

## Parable of the Generous Landowner

Matthew 20:1-16

### *Introduction*

Aeneas' eyes snapped open from his deep sleep. He could hear the desert winds relentlessly blowing the trees outside and whistle through the cracks and crevices of the house. Years of working as a day laborer in the vineyards taught him what these winds meant. It was the time of the scorching heat and the grapes had to be harvested!

These winds would soon be followed by heavy rains and even more destructive high winds. The grapes would be lost unless they were harvested quickly. This was good news for him. It meant there would be work. It meant bread for his family. The endless cycle of poverty would be broken for a time. If he got to the marketplace early, he was sure of being hired. With a surge of hope Aeneas dressed quickly.

The crimson sun was just erupting over the horizon. He was joined by several others hoping for a day's work. Strangely, one of the vineyard owners was already there. He too felt the urgency of the harvest, and needed all the hands he could hire before the rains came. The negotiations for the day's wage went quickly: a denarius, the going rate for sunup to sundown labor. It was 6:00 am, and Aeneas went to work.

The early morning hours in the vineyard were usually cool and it was the best time to work. But today it was already blistering hot, and the winds felt as if they had blown off a furnace. He gathered grapes as quickly as he could. He had much experience and his hands had been trained by years of hard labor, but as he looked across the vineyard, he knew they would not finish before sundown.

At 9:00 am, the owner returned to the marketplace to hire more workers. Aeneas speculated what they would be paid for less than a full day's labor, but it would be good to have help. Only nine hours left in the day and it would take every hand to finish on time.

But the Nine o'clock crew would not be enough either. The shadow was sprinting across the dial; the winds and the rain would come too soon. Aeneas stole a glance at the owner whose expression betrayed his concern. He wasn't surprised when the owner returned to the marketplace at noon to hire more workers. By now, men from other villages seeking work were waiting. Yet even more workers were hired at 3:00. As the afternoon sun began to cast longer

and longer shadows through the rows of still unharvested vines, they knew they could not pick them all in time. Yet, they were still surprised when the owner returned to the marketplace at 5:00 to see if he could hire still more men. There would be little more than an hour for them to work.

As each crew was hired, Aeneas calculated what each would earn for their portion of labor. He even mused over the possibility of making more than the owner had agreed. He could almost feel the coins in his hands.

Finally, the end of the day came and the workers lined up for their pay. He was amazed when the five o'clock workers were called to be paid first. All eyes were fixed on the landowner as he handed out the wages. Unbelieving shock swept over the workers as the owner paid each a full denarius.

How could this be? It meant one of two things: either the others would be paid more or no, that could never happen. He felt a surge of greed. He thought best of the owner and was already multiplying what he could earn for a full twelve hours of labor. Twelve denarii!

But fear gripped him as the three o'clock workers are also given a denarius. His anxiety mounted as the workers hired at noon received the same, then white hot anger as the nine o'clock workers are given no more than the others.

When the owner placed the single denarius in his hand, Aeneas could take it no longer. He burst with a blast of indignation. "It's not fair! I've been working here all day. Is there no justice; no reward for hard work? What's the use of working 12 hours if one hour's work in the cool of the evening earns the same amount?" and he threw the coin at the owner's feet. "You keep your dirty denarius!"

The owner looked at the other guys hired in the 1<sup>st</sup> hour. He saw the disappointment mixed with anger on their faces. He picked up the denarius and looked back at Aeneas, "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous."

**Body**

It's hard not to sympathize with the guys hired at the 1<sup>st</sup> hour. In fact, we feel for them. We can almost hear their complaint echoing in our own minds. To our American ways of thinking, it doesn't seem fair. It strikes against our sense of equal pay for equal work. If modern unions had existed in ancient Israel, there would have been protests. A strike would have been called against the landowner, and none of the grapes would have been harvested in time.

This parable rubs us the wrong way. I've even heard Christians say this parable offends them. Listen to what four different Bible scholars writing in four different centuries have to say about this parable. One commentator from the 19th century writes "This parable is harder to interpret than any other which our Savior uttered." Another from the 16th century says, "We are confronted here with the most puzzling of all the parables." A third from the last century writes this parable "irritates the modern listener because it goes against sound human logic." And a fourth writing in 2001 says this parable, "more than any other is likely to offend the modern readers' sense of equity."

This parable is not an isolated incident. The gospels are filled with stories where the expected order of things is tossed aside, the unlikely is embraced, the unexpected happens and things just don't seem to add up. From our way of accounting, God seems really bad at math. Why would you ever pay the guy who works 1 hour the same as the guy who works all day? When does it make sense to leave 99 sheep to save only 1? How do you justify spending your retirement nest egg to wash someone's feet? Since when does two cents amount to more than hundreds of dollars?

