

The King and the Kingdom Part 7

We continue examining the nature and values of the kingdom of God as described in some of the parables of Jesus. Turn to Matthew 20 as we look at the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

Last week Peter prompted a parable by asking Jesus about how many times he should forgive someone who wronged him. This week Peter prompts another parable by a comment he makes regarding money, sacrifice and rewards. If you look at Matthew 19, Jesus had been visited by a man we call the rich young ruler. Jesus suggested the man sell all his possessions and come follow Him. The man went away sad the bible says, because he had great wealth. His possessions owned him instead of him owning his possessions. In response to that exchange, Peter said “we’ve given up everything to follow you. What do we get? What’s our reward?” Jesus said you’ve sacrificed and you’ll receive a hundred times as much and inherit eternal life. That sounds like great news. But then he says, “But many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first.” That sounds like a cryptic warning of some kind. What does that mean? Jesus then tells this parable to illustrate some truths about the kingdom of heaven.

Remember these parables of the kingdom often show the contrast between the kingdom of this world and its’ culture and values and the culture and values of the kingdom of heaven. We are citizens of the kingdom of heaven above all and when we talk about the kingdom of heaven we’re talking about the rule and reign of God in our life. His values are to be our values. We embrace heaven’s culture and not the culture of this world. As we look at this parable we’re reminded the values and the economy of heaven don’t always align with this world.

Jesus said, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ 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.’ The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘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.’

“But he answered one of them, ‘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?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Matthew 20:1-16

Let me say at the beginning, this is not a lesson on business management or economics. It’s a parable about the principles and values of the kingdom. Let’s make sure you get what’s happening. Many of the people hearing Jesus probably could relate to the workers in the story because they may have been day laborers themselves. Needing work, they gathered in the marketplace every day hoping to be hired. When it was harvest time, workers were always needed. There was an urgency about the harvest because when the grapes were ripe, there was a short window for getting them picked. A couple of days could make a huge difference in the outcome of the harvest so the landowner would decide, based on the harvest, how many laborers he needed. These were seasonal workers and they depended on the harvest to live.

A denarius was at that time essentially a day’s wages. You could provide for your family on a denarius a day. That was the negotiated price the landowner starts out with at 6:00 with the first group. The work day was basically 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. At the third hour, 9:00 am, he sees he needs more help and hires more workers. These workers agreed to work for “whatever is right.” They weren’t in a position to bargain because the day was wasting and they needed the work. If they didn’t work, their family didn’t eat. They were living day to day, paycheck to paycheck. The landowner did the same at 12:00 and again at the ninth hour which was 3:00. Finally, he returns at the 11th hour, 5:00 and asks why are you guys lounging around all day? They said, “No one has hired us.” The landowners says, “I’ll take you. Get to work.” All of these later hired workers were fully expecting to receive a reduced wage because they knew they hadn’t worked all day like the others, but they were grateful for any payment they could receive

by this time. “Whatever was right” was what they expected from the landowner. As we read, everyone was surprised by the actions of the landowner at the end of the day. Everyone received a denarius, a day’s wages. Of course, the ones who had worked all day in the blazing Israeli sun, when they saw what the other workers were getting, they expected to receive more than the ones hired at the eleventh hour. No wonder they were upset when they too received one denarius. The people listening to Jesus tell this parable, they were probably upset as well. It doesn’t seem fair, does it? But it reveals some important truths about the nature of the king and his kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner. We can’t say that God is the landowner, but we can say that the landowner reminds us of and gives us a glimpse into the character of God. We can identify with the laborers. Perhaps you’ve been serving the Lord for a long time and you identify with those first hired. Maybe you’ve just come to Jesus in the last few weeks. You’ll find yourself in the story. With that said, let me just share some nuggets of truth, in no particular order, that I found in this parable.

God is sovereign. It’s amazing how often we want to argue with God and tell him how he ought to run things. “That’s not fair. That’s not right. What do you think you are doing God? You owe me!” The Landowner said, **“Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money?”** It’s God’s money, God’s redemptive plan and purpose, God’s kingdom, God’s ways and we are his servants. We belong to him and he has the right to do what he desires and plans to do. A few Sundays ago Sarah read from Job 38-39. It’s the series of questions God asked Job and it certainly put him, and us, in our place. I won’t take time to read them, but I’ll just say, until you can answer God’s questions, until we have those answers, we’d best keep silent and trust God to handle his business his way! Isaiah 55 says “His ways are above our ways and his thoughts are above our thoughts.” God is sovereign over all and you can trust him to do what’s right. That’s what the Landowner told the workers he hired. “I will pay you whatever is right.” Let God be God. He is Sovereign in his ways!

