

September 20, 2020

Pentecost 16/Proper 20

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

¹ "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. ⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.'" ⁸ "So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.'" ⁹ And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. ¹⁰ But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. ¹¹ And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, ¹² saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.'" ¹³ "But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. ¹⁵ Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen'" (NKJV).

“Is Your Eye Evil Because I am Good?”

In our text, Jesus asks an odd question. He says, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” What does he mean? Well, our eyes have a language all their own, don’t they? They are often a window to our souls. Our eyes can tell us if someone is angry, or sad, or afraid. But what about green eyes?

I learned about green eyes the hard way. When I was in grade school, my mother took me to the YMCA for swimming lessons. While waiting in line, I heard one woman say to another, “Her fur coat makes me green with envy.” I asked my mother in a loud voice, “Do fur coats really make you green?” Everybody scowled at me. My mother covered my mouth, and whispered, “We’ll talk about it when we get home.”

At home I learned that some people’s eyes look green when they are jealous. Envy, of course, is a common human emotion. Suppose, for example, that your job pays you \$4,000 a month. You’ve been with the company ten years and you’ve always received good performance reviews.

But then your boss hires a half-time worker who does the same work you do. You have to train her. And then you learn she gets the same salary you do. Would you be upset? Of course you would! And so would I! “It’s just not fair!” you say. And guess what? You can see the anger and jealousy in your eyes. Jesus might say to you, “Is your eye evil because your employer is generous?”

If you can relate to this, then you can surely relate to the parable that Jesus tells in our text. It seems that a landowner has a sizeable vineyard. It’s harvest time and he needs workers to bring in the grapes. So, at 6:00 a.m., he finds workers. They enter into a verbal contract to work 12 hours for a denarius (a normal day’s pay).

But he needs more workers. So he goes out again and hires more laborers at 9:00 a.m. He says to them, **“You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.”**¹ But still he needs more help. So he goes out again at noon, 3:00 p.m., and 5:00 p.m. and finds more help.

But now it's 6:00 p.m., and it's time to get paid. Those who worked only one hour were paid first. But, surprise, surprise, they got a full denarius, not one-twelfth of a denarius. They must have been stunned at the landowner's generosity.

When those who started at 6:00 a.m. saw this, you can almost hear them saying, "Wow, if these guys who worked only an hour got a denarius, we should get 12 denarii! Yes, they did the math and were making plans to go to the Cowboy's game.

But they didn't get what they expected. They, too, received a denarius. "Not fair!" they cried. They were outraged because the landowner leveled the playing field and treated everyone as equals.

Their eyes were evil because their employer was generous and good ... to others! And that's the rub, isn't it? Their eyes were evil because the vineyard owner was generous.

The landowner in our text represents God ... and a generous God at that. He gives those who worked all day exactly what he had promised them, a denarius. He said to each of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?"² Well, yes they did. But they wanted more. Again, he says to them, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or is your eye evil because I am good?"³

Yes, God is good. His goodness moves him to be generous. His generosity scandalizes our notion of fairness.

But God doesn't play by our rules. Why? Because this parable is not about compensation for earthly work. No, this parable is about eternity. And he wants you and me and even homeless people to be in the kingdom of heaven. So, he must play by different rules because, if he were to operate by the rules of fairness, not one sinner would ever see heaven. Indeed, the Bible says, "Whoever keeps the whole Law, but fails in one point, that person is guilty of breaking all of it."⁴

Eternal life requires God's mercy and grace. The Lord wants to give us sinners something no amount of money can buy. He wants to give us forgiveness of sins (here) and eternal life (hereafter).

But truth be told, we are not all that impressed by grace or eternity. That's often because we don't want to do the hard work of daily repentance. We don't want to deny ourselves or be inconvenienced. We expect to hear Law and Gospel on Sunday, but too often, we live on comfortable terms with our sins for the rest of the week.

A missionary in India once delivered a sermon on the subject of conscience. Some days later he met one of the men who heard his sermon. "My friend," said the missionary, "can you tell me what your conscience is?" "Oh, yes," replied the man. "It is a little three-cornered thing inside of me. When I do wrong it turns round and hurts me very much. But if I keep on doing wrong, it will turn so much that the corners become worn off and it does not hurt me anymore."

What a great illustration! It's true, of course, that the further we are from God, the less we feel our sins. But the closer we are to him, the more we feel our sins. Be worried if your conscience never condemns you.

But God has a solution for our problem. But his solution was, is now, and always will be totally unfair. God determined to lay your sins and mine on a man ... the only man who was morally perfect. I ask you:

- Isn't it unfair to charge all of our sins to the only man who never committed a sin?
- Isn't it unfair to torture and kill him?
- Isn't it totally unfair to make him suffer the agonies of hell itself on the cross?

Yes, it's totally unfair. According to our rules, we who are guilty of sin should suffer the wages of sin, namely, death, and hell. It's unfair to crucify the Innocent One and let all the guilty ones go free. But God is playing by different rules. You see, God wants to be generous. He wants to level the playing field. He wants to be gracious. ... But gracious to whom? To sinners ...

- Even to the drug addict [... *oh no, he's not worthy!*],
- Even to the rapist, [... **God forbid! He's nothing but lowlife scum!**],
- Even to the murderer, [... *he's not welcome in this congregation!*],
- Even to such sinners as you and me, [*well, of course; we're good people!*],

... by crucifying his Son in our places.

Is this fair? No, it's not. But to us no-good sinners, it's better, far better, than fair. It is grace! You see, by the death of Christ, a full atonement for sin was made. St. Paul explained the transaction that took place on the cross in this way: "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all."⁵ And we for whom Christ died receive forgiveness and eternal life merely by trusting that he has paid our debt of sin in full.

In terms of the parable, God is the landowner. Believers are those whom the landowner found to work in his vineyard, the Church. And behold, all the vineyard workers receive the same blessing, a denarius of grace, through which all receive the kingdom of heaven.

My friends, that means that there is only one distinction between people that matters before God. And it's not rich or poor, male or female, black or white, the moral or the immoral, American or foreigner, or any among a number of categories you may choose.

No, the only distinction that matters to God is forgiven or not forgiven (or saved or not saved). The blessings of forgiveness and salvation become our own by trusting in Christ's saving work alone ... his generous, gracious saving work alone.

If we trust in him alone, then he is -- and he will be -- our Savior for all eternity. As such, we believers have already received the greatest blessing of all. We are pronounced "not guilty" of our sins by God himself.

And when God looks at us, he does not see any evil in our eyes. No, he sees only the pure, white innocence of Christ.

Indeed, Jesus makes all of us beggars rich!

In his saving name. *Ἀμήν*.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Endnotes

¹See Matthew 20:4.

²See Matthew 20:13.

³See Matthew 20:15.

⁴James 2:10, NET. According to the BDAG Greek-English Lexicon, the Greek phrase, *gegonen pantōn enochos* is best rendered, “has sinned against all (the commandments).” See Danker, Frederick William, reviser and ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. By Walter Bauer. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000.

⁵See 1 Timothy 2:5-6. See also 2 Corinthians 5:21 where St. Paul says, “God made him [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” Notice, here, that God makes Christ to be sin for us. He does not merely say that he made Christ to bear our sins, but that he was made to be sin. Thus, by imputation of our sins, Christ was, on the cross, made to be the vilest of all sinners. What God saw on the cross was sin. And he punished that sin to death. And to believers, Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us.