These are the scandalous mathematics of grace. This isn't economics. This is kingdomnomics. It's not what we deserve. It's what we need. It's not  $2+2=4$ . When God is your X-factor, then me plus you times X equals more than you can ask or imagine. In kingdomnomics, God dispenses gifts, not wages. In kingdomnomics, value is not measured by what you deserve, but by how much you're given. In kingdomnomics, heart counts more than the bottom line. In kingdomnomics, even one is worth everything. In kingdomnomics giving up everything is the way to win it all.

God is not the one bad at math. We're the ones that have switched the price tags on everything. In 2013, Macy's advertised a \$1,500 necklace for \$47. The mistake was quickly

caught, but not before a Dallas Macy's completely sold out of their inventory. A few years ago an eBay seller listed a bottle of *Allsopp's Arctic Ale* brewed in 1852. The problem was that in his listing he dropped the second 'P' from the name "Allsopp's." One eagle-eyed shopper won the auction with a bid of \$304 and turned around and sold it for \$503,300.

We've done the same thing. We've taken the things that are of great value and worth and we've swapped them for pennies on the dollar. We've traded in eternal glory for dollar store trinkets that will break before we even get home. We've pawned our marriages, our children, our values, our character, our integrity to buy a few cheap thrills and fleeting amusements. What kingdomomics does is set everything back to its proper value. Over these next four weeks we will look at four stories, one from each gospel that reveals God's new math that switches all the price tags back to proper value.

Jesus challenges us to see things in a new way. His teaching stretches our minds and our hearts. He wants us to weigh things on the scales of heavenly worth instead of earthly value. To understand this parable we need to know why Jesus told it.

### **Context**

In Mt. 19 Jesus is approached by a rich young man. (19:16-24) We learn from other gospels that this man is a scholar in Jewish law. He is a religious expert. In Jewish eyes, if there was anyone who had an inside track to God's Kingdom, it was this man. But Jesus knew he loved his wealth more than he loved God, so when Jesus told him to sell all he had and give to the poor, he went away very disappointed. Jesus then talked about how difficult it was for a rich person to enter heaven because the enticement of wealth was so great.

Now the disciples had heard and seen all of this. They realized that everyone had something in their hearts that could keep them out of the kingdom. Here was a God-fearing man, who had obeyed all the law, he lived a good life, and avoided sin, He just couldn't surrender control of his wealth. Wouldn't there be some such thing in every person's life? (vs. 25) They wondered if anyone could be saved.

Jesus' answer addresses the heart of their concern. Eternal life is not about what we have earned or how we perform. Salvation is not something God owes us for what we have

done. It is something He freely gives us because we desperately need it. It is impossible for man to be saved by his own power, but with God's power it is possible for anyone to be saved. (26)

The rich young man had gone away because he loved his wealth. Peter was chewing on this fact and what Jesus had just said. And here's what Peter was thinking, "We have not held on to our wealth. In fact, we have given up everything to follow Jesus. We have sacrificed all we have. Maybe we'll get an extra special reward in heaven." Being Peter, he just blurts it out. (27)

Jesus answers saying that our reward in heaven will far outweigh anything we give up in this life. (vs. 28 & 29) But Jesus ends his statement with a riddle, "*But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.*" Jesus then tells this parable and afterwards repeats the riddle, "*So the last will be first and the first will be last.*" So the meaning of the parable is couched in this riddle.

### **The Generous Landowner**

For centuries this has been called the parable of the workers in the vineyard. However, it would be more accurate to call it the parable of the generous landowner. Jesus isn't teaching a lesson on economics. This isn't about fair labor practices. This is all about the generosity and goodness of the landowner; ultimately, the generosity and grace of God.

Despite the offense taken by the 1st hour workers, they were paid a just and sufficient wage. It was the commonly accepted wage. It was the wage for which they had agreed to work, and it was a sufficient wage to supply their needs and provide for their families. He paid them what they needed to be paid. However, he also gave the other workers what they needed also. Not what they deserved, but what they needed. Anything less and they would not have been able to feed their families. Imagine the guy hired at the last hour, trying to make do with only 1/12th of a living wage. The landowner, because he was so generous gave him what he needed.

It's the same with us. God doesn't give us what we deserve. He gives us what we need. No matter how little we deserve it. No matter how insufficient our effort, God gives us what we need. Salvation isn't about what we deserve, it's about what God gives. You see, no matter how hard we work. No matter how good we are, if God only gives us what we deserve, we will never earn enough. We are not perfect. We are not sinless. We can never hope to earn our salvation.

Our only hope is for God to give us what we need. God is like the generous landowner. He gives all who come to him what they need.

### Questions

So what does this mean for our lives this morning? Well, let's answer that with a series of questions. These are questions to search and probe. Marinate in these questions for a moment this morning. Let the Spirit poke and prod, and if one of those pokes is sensitive, then maybe God is trying to tell you something here this morning. Hear what He has to say.

**#1 The first question is this- Are you truly grateful for your salvation?** Are you truly overflowing with thanks for what God has done for you, or do you act like you kind of, sort of earned it. No, you've never quite said it that way, but your attitude shows that you think you deserve it. God owes it to you.