God is good, generous and full of grace. We say amen to that but that is the source of the problem in this parable. The landowner was good, generous and gracious and to some of the workers, that made them angry and ungrateful. It led to accusations of the landowner being unjust and unfair. God is good and gracious and full of grace. His rain falls on the just and the unjust the bible says and that makes us feel like he is being unfair when we feel we deserve more than others. We’re just, we deserve more. “Yes, but who made you just? Who justified you?”

We read the words of Jesus in the verse before this parable and at the close of the parable, that the last will be first and the first will be last. We rejoice and say Amen to that, but you already know, it's good news when you're at the end of the line, but when you're first in line, when you got there ahead of everyone else, you don't care about the problems of the last in line, you don't care about their difficulties, their bad back and bad knees and all their drama, you just know you're first in line and that's how it ought to be. But, if the first are last and the last are first, it means everyone is on an equal status with Jesus. He's being generous and gracious to everyone. When you stop to think about it, that's not bad news. It may expose envy and greed in our own heart, but the graciousness of God isn't bad news. God is good and full of grace and that is always good news. Thank God the landowner is gracious to the last!

Think of it this way. We are workers in the vineyard and we are rewarded on the basis of God's goodness and graciousness (which is infinite) rather than on the adequacy of our work and performance. Some of those guys put in a 12 hour shift, but maybe half the time they were on their first century cell phone and they didn't do near as much work as one of the guys that got hired at 3:00 that afternoon. God examines the heart. He is sovereign, he knows and sees and he knows what's best. He says sometimes the first will be last and the last first, that's because he knows what's best and does whatever is right and just and full of grace.

Whether we are first or last, Brad Young writes, "The amount of the reward is based upon the grace of the king, who represents God." When it comes to our salvation, **The reward is based on His grace and not our performance!** That is good news. Aren't you thankful? But if we are being rewarded in an area of our strength, then we want to be compensated based on performance. "I deserve more because I'm really gifted in this area." But, if we are being rewarded in an area where we are weak, we want to receive on the basis of his generosity and grace. "I think everyone should get a trophy!" I get it. If we are being rewarded for piano playing, I want it to be based on performance, but if it's rewards for banjo playing, I'm hoping the rewards are based on his generosity and not our performance. The generosity of the landowner shouldn't make us angry. It should make us rejoice! He's that good to those in need. He's that good to those needing mercy and he'll be that good to me when I need it!

God looks at our need, not at what we can earn. The landowner saw people and families, not just laborers. He saw that the families of those workers would not have food if he didn't pay them a full day's wage, even if they had only worked for an hour or two. They earned

less, but they needed the same. They couldn't live on anything less. The workers and their families would go hungry and the landowner looks at the need and responds out of his generosity and goodness and grace. Listen, that may not sound fair to some, but you should be thankful that God looks at your need and not on what you've earned. He isn't rewarding you on your merit, your outstanding performance, but he is rewarding you out of his abundant mercy and grace. "But I worked harder. I should have earned more than those people that just came in at the 11th hour! I've been here since the beginning." Remember this: **Ultimately, at some point in our life, we all get hired at the 11th hour.** It's why in the Old Testament God often reminded the Israelites about how they were to treat the aliens and strangers among them – "because you were once aliens in a foreign land." You were once exiles. Thank God he looks at the need and not what we've earned. We all come up at the end of the line at some point and out of his goodness, generosity and grace, he says, "It's okay, I'm giving you the full day's wage." You didn't earn it, you don't deserve it, but out of God's great mercy, he's moving you to the front of the line. It's grace.

We get in trouble when we compare ourselves with others. "What about him? What about her? What's she going to get? What are you paying him?" What business is that of yours? God deals with us as individuals. What did Jesus tell you to do? What did he promise you? Is God being unfair to you?

In John 21 Jesus tells Peter some things about his future and indicates he will die a martyr's death. Peter sees John, whom he was always competing with, and says "**Lord, what about him?**" Jesus answered, "**If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.**" **John 21:21-22**

What difference does it make if the other worker gets a million dollars and you get \$1,000? Don't you think the Lord knows what you need? Don't you think he is able to take care of you and meet your needs? That's part of the point of this parable. In spite of the differences, the truth is everyone had their needs met for that day! We all need to stay in our lane, obey God and do what he has called us to do. Do what he has anointed you to do! Don't worry about everyone else. He'll take care of it all!

