable, Jesus is saying 'no, no, no, no – Animal farm logic does not apply here. There is no believer who is 'more equal' than another. Before the Cross, like it says in verse 12, you are all equal. Doesn't matter who you are,
what you've done,
how impressive you are,
how spiritual you are,
how many years you've been a believer,
how many generations your family's been Christian – you have all received the undeserved, unparalleled generosity of God. When a new person experiences that undeserved, unparalleled generosity, that should make us rejoice, not resent them.

Now again, I don't think that that's an issue here. I remember when Drew came to faith, early in my time here, I met him for the first time in the hospice, he trusted his life to Jesus, he experienced the undeserved, unparalleled generosity of God and it was reason around her for rejoicing. Not – 'he converted on his death bed, not he was only a believer for a few days and here I am denying myself and taking up my cross and bearing the burden of Christian work' – you rejoiced, and honoured he and Louise and honoured God by celebrating His forgiving love. That's awesome. You can't get better than that.

That's what extending the generosity of God looks like. Letting people know about God's generous gift of salvation; rejoicing when they come to faith; sharing with them in Christian fellowship – that's what it means to extend God's undeserved generosity.

It's not an accident that Jesus describes God as someone who puts people to work in His vineyard. As Dale Bruner writes: 'a Christian disciple is by nature a Christian worker' (319). Just imagine how those 11th hour workers felt when they received such generous pay – I'll bet they would have been there at 5:30 the next morning, ready to work and hoping that landowner came back around again.

And that's how it should be with us – ready to extend God's undeserved generosity into the world.

I want to challenge you this week to be generous to someone who doesn't deserve it, in Jesus' name. Pray that that might somehow be an opportunity to speak God's undeserved, unparalleled love into their lives.

God's undeserved generosity should be extended not resented.

- Each of us has a part to play – donkey drivers, grape pickers, basket fillers...

BENEDICTION

5. 1 Cor. 15:58 - Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.