

**Topic:** “The Parable of Generosity” **Text:** Matthew 20:1-16 HPC 3/21/10

**INTRO:** Ours is a culture of meritocracy. Every day our lives are impacted by merit:

- High School students can exempt up to 3 exams if they have good attendance.
- Drivers can get a lower rate on auto insurance if they have no points.
- Salespersons often enjoy vacations in dream destinations like the Bahamas or Hawaii for meetings sales objectives.
- Bank employees receive bonus payments when bank goals are achieved.
- Pro Athletes and coaches get bonuses for playoff games and championships.
- Most of us carry punch cards in our purses and billfolds to get a free sandwich, etc. after buying 7 or 10.
- Some places give discounts for senior adults – age meritocracy.

Small wonder our shock as we listen to this parable with postmodern ears.

## I. HARVEST CRISIS

**A. Employer’s Plight** - The vineyard owner and employer is God. He has a crop of grapes to pick that day, so he goes early at 6:00 a.m. to secure workers from the community labor pool that will work for food. They agree to 1 *denarius*, one day’s wage of \$96 in exchange for picking grapes all day. As the morning progresses, the owner realizes these workers will not be able to complete the job by days end.

At 9:00 a.m. he goes back to hire more idle workers for a price that is right to them and worth their while! Still the harvest is not being accomplished, so again at 12:00 noon and at 3:00 p.m. he hires additional workers for a fair price. Finally at 5:00 p.m. he sees the job can be completed by sundown only with some more helpers from the pool. Once again he finds idle workers willing to work even at this late hour. All they need is a call – a chance to make enough to buy food for their families. They too are dispatched to the vineyard – interestingly deployed without any contract or agreement for remuneration. They are just grateful for work after hanging around all day.

**B. Employee’s Production** – The owner is elated that his crop is all gathered by 6:00 p.m. sundown. How celebrative and jubilant the workers are as they share the owner’s joy of harvesting his crop.

**REAL LIFE:** It reminds me of building our fraternity float for Homecoming at the Univ. of Florida. Construction always started slow as the engineers in the house built the frame and any motorized parts. By crunch time the whole brotherhood was involved to finish and together have a big party to celebrate regardless of how many hours one worked on the float.

In our workers case, the highlight is a paycheck. How grateful they are to have money to buy food for their families for another day. Thus they line up for their pay, the last hired being first in line. **Do you ever notice how Jesus has this thing about the last shall be first?** Jewish law requires the owner to pay at day’s end.

**Leviticus 19:13** – “The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning.”

1. **Payday surprise** - Little do the workers expect the great surprise that awaits them at the end of the workday? The owner’s grace is totally unexpected. The last persons hired at 5:00 p.m. are given a full day’s wage of \$96 as if they had been hired at 6:00 a.m. with the first pickers tapped. **Ex.** Think of the NFL contending team picks up a key player late in the season to fill a weakness for the playoffs and goes on to win the Super Bowl. That player gets the same ring as those who started with the team in the August preseason.
2. **Owner ineptitude** - Obviously our owner doesn’t know much about running a vineyard. Certainly he doesn’t have an MBA from Harvard. You can’t have a good bottom line and keep the stockholders happy when you are paying 12x the going rate for some of your labor. And if the owner had any Workplace Psychology or Human Relations courses, it is not evident. Jealousy is stirred among the workers by his equal pay for unequal work payout.
3. **Higher Ethic** - About this time we remind ourselves the owner here is God – and as CEO of the vineyard he has a higher ethic, one of love and concern for all the workers. **It’s his party and he’ll do, as he wants to!** He is more preoccupied with having everyone employed than he is with profit. Imagine the excitement and gratitude of the late hires that their families can eat for another day. The owner has pity upon them and is gracious. That’s the way God is. He knows it takes just as much bread to feed the families of the men hired late as those recruited early. His compassion knows no limits. His Grace abounds. To the dismay of those hired first, all receive the same wage. Matt. 20:16 says:

**Matthew 20:16** - “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

4. **Grace abounds** – the owner, God, bestows his *denarius*, his gift of grace to all who respond to his call regardless of human merit. Length of years in God’s service does not insure the life long Christian a better destination than the new converts. Heaven is heaven, period. There is no merit! It is all about grace.

**REAL LIFE:** The oldest person I ever had join a church Kristy and I served was Jim McGuirt at Siler. Jim belonged long before he believed. While his family was very active and had many pillars in the church, he was always on the outside. Then we started a softball team and he became one of our most loyal fans. He always bought me homemade ice cream at our concession stand to get me through those hot afternoons where we played successive tournament games. Jim experienced belonging with all of us on the team and our many fans who consistently attended. This segued into feeling a sense of belonging in the worship and eventually to his profession of faith (believing). A couple of years later it was a sacred moment in Presbyterian Hospital as about 20 of us held hands and I had a prayer before he peaceably passed. It matters not when the

hour, he is enjoying heaven just like those of his family who had been lifers in the church.

**APPLY:** This should be a comfort to all of us praying for a loved one to respond to God's call. Even if we have prayed for 25 years, it's not yet the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. There is hope that the one for whom we pray will still accept God's grace regardless of the late hour. If a person responds to God, that person has the same benefit package of those who have spent a lifetime with him. The benefits of the kingdom are the same for all. There is no merit system! Not even for James and John on the right and the left of Jesus in our context.

## II. HARVEST STIMULUS

**A. Pickers Protest** – The owner is generous with his stimulus wages for the latecomers but not everyone is happy about it. Like the workers who started at 6:00 a.m. we are tempted to cry to our union steward or the **Fair Labor Practices Commission** to find proper redress for our gripes. We protest we have been in the heat all day working and deserve more wage – never mind we signed on for a fair wage and agreed to the owner's terms! With our “**Older Brother**” mentality, we rail God for neglecting our longevity of service. Like the older brother we want privileges for meritorious obedience and service. Instead God treats us all equally. Why do we fret? It isn't injustice. God pays us the *denarius* or salvation that he has promised. We fret because we make it all about us.

