

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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God's Goodness Makes Us Equal

Matthew 20:1-16

About five years ago, Dan Price, the head of a Seattle credit-card-processing company, made headlines by slashing his own million-dollar pay package and setting a new minimum salary of \$70,000 for the company's employees. While many of the firm's workers were excited to hear the news, not everybody was happy about the decision. Two of Price's most valued employees quit, partly because they thought it was unfair to double the pay of some new hires while staff who had been serving for a long time got small or no raises.

Maisey McMaster, a financial manager who had consistently put in long hours at the company, was at first swept up in the excitement of Price's salary pledge. But the more she looked at the numbers, the more concerned she became. She said, "He gave raises to people who have the least skills and are the least equipped to do the job, and the ones who were taking on the most didn't get much of a bump." McMaster thought it would be more fair to give smaller increases with the opportunity to earn a future raise with more experience.¹

This sounds like a contemporary version of the parable in this morning's text from Matthew. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a farm owner who, at the first sign of daylight, drove into town and found some day-laborers gathered in a parking lot. They only wanted what most everyone wanted, some means of earning a paycheck to provide for themselves and their families. The farm owner hired some of them, promising to pay a full day's pay for a full day's work. Around midmorning, the owner realizes that he's going to need more help, so he hops back into his pickup, heads back into town, and hires some more laborers. At noon and then midafternoon, he ends up having to do the same thing. In fact, around 5:00 PM, when many folks are starting to call it a day, he makes one last trip into town and does some more recruiting. Even then, there are a few individuals still waiting, hoping to get hired. So they climb in the truck and off they go.

After another hour or two, the owner sends his foreman to gather all the laborers and give them their pay. The last hired are called forward first. Surprisingly, they're given a full day's wage. At first, this generates some excitement among those who've been in the fields since sunrise. This must mean they're going to be compensated at a multiple of what was given to those who showed up at the end of the day. But no, those who've worked the longest and the hardest get paychecks identical to those who only put in an hour or two.

Now where's the fairness in that? What about just compensation? This farm owner doesn't happen to be named Dan Price, does he? This is no way to run a business, no matter whether you're processing credit cards or harvesting crops. This just isn't right. Somebody contact one of the news outlets, and get a reporter out here. This is the kind of thing worth investigation by 7 On Your Side. As one reporter noted about Price's \$70,000 minimum wage, "Early adopters and latecomers may be equally welcomed in the Kingdom of Heaven, but not necessarily in the earthly realm, where rewards are generally bestowed in paycheck form."²

Remember that's what this parable is about, the kingdom of heaven. In other parts of the Scriptures, it's referred to as the kingdom of God. "Kingdom of heaven" is Matthew's usual term. He's not speaking primarily about a place that believers go when they die, though the good news of God's kingdom certainly gives believers assurance of life beyond death. But primarily, kingdom of heaven is about God's sovereign action in the world and in history, reclaiming his creation and accomplishing his saving will and purpose. In and through Jesus, God's kingdom breaks into the world, and you and I are called to repent and believe this good news, to align our lives with this new reality of God's reign.

Jesus' parable of the farm owner and the hired workers reveals God's kingdom as a realm in which God's grace and generosity disrupt and overturn many of our cherished ideas about fairness, merit, and justice. What kind of world is it where those who show up at the last minute get paid at the same level as those who've put in a full day's work? In what reality do laborers get compensated based on the owner's eagerness to give, not based on what they think they deserve? What world is Jesus living in, preaching about, and calling us to enter? The kingdom of heaven.

When those who had been working since sunrise grumbled about the farm owner's treatment of the latecomers, he reminded them of their agreement, and said, "It's my farm, my money. Don't I have a right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (v. 15). This is the climax of the parable. It takes us to the heart of the matter, namely, the goodness of God. The term often translated as "generous" also means "good." A literal reading of the Greek in verse 15 goes like this: "...is your eye evil because I am good?" So this is a story about who God is and what God is like. It's a story about how the goodness of God sets the terms of our relationship with him and with other people.

During his 2019 commencement speech at Morehouse College, billionaire Robert Smith announced that he would be making a grant to pay off the student loan debt of all 396 graduates. After the students and their families recovered from the initial shock, there were astonished looks and wild cheers of celebration. But it wasn't long until there was also some resistance. Michelle Singletary, a personal finance columnist for *The Washington Post*, fielded the resentment that came from some parents. Singletary said:

There's a common complaint I hear from some parents who have sacrificed and saved for their children to attend college debt-free ... Was my labor in vain? Those not on the receiving end of this amazing gift might have thought to themselves, even for just a second: "What about us? What do we get for doing the right thing and saving for our kids to go to college debt-free?"