If you're like me, and you grew up in the church, you've been a Christian all your life, you tend to see yourself as one of the workers hired at the first hour. It's not that this parable is hard to understand; it's that it is so hard to accept. Whether it's because we're red, white, and blue Americans or just human nature, as long as we see ourselves as the first hour workers this parable is going to rub us the wrong way.

Notice that all of the workers were grateful for what they were paid except for the very first ones. The only ones who complained were those that started working at 6:00 in the morning. Everyone else was thankful because they KNEW they got more than they deserved. The truth is we're all workers hired late in the day.

But here's the thing. Even the first hour workers received grace. The landowner didn't have to hire them. He didn't have to pay them what he did. They were dependent upon his goodness to pay what he promised. All of us, no matter when or how we became Christians. All of us, no matter how long we've been serving the Lord, are dependent on the grace and goodness of God. And if God gave us what we truly deserved, well, we wouldn't be here this morning.

**#2 This brings us to second question- What is your motivation for serving God?** What is your motivation for ministry? There are lots of reasons people might get involved in ministry. There are lots of things that drive people to serve. It could be a sense of duty or guilt. It might

be a desire to look good to others. You might be trying to earn your salvation. You're striving to be "good enough" to get into heaven. But none of us are getting into heaven because of how hard or how long we've served. Again, it's not about what we deserve. Instead, we need to be serving out of gratitude, because we are thankful that we've been given more than we deserved. We've been given all that we need.

**#3 How about this question- Are you living your life in such a way to be first in this life, or the next?** The end of day when the workers are paid in this story represents the end of time and the final judgment when we give an accounting of our lives (19:28) It's pay day, if you will.

You can live your life only for the rewards that you get in this life, and simply ignore and neglect the next, or you can live for the rewards of eternity. So what are you living for- temporary trinkets, or eternal treasure?

Eternity has a way leveling the playing field. Maybe this has something to do with what Jesus said about the last being first, and the first being last. I was looking through a list of celebrity deaths in 2015. Each of them were powerful and successful in their own way whether it was music, business, television and movies, or literature. On earth, they were among the first. They were in the front of the line, the top of the ladder, the head of the pecking order, but in death none of that matters. Eternity doesn't care how much money was in your bank account, how many Emmys or Grammys you won or how many bestsellers you wrote. It doesn't care how many fans wore your jersey or how many times you were elected.

This last week, though, an old friend of ours, Max Pritts, was laid to rest. He didn't live his life to be first in this life. He stored up treasures in heaven. He was a faithful husband, a loving father, a humble elder in his church. Four generations of Pritts were active and serving in the church. There were not throngs of adoring fans at his funeral. No headline in the paper celebrated his life, just a little blurb on a back page. But there was a huge party. It was the welcome home party in heaven. It was filled with angels rejoicing as Max's Savior declared, *"Well done, my good and faithful servant.* If you spend this life trying to be first in this life, it won't mean anything in the next life.

**#4 Let me ask you another question- Are you jealous of the grace God gives others?** Do you get envious when God really blesses another Christian? Do you wonder why it was them

and not you? When the landowner asked the first hour workers, are you envious because I am generous, the text literally asks, "Is your eye evil?" The idea is that the worker could not be grateful because he was so blinded by self-centered envy. He couldn't be grateful for what he had, because he was so jealous of what others had. When you are jealous of the blessings of others, it blinds us to our own blessings.

It's strange, we want God to give grace to us, but when he shows grace to others, we don't like it, or we think it's too much grace. Some people are greatly offended that people like Manuel Noriega, or Jeffery Dahmer could be in heaven. Both repented and received Christ as their Lord and Savior not long before they died. We're okay with God forgiving our little peccadillos, but how dare He forgive an oppressive dictator or a serial killer.

Here's the thing about the kingdomnomics of grace. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter how bad it was. God's grace covers it just the same. Even the very last can be first with heaven's accounting. It doesn't matter when you come to him, whether it's the first hour of your life, or it's the last hour. Yes, those who come at the end of their life miss out on a lifetime of joy and intimacy with their God, but Kingdomnomics offers God's forgiveness and salvation just the same. It doesn't matter what you did before you came to Him.

**#5 So this brings me to one last question- Do you think it's too late for you?** Do you think too much of your life has passed for it to make any difference now? Do you think that what you did earlier in your life will keep God from loving you now?

What about those guys that the landowner hired later in the day. Why weren't they there earlier in the day? What were they doing? Were they irresponsible? Were they lazy? Did they have a legitimate excuse for being there late? Maybe their wife or child was sick? We don't know, because it doesn't matter. The landowner gave them what they needed. God will give you what you need, if you just come to Him. There is always room in his vineyard for one more. It doesn't matter how late in the day. It doesn't matter what you were doing before. God's kingdom always has room for you.