

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The theme we are going to consider today, from the conclusion of our Gospel reading; Do you begrudge God's generosity?

Pray.

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard is a strange parable. Yet in the parable, God reveals a deficiency in our hearts.

Firstly, let's make it clear that this parable is primarily about God's **generosity** towards humanity. When this parable shows us our own sin, it is not in order to condemn us to hell but to point us back to God's **generosity**.

Secondly, there are many unanswered questions in this parable, (that is the nature of parables and illustrations), but that isn't really a problem. For instance, we might want to explore why workers keep appearing in the marketplace at various hours of the day when the master seems to have hired all those available. Or why does the master have the need to find more workers at different intervals during the day, did he miss-calculate his harvest, is he really a diligent master? We may also be left confused as to whether the kingdom of heaven is something earned, after all the parable is about workers and payments, but all these questions lead us down unhelpful paths and cause us to miss the main point of the parable.

**'God is exceedingly generous with bringing people into the kingdom!'**

Jesus tells the parable for a reason; it seems that the disciples have not got the point of previous discussions about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew has been following this theme for several chapters. The disciples missed the point or didn't want to hear that the greatest in the kingdom are the dependant, humble, little children, who forgive and instead they want to claim some special place. They are really confused as to why the rich man who appears to want to follow Jesus is turned away. Even after this parable with its conclusion; 'the last will be first, and the first last.' Matthew 20:16 (ESV) We hear James and John's mother asking for special **seats** for her sons.

This is an important point to understand regarding the life of the disciples, they don't completely understand the gospel, its ramifications for them, for others and who Jesus really is until **after** his resurrection. We see a change in the disciples from the gospels to the book of Acts. In Acts they really get it; in the gospels, they still seem to not fully understand Jesus. The change is so great that they are set free from all their sin and are willing for Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to record all the foolish questions they asked so that we can learn from them and fully comprehend the gospel ourselves.

The parable sheds light on the kingdom of heaven depicting a master who has work to be done in his vineyard. The first workers agree to the regular daily wage and begin early in the morning. Further workers are added at intervals during the day all agreeing to work for **what was fair**. It's a pretty good set-up really, you can tell that all the disciples are thinking in their heads, especially Matthew, Judas and others who were interested in money matters; 'what portion of a denarius is the master going to pay these latter workers? Are some only getting 1/12 of a day's wage given they only worked 1 hour out of 12'?

That's the set-up, but it isn't **the punch line**. When payment time comes, the master begins with those who only worked an hour of the day, and we should expect the disciples were becoming uncomfortable. They've just been arguing with Jesus about how much they've given up to follow him and therefore how much they should get in his kingdom. Usually, we would expect those who started work first to be paid first, but they are not.

All these workers lined up, and those who only worked 1 hour of the day, get paid a full day's wage. Now the money-counting disciples in the group will be quickly doing the maths, 'Are those who worked 12 hours of the day going to get **12 days' wages**? Are those who worked half the day going to get **6 days' wages**?' The tension was high, that's how we should expect it played out. But as the workers file through they each get the same pay, right down to those who began early in the morning, they get paid what they agreed with the master. One denarius, a day's wage.

Consider this parable from the perspective of the servants hired last. They appear late in the day, they claim no one would hire them. Perhaps they'd been applying for jobs all day. This master is willing to hire them even for one short hour. They agree to work, for 'whatever is fair'. We should expect that they would only receive a portion of a denarius and that they would be paid last. But what they get is a whole day's wage and they get paid first. That is the great switch from expectation in this world to the reality of the kingdom. This is the gospel of this parable; God generously gives even to those who appear to be last to the kingdom.

But the early workers in the parable, those who worked the whole day, the workers we should relate to start to grumble, as Jesus had heard the grumbling of his disciples; saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' Matthew 20:12 (ESV) This is essentially the complaint the disciples had with Jesus just prior; <sup>27</sup> Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Matthew 19:27 (ESV) and it's the request of a mother in just a few moments; "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." Matthew 20:21 (ESV)

The disciples, and their families it seems, had this idea that because they were the first to follow Jesus, they were somehow going to get something better in heaven. It shows that they don't totally understand the free gift that Jesus is giving to them, they think they have somehow earned it by their good and hard work. There is an air of greed and self-importance about their complaints and requests, both sins that need God's forgiveness. This parable should be a mirror for us!