God is not an employer writing our paycheck, He is a Father who makes us His own. My expectation changes when I realize who the Landowner is and the relationship he desires with me. He isn't just hiring us as day laborers, he is calling us to be his children through

his saving grace. The bible says he has made us his own through our faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. **“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and coheirs with Christ.” Romans 8:16-17** We live in him. The bible says “in him we live and move and have our being.” This changes my perspective and view about the reward and the wage. I’m not serving him for a denarius. I’m not hoping for a bonus. **I’m serving him out of gratitude and love, not out of expectation of reward.** Thank God for his grace to me and thank God for his grace to you. I’m not envious of how much he blesses you, I’m thankful for it. I’m a messed up sinner that Jesus saved and made his own. I didn’t deserve mercy to begin with. The fact that he has been so gracious frees me to live generously, like the landowner. We talked about it last Sunday. Freely we have received so freely we are to give! I want to live like the landowner, generous, extravagant in giving and in forgiveness, because I’ve been given much! I’m a child of the king. I’m not begrudging what God gives you because all the blessings of the Father are now mine in Christ.

Heaven’s math isn’t like ours! This parable shows us that Heaven’s economy and heaven’s math isn’t like ours. Heaven doesn’t figure things the way we do. Frederick Buechner wrote, “The arithmetic of Jesus...was atrocious. He said that heaven gets a bigger kick out of one sinner who repents than out of ninety-nine saints who don’t need to. He said that God pays as much for one hour’s work as for one day’s. He said that the more you give away, the more you have.” It’s the kingdom where the lame take the prey, where the meek inherit the earth, where the last are first, the first are last, the youngest inherit the blessing, the barren rejoice. Heaven’s economy is different so don’t worry. Don’t be like the workers who were hired first and start grumbling against the landowner. You aren’t being mistreated, not if you are part of heaven’s kingdom. He told us he would pay us whatever is right. He will. It will be right for us. He will supply all our needs according to his riches in glory. Don’t grumble. The landowner asked them, “are you envious because I am generous?” Don’t be envious because God is generous and good. Trust Him! “But it’s not fair.” You know what we say, Life isn’t fair but God’s always faithful. He is always faithful and good and full of grace. Don’t let envy or bitterness or jealousy or greed get in your heart. Trust God and trust the economy of the kingdom of heaven.

Ultimately, it’s about the Master and the harvest. You can debate about the fairness or unfairness of the landowner. We can talk about justice vs. mercy. All the things I’ve shared

about this parable I believe to be true, but out of all the commentaries I read and things I studied, it occurred to me, the one thing I didn't read or see was this, ultimately, it's about the Master and about his desire to get the harvest in. It's about the lost. It's about harvest fields that are ripe, about fruit that will die on the vine, the harvest will be lost if we spend our time arguing and fighting with each other, envious because God blessed some other person or pastor or church more than us. We've been here for 85 years and some little upstart church comes in and starts up and in 6 months they have 2,000. You know what I say? Praise God! God is generous. God is good. It's still all about the harvest. We don't have time to protest and fight over who gets higher wages, who has the biggest church or the biggest crowd, who got here first or who deserves what. It's about the Master and serving him. It's about the harvest, about reaching the lost while there is still time. And remember, it's not about expecting a paycheck, it's about growing in the relationship with the Father as well.

While working on this message I saw a pastor on Facebook telling about being at Silver Dollar City at Christmas time and losing his little boy in the crowd. He positioned his wife at the entrance and he headed into the park where there were 20,000 people in attendance. He said there were children everywhere. It wasn't that he didn't care about the other children, of course he did, he wouldn't wish harm to them, but he said, "I didn't care about the found children, I only cared about that one lost child, my son." After about 10 minutes the boy found someone who took him to security and all was well. He asked the question, Why aren't we more concerned about the lost children? We will be when we think of them as our own!

Workers in the vineyard. That's us. Don't worry about the reward. Don't worry about the pay. He will pay you whatever is right. Besides, this is just wages for today, there will be an ultimate reward someday. But for now, don't worry about the pay, focus on serving the Master, focus on pleasing the father, focus on bringing in his harvest while there is still time!

"Why have you been standing here all day...? You also go and work in my vineyard." That's his word to us. He calls us to the harvest. Don't worry about the pay.

What is God saying to you today? Envious of others? Feeling like you've been overlooked? Ask God to help you rejoice that God is gracious and good to all. Have you been doubting God, anxious about your paycheck, wondering if he is going to come through for you? He isn't your employer, He's your Father. Trust him! He is looking at your need, not at your performance. Rest in him and in his good grace!