Singletary offered some encouragement to these parents, affirming their sense of responsibility and sacrifice. But along with that, she noted, "Whether it's a surprise gift from a billionaire or need-based aid given to some other person's child, don't resent what others get."³

That's true, but still, Jesus' parable contradicts so many of our assumptions and convictions about the way the world works, or at least the way we think it should work. Reward based on effort. Just compensation. Equal pay for equal work. If you want something you've got to earn it. These are the rules that we live by. They capture our aspirations about fairness and equality.

Equality is always on the agenda in our society. Our nation's political roots, and our economic system, create space for individuals and groups to pursue the equitable distribution of power and wealth, at least in theory. But in practical terms, things often fall far short of our ideals. We proclaim equality, but the reality on the ground can be very

different. Conditions under the coronavirus are a good example. COVID-19 has laid bare and intensified inequities that have existed in our country for a long time. Employment inequality. Income inequality. Educational inequality. Health care inequality. And these inequities frequently break along lines of race and ethnicity. So now, as much as ever, we followers of Jesus need to be informed and active in the pursuit of fairness, justice, and equality.

But at the same time, answering Christ's call into the reign of God means that we embody and reflect an even deeper kind of equality that comes from the disruptive goodness of God. This is the goodness described in today's parable, where those who were hired first complain, "These men who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day" (v. 12). Their equality with one another isn't just a matter of receiving the same pay. It's most of all a matter of being hired by the same owner, who pictures to us a God who calls and welcomes indiscriminately. He deals with every one of us on the basis of his grace and not our merit. In other words, coming into and participating in the work of the kingdom of heaven is possible because of God's goodness, not our own.

On Roman shrines the words were often inscribed, "I give in order that you may give." With these words the donor made clear that his or her generosity was intended to inspire a similar generosity from the god being worshiped. What a contrast to the farm owner in the parable who says he has the right to pay his workers not on the basis of their merits but on the basis of his own generosity. Entering the kingdom isn't about bargaining with God. Your relationship with God isn't about a contract. It's about his compassion.

Robert De Moor tells the following story from his upbringing:

Back in Ontario when the apples ripened, Mom would sit all seven of us down, Dad included, with pans and paring knives until the mountain of fruit was reduced to neat rows of filled canning jars. She never bothered keeping track of how many we did, though the younger ones undoubtedly proved more of a nuisance than a help: cut fingers, squabbles over who got which pan, apple core fights. But when the job was done, the reward for everyone was the same: the largest chocolate dipped cone money could buy.

A stickler might argue it wasn't quite fair since the older ones actually peeled apples. But I can't remember anyone complaining about it. A family understands it operates under a different set of norms than a courtroom. In fact, when the store ran out of ice cream and my younger brother had to make do with a Popsicle, we felt sorry for him despite his lack of productivity (he'd eaten all the apples he'd peeled that day—both of them). God wants all his children to enjoy the complete fullness of eternal life. No true child of God wants it any other way.⁴

In the life of God's family, the church, God's goodness is what makes us equal. Salvation and kingdom life aren't a reward for your good behavior or your diligent effort. They're a gift of God, the demonstration of his grace, received by faith. This means that a new believer who's still learning their way around the church is valued just as much as someone who has served for years on every committee in the congregation. It means that someone who experiences a deathbed conversion is on equal footing with the disciple who has known the Lord for decades. It means that the faithful, low-profile worker in the church nursery matters just as much as the pastor who stands behind the pulpit. We're a community of equals in a kingdom of grace, called into a common work by the goodness of God.

¹ Patricia Cohen, "Seattle company copes with backlash on \$70,000 minimum wage." The Seattle Times website. January 25, 2016. Accessed September 16, 2020 <<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/seattle-company-copes-with-backlash-on-70000-minimum-wage/>>.

² Patricia Cohen, quoted by Ruth Moon, "\$70,000 Minimum Wage Brings Bible Parable to Life (Unfortunately)." Christianity Today website. August 4, 2015. Accessed September 16, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com>

</news/2015/august/70000-minimum-wage-bible-parable-gravity-payments.html>>.

³ Michelle Singletary, "Robert Smith pledged to pay off Morehouse graduates' student loans. Is this fair to families who saved? *Washington Post* (May 23, 2019).

⁴ Robert De Moor in The Banner. *Leadership* (Vol. 5, No. 3).