This is also the problem that Jonah had, and thanks be to God for those who prepared our lectionary that they grouped these texts together. Jonah gets very angry with God because God did what Jonah had predicted; he relented of his anger towards the people of Nineveh. Jonah is so angry that he is suicidal; 'how dare God send me here to preach destruction on these people and then have them repent and save them, what a waste of time'. Jonah has no joy at the number of people saved in the city, nor is he willing to praise God for his exceeding generosity towards humanity. He'd much prefer to see the destruction of Nineveh and his own promotion as righteous. As if by bringing more people into the kingdom those who are already part of the kingdom miss out. Jonah thinks he's earned God's grace and when we think we have earned God's blessings, or that we deserve it, it ceases to be grace.

Consider the story of Jonah from the perspective of the inhabitants of Nineveh. In a city full of wicked behaviour there is all manner of injustice. There is theft, murder, rape, slander, lying, abuse, neglect, violence in the streets, victims abound! Just observe the cities and towns around the world, around our country, around our state, today where there is no law and order. It is a mess. Imagine living in this city, everyone is a victim in some way even if they are also a perpetrator. Brother steals from brother, neighbour kills neighbour, you get the picture but worse than that, because the king is corrupt also, there is no justice for those who have been wronged. The big switch here is that in believing God's message through the mouth of Jonah from the king to the street urchin they all turned from the evil ways. At once injustice turns to justice. Law and order reigns, victims receive justice, and law courts suddenly operate as they should. And God relents of his anger and does not destroy the city. This is the gospel of this prophet's book, 'should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left

and also much cattle?’ Jonah 4:11 (ESV) God saved them by calling them to repentance, the evil deeds ceased and justice and mercy reigned in that city. Yet Jonah still begrudged God’s generosity.

Consider these readings in light of our current society. It is so easy for us to point out there and see that this world is becoming more evil and that God should end it and reign down judgment immediately. But what about the opportunities that are right before our eyes? Additional evil gives more opportunities for the gospel. More oppression is more people for God to release. More sin, more forgiveness. Not Romans 6, we should not go looking to commit or create more evil but we should know that when there is evil around us and we see it increasing, this is an opportunity. When there are fewer people in church, there are logically more that need to hear the gospel. But we must continue to ask ‘Do you begrudge God’s generosity?’

Paul also speaks to this thought process in his letter to the Philippians when he calls the people to; ‘let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ’ that is to not begrudge God’s generosity to others. For how can they be, ‘standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel’ (Philippians 1:27 (ESV)) if they begrudge and exclude others? As if the gospel and the message of grace is something that we possess and will lose if someone else receives it.

We can fall into this same trap of begrudging God’s generosity to others. When we think we have earned our faith, by things such as our family name, good behaviour, and lifelong service to the church we are in the same position as Jonah, the first workers in the parable and the disciples. We turn God’s great generosity to us into something to be possessed and hoarded rather than a free gift to be shared with those around us. What more is there for God to give us than eternal life with him?

Instead, we should always be looking to scripture to find examples of thankfulness and praise. Our psalm today is one example, Psalm 145 One generation shall commend your works to another! We want to share the generosity God has had on us, with others!

**<sup>3</sup> Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,  
and his greatness is unsearchable.**

**<sup>4</sup> One generation shall commend your works to another,  
and shall declare your mighty acts.**

**<sup>5</sup> On the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.**

**<sup>6</sup> They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds,  
and I will declare your greatness.**

**<sup>7</sup> They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness  
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.**

**<sup>8</sup> The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

**<sup>9</sup> The LORD is good to all,  
and his mercy is over all that he has made. Psalm 145:3–9 (ESV)**

Here we see that those who know of God’s generosity, his gift of life, salvation, and holiness to sinful humans want to share it, declare it, shout it, sing about it!

This parable, and all our readings today should excite us to receive God's grace again, for he gives the same gifts of salvation to those who are new in the faith and to those lifelong believers. He gives it in his word and his sacraments! It should excite us to mission, for God wants to deliver his grace even to the workers who appear to have slept in and so are still sitting in the unemployment line late in the day. Our cities and towns are full of all sorts of evil, all manner of people who need some good news, not just for this life but the hope of eternal life in Christ Jesus, just as you need to hear it repeatedly! But most of all it should remind us that

God has been generous with us by giving us his only Son to die for us, and that generosity is for all his creation.

Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all our understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen