

The God Who Gets it Right

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.” (ESV)

What's it like to be a believer? What's it like to be a part of the kingdom of God? Jesus answers that question over and over when he teaches through parables. And even though the setting for this parable is foreign to us, we understand what's going on -- we've been around.

We know from our study of God's Word that he made the world and everything in it. He made the universe and all that it contains. He made us and all people. But most obviously from this parable, God makes the rules. God has the power and the freedom

to make the rules that govern the world, as well as our individual lives.

Some would even have us believe that rules are made to be broken. The natural rebel within us wishes that were true! Rules have a way of getting under our skins. Rather than follow rules, we would like to make them, or make them up as we go. We often resent rules which compel us to do things we don't want to do. But there are also a few rules we like, especially if we can apply them in our favor.

One such rule is equal pay for equal work. Once upon a time, it was common for people to receive different pay based upon their gender or their race. Lawmakers finally arrived at the position that unequal pay for equal work was unjust, and so they made a rule, a law, which made it illegal. Because we have become so accustomed to equal pay for equal work, the details of this parable concern us, because it looks to us here like equal pay for unequal work.

In my ethics classes, we would often talk about whether it is right for employees to slack off while working. Most every ethics student says that is not right. It is wrong to be paid for not working. But whether we are flipping hamburgers or picking fruit, or punching parts on a press, or typing characters at a keyboard, we recognize that we don't produce at the same rate. If the fastest programmer in your department can program 500 lines of code per hour, and you can only manage 480, are you cheating your employer? We usually look to the employer or to the boss for the answer. Does the boss expect the same from everyone, or does the boss recognize that we have different competencies and different abilities to accomplish a task or finish the work. God expects us to be good managers of our time, and he expects that we will give our employers what they bargained for. Our standard says that we don't all have to produce exactly equal amounts. But we do have to honor whatever agreements we make.

So the scene is set. In Matthew 20, God is making the rules. He goes out and negotiates with workers, and has them start working at different times. The Master is disturbed at the sight of people who are idle, not challenged to turn their time into something useful and productive. He wants to put

them to work, and he starts them out, better late, than never.

God makes the rules. He can determine to pay workers whatever he thinks is right. As he does so, he never breaks a promise. He does not break a promise made to those who were hired first. He does not break a promise to those hired in the middle. He does not break a promise to those who are hired last. God is good for His Word and his promises.

It seems that in our time and culture, we have moved past honoring our word. Our agreements used to be concluded with a handshake. It used to be said that a man's word was his bond. In other words, if you said it, you meant it, and you would honor your promise or your word, even if it was inconvenient. A business or a neighbor would keep a promise even if it was inconvenient or costly. Our lives would be so much simpler if we could return to such a system. Our view of the human race would be so much higher if we could trust people to keep their promises and honor their words.

We have such a model in our God and Lord. Show me a single promise from the Word of God that has not been kept. Point me to a single pledge from the mouth of God that He has not been honored. When God speaks a promise, he gives us his bond. When God makes a commitment, he honors it, even though it may cost him dearly.

That precise thing came to pass when God promised to send his Son to redeem people from their sins. That promise was first given to Adam and Eve, and was passed down from generation to generation. When God's right time came, he sent his son into the world, as promised, to pay the price for your sins of thought and word and deed, and mine, too. As Jesus was in the process of suffering and paying the price, he asked whether there was a way out of the deal. Not my will, but thine be done. It was promised. God keeps his promise. It cost Jesus Christ his LIFE. WE benefit from the promise kept. God does not break the big promise made to our first parents and to past generations. He does not break the promise made to the workers in the parable, that they would receive whatever is right.

Then comes the long workday. It is no picnic. The sun is high and hot, and the bugs are biting. The tools are not as sharp as they could be,

and the row you're working is much harder than the others. It's tough work. No wonder the owner is having a tough time filling jobs.

Finally, the day is over. There is, of course, a teaching moment that comes from the mouth of Jesus, the master teacher. Even those who do not accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord recognize that he was a teacher without equal. The master teacher knows his students well. Jesus knew, as do we, that people care about how much money they make, and are even more interested in how much pay OTHER people get. We derive much of our sense of worth, by carefully examining how much we receive, and comparing how much others are receiving. It may be to satisfy our sense of fairness, or our curiosity, or perhaps even our sinful jealousy. In the parable, as related by Jesus, the master asks the foreman to call the workers in at the end of the day, and to line them up for their hard-earned, or not so hard-earned pay.

The way the workers are lined up is not accidental. The ones who were hired last get their pay first. The ones who were hired early in the day, will get their pay last. If the ones who started first were paid first, they might never find out how much the latecomers got. The order is intentional and very effective. It gives the first students to hear this parable, and us, too, the chance to discuss and learn from this master. We learn from what he does, and we learn from the reaction of the people involved.

The workers in the parable got the same payoff, despite the vastly different length of their workday. All who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will enjoy the same eternal reward, the same eternal life in heaven, not based upon their years of believing or the number of their good works, but by the generosity of the God who makes the rules, keeps his promises, and is downright generous with eternal life.

Finally, we stand back and survey the results. There is obvious grumbling. Even though the master has been scrupulously fair with all the workers, there is groaning and unhappiness, mainly from the full-day workers. It's not fair. God is not right. Our calculations are right. The master's human relations and industrial relations are all wrong."

The truth is, that in parable after parable, God turns the world upside down. What makes sense to us is not God's order and his way. The thoughts and ways of God are far above our thoughts and our ways. And we mean more than God's thoughts are above us in heaven, while ours are here below on earth. "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Try that in a grocery store or a concert. Try showing up at the end of a long line, and quote the words of Jesus at the end of this Gospel. After the name calling and the foul and dirty looks from the crowd, you can pretty much summarize their feelings with the words, "The first will be first, and the last will be last." First in time, first in right. Wait your turn. You get service in the order you deserve it. Who's right?

The redeemed children of God know the God who gets it right. God has been getting it right since he first made the human race and determined to get involved with it. The world says, "If you have a hundred sheep, and you lose one. Not bad. Consider yourself lucky." The God who gets it right cares so much about each lamb, that he will go and search for the lost one until found. That's upside down.

It's hard to find a parable whose central message does not go against our common experience and the way of the world we have come to know. God is always turning our comfortable world upside down. But the key today is in the first words of this Gospel: "The kingdom of heaven is like this.." We have to be told by Jesus what it's like to be a believer and to act as a believer, because most often, it doesn't come naturally, and it doesn't come easily. Some of the teachings of the kingdom of God are difficult to explain. We simply accept them as part of God's revelation to us, and we sing a hymn of praise that things are much better than they might have been.

The world will try to shout that God is wrong. His advice and teaching is not practical. I'll give you this: It is radical, but it is refreshing. And we know from Jesus himself what it's like to be a part of God's kingdom, and through Jesus Christ our Lord, we know the God who Gets it Right. Amen.

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