1. **All about us** – we are like all day workers who are envious that the 1-hour workers get the same wage as they do for 12-hours work. We begrudge the owner's generosity. Like the **prodigal's older brother**, we don't think prodigal come lately younger brothers or sisters should get a party and a fatted calf. Friends it isn't about us, it's about God!
2. **All about God** - God's grace smiles on us all, whether we are older or brand new Christians. God has pity and compassion on us all. We are all sinners come short of the glory of God. We all deserve death as the wages for sin. Instead God gives us a *denarius*, grace in Jesus. It may not be what we want to hear, but it's God's way. And what difference does the number of years make when life is but a brief prelude to eternity. Apparently none to God – to Him a day is like a 1000-years!

**Illus:** Think of the penitent thief next to Jesus on the cross. He believes at the 11.999<sup>th</sup> hour and Jesus says: “**Today you will be with me in paradise.**” He isn't even baptized and he still gets in just as much as one who is dunked!

**APPLY:** The key is learning to work in the vineyard or church together. Seniority in the faith is not the issue. The key is the love of the Father whose grace calls us all to work together to get his grapes harvested here in the heart of Huntersville and beyond. To do so before they rot on the vine unpicked. He

chooses whom he will choose to get the job done. The hour makes no difference! God does not discriminate. That is what makes us grumble, become jealous, and revert to our culture of meritocracy. And the owner rebukes us!

**B. The Owner's Rebuke** – Verse 11 says those workers paid last grumble at the owner for not giving them more compared to the 5:00 p.m. group. They expected more from the owner. God allows us to be honest, but we better prepare ourselves for His rebuttal. You see in v. 13 he says: “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a *denarius*?” Three times Jesus uses the word “Friend” as found in this passage. He always uses it in an exhorting sense of being utterly truthful even though it hurts and we hearers don't like it.

- In **Mt. 22:12** he calls the man who shows up for the wedding without a wedding garment a “friend.” Then he has him bound and taken away for insulting the host by his inappropriate dress.
- In **Mt. 26:50** he says to Judas: “Friend, why do you come?”
- And in **Mt. 20:13**, he says: “Friend, I am not being unfair to you.” Having in no way violated his contract, the owner can go on to say to the 12-hour laborer:

*“Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last persons as I have to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”*

**Evil Eye** – Another version adds: “*Is your eye evil because I am good?*” “**Evil Eye**” is a Jewish expression for a jealous or grudging spirit. Those who work 12-hours feel the 1-hour crew should only get a *pondion*, a coin worth only about 1/12<sup>th</sup> the *denarius* - \$8 not \$96. Instead they learn there is no such thing as a 12<sup>th</sup> part of God's love and grace. The last will be first and the first last is the “Great Reversal” of equal pay for unequal work. All the workers receive a **harvest stimulus**.

**APPLY:** In the economy of God's kingdom, his grace is unmerited. God pays a full day's wages to all the workers. We intuitively understand the complaint. After all:

- We're used to a young man barely out of college getting obscene amounts of money because he can toss a round ball through a hoop, while a third-grade elementary teacher is awarded \$35,000 to teach our children.

Jesus understands the value of all people regardless of what the culture thinks of them. He gives all people value. Even the last one to arrive at the table is given a full-course meal.

In one penetrating parable, Jesus leaves us with a lot to think about.

- We know that we can't work our way into heaven.
- We can never do enough “good” in this life to earn everlasting retirement, whether we start our Christian service at six in the morning or at five in the evening. Our IRA's, our **Individual Righteousness Accounts** will simply never be fat enough to fully fund a future in God's eternal kingdom.

- We also learn that we're all in need of God's grace and forgiveness, every single one of us. In the kingdom economy, we can be grateful that God chooses to be generous, generous, and generous. □□
- We learn, too, that in God's service, we do not all have the same work to do. Some of us can teach, others sing, cook, or organize, others visit the sick, and evangelize, others serve the poor and care for children, and others repair the church roof. Like the workers in the vineyard, we have different tasks to perform, with different time frames, energy levels and abilities. □□

But no matter how menial or glorious the task, we all get paid the same. In God's eyes we are all equal. In His kingdom, all people are equal - rich and poor, wealthy and destitute, righteous and sinners, powerful and powerless - all of us are equal because we are all loved equally by our God. The greatest gift we can give back to Him is our love, living that love in community, and welcoming others in to a place they can belong even before they sometimes believe.

**APPLY:** Here at the Patch we are what Jim Belcerh in his book *Deep Church* calls a “Center-set” church, you often “belong” before you “believe.” Most old denominational mainline churches are “Boundary-set.” You must believe before you belong and they have ways of asking their questions in a way to determine whether you are welcomed into their belief system or not. Then there are the many postmodern churches who have reacted against the “Boundary-set” mentality and become “Relationally-set.” Their community determines their culture or standards that solves one problem and causes another. “Center-set” churches welcome you with a sense of belonging, but tenaciously hold to a core set of values based on the authority of Scripture. They are so in love with Jesus and experience his presence in their life and worship that others are drawn from belonging to believing over time as they experience the Living Water of Jesus Christ.

**CLOSE:** Thank God there is no merit system in heaven like we have on earth. We don't need to carry a card in our billfold and hope for enough punches to cash it in. God has already punched it for us by our faith in Jesus Christ. He's the one ticket that is always a winner, even at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour for life eternal!