

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Matthew inserts this parable to “illustrate the teaching about rewards in the kingdom” which had been the subject of the previous passage. The owner of the vineyard is understood to be God, and the payments featured in the story are his reward for mankind (that is, eternal life). The owner employs men at different times in the day, and at the end of the day pays them all the same wage. The parable is also used to illustrate the teaching about *the last and the first*. One lesson here is that “God is not answerable to man for what he does with his rewards,” and we are not meant to complain about what he chooses to do in this regard. The setting is probably “the controversy with the Pharisees over his treatment of the tax collectors and sinners. God’s mercy, revealed in Jesus’ fellowship with the outcasts of Jewish society is “inexplicable to the Pharisees.” Note that those who protest and moan about injustice in the parable closely resemble the Pharisees who claim more from the Father because of the assumption that their good works exceed the value of the good works of others.

The *Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*, you may recall, sets up “an expectation of celebration when the king cancels an enormous debt only to have it swept away when the servant will not forgive a small one. Similarly, the *Vineyard Workers’ Wages* (or *The Workers in the Vineyard*) ends on a sour note.” Without knowing the context in which Jesus used such parables, the reason for such shocking twists and dark conclusions remains a matter of speculation.” Most authorities agree that the point Jesus is making is this: “so excessive is God’s propensity to give and care, it violates our instincts about fairness...it looks rash. It almost makes God out as inattentive to the kinds of people who, just by going about their usual business, easily exceed humanity’s lowest common denominator for effort, morality, and piety.” But stand back for a moment and what you see is that that the only people who spend the whole day waiting to be hired but don’t find success until the end of the day in Jesus’ time would have been “the weak, infirm, and disabled (and likely) the elderly --- even targets of discrimination, such as criminals or anyone with a bad reputation.” Thus, what better way of illustrating “God’s inclination to show special generosity to the poor and outcast.?” All of scripture points us in the direction of this understanding of the essential character of the God of Israel.

Some have imagined that the point Jesus is making here is part of a “comment on the social justice of the day.” And certainly, Jesus frequently did this. However, here he is more concerned with saying something about God. And it is easy to imagine that his message is directed primarily to the disciples. For example, the whole point of “the (puzzling) saying about *first and last*, the *front and back*” relates directly to his concern that after he has departed, his most faithful followers will assume that because they have held a place of honor in the view of their Lord, this means they are placed in a favored position vis-à-vis others. The whole problem at the end of the parable is “the landowner’s fault – not because he paid them all the same but *because he paid the last first*.” Thus, the message to the disciples

is: *don't think that because you had a special role when I was on earth that this somehow means you are favored for all time.* If they are imagining that in his absence they will become wealthy and famous, he is telling them that this is not the way things work in the kingdom of heaven.

People have long argued over various aspects of the fairness or unfairness of the payments made to the workers, but in the end “this parable is not a paradigm of fair labor management, but rather is a statement about the radical nature of God and the Kingdom.” The story teaches that participation in the kingdom does not come about through works or laboring beyond normal expectations but rather achieves expression through “the unmerited and unmitigated grace of God.” The theme of grace is “so strongly sounded in this parable” that it is akin to “the pealing of a bell on a clear day.” Actually, Jesus may have felt compelled to make a point of this lesson in a vivid way because people in general have such ingrained patterns of behavior and experience that they “resist the seemingly preposterous nature of grace as an expression of the sovereign love of God.”

If you listen carefully to the parable, you will notice that the landowner specifically promises to give *just* compensation and later argues that his decisions are *just*. What this does is to place the emphasis on the “surprising and unsettling character of *God's* justice.” When the wages for all turn out to be the same, “instead of celebrating the fortune of their comrades and rejoicing at the landowner's generosity, (they) get angry over not getting more than was agreed upon by common consent.” Thus, “the generosity of the landowner generates only anger.” What is going on here? Well, “the transforming generosity of the landowner and its power to create a forgiving community of justice runs squarely against the power of evil that feasts on vengeance and disciplinary distinctions that would divide and exclude from the community.” It turns out that the sheer magnitude of God's grace can be so unsettling as to create dissension and make the building of a new community of believers very, very problematic.

As one scholar puts the matter, “why do we find it so difficult to rejoice over the good that enters other people's lives, and why do we spend our time calculating how we have been cheated?” It is simply a fact that “people regularly understand and appreciate God's strange calculus of grace as applied to themselves but fear and resent seeing it applied to others.” This is a key reality because “the life of God's kingdom with its focus on communal love cannot be experienced as long as we are comparing ourselves with others and calculating what is due us or being envious of what others receive. Even while we speak of justice. None of us is satisfied with average. We always think we deserve a little more.” You can see from these examples the immense obstacle Jesus confronted in conveying the character of God's kingdom to people with a limited spiritual outlook.

Of course, justice itself is important and not to be overlooked. However, it needs to be re-defined: “it requires positive action seeking the good for all persons.” Too often we imagine that jealousy is justice and use it as a “weapon to limit generosity.” Certainly, true justice cannot be a “standard by which the poor are kept poor.” True justice “seeks mercy and ways to express love.” So, it the parable is really

about the goodness of God, then it asks us to “give up envy and calculation of reward and, rather, both embrace and imitate God’s goodness.”

I’d like to add a footnote here courtesy of Bishop Mary Glasspool which came to my attention on Friday. Here is her interesting take on the parable:

*I think that what this parable is trying to tell us is that entrance into the kingdom of heaven does not depend upon justice! It depends upon our acceptance of God’s invitation to work in the vineyard – and God keeps going out, at every hour of the day, all day long, to invite us.*

*What this parable says about life in the kingdom of heaven is that it is not wages or hierarchy or fairness or even justice which count – but the call to go into the vineyard and our response to it. In the parable, all who accepted the landowner’s invitation to work in the vineyard, received the wage. The major theme of the parable is not generosity, but grace – **God’s** grace. And it’s not grace in terms of what the landowner paid the laborers: how much, to whom, or for what. It’s grace in terms of the landowner’s need for laborers; grace as manifested in the landowner’s going out again and again and again – all day long, to invite people into the vineyard; the grace of God which is offered to all of us, even in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, and simply awaits our acceptance. To that I say, Amen.*

*Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

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