



Matthew 20:1–16

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. 3 “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’

5 So they went. “He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. 6 About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ 7 “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ 8 “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ 9 “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected

to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ 13 “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16 “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Reflection

(Today's reflection is given by Justin Mof-fatt)

So, put simply, there is a new economy in God's world and it turns our old economies on their head! And it can be summed up by the last verse:

16 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

The ones you expect to be rewarded aren't. And the ones you expect to be ignored are showered with generosity. This is grace! Grace ought to be shocking. Grace ought to interrupt our ways. Grace ought to challenge our pride. It ought to

do our heads in. Grace is counter-intuitive.

To get grace into us, Jesus tells an unsettling parable about a man who pays the workers who came in at 5pm the same as those who came at 6am to work all day. It feels unfair!

I used to run a youth group. Fifteen year twelve guys in the room. Half of the room couldn't get this parable, saying it's unfair. The other half got it – saying God is free to be generous. By and large, the half who got it are still following Jesus. And the half who didn't, have given their faith away. Why?

The context of the parable is this, Jesus says to his disciples (19:28): “At the ‘renewal of all things’ (when God renews this

broken world), you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” They could have been puffed up. But, it’s not like you think. The “many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first.”

Strange, but then he goes on and explains it 20:1. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard and then pays all his workers the same day amount, no matter what time they came in: 6am or 5pm!

I have five quick points I’d like to make. The first is this. The kingdom of God is not like your workplace, which pays wages according to merit. It is not like university, which gives marks according to content. It

is not like the shops, where you get what you pay for. The kingdom of heaven is like a person who is weirdly generous. Paying lazy people far more than they deserve.

Secondly, the man who owns the vineyard is keen for people. He pursues people.

Verse 1, at 6am, 'Come and work in my vineyard'. Verse 4, at 9am (the third hour), 'You also go and work in my vineyard'. Verse 5, and midday and 3pm: Same thing. Verse 6, at the proverbial 11th hour, at 5pm, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

Here is what you find out about God: That he pursues me and pursues me and pur-

sues me and pursues me.

Thirdly, God is fair. The story is beautifully crafted. The guys hired at 6am are told: “You’ll earn a day’s wage”. The guys hired at 9am, midday and 3pm are told: “I will pay you whatever is right.” The pay structure for the guys hired for 1 hour at 5pm isn’t spelled out. Just, “Get in there and work.”

When evening came, the workers step forward for their pay. The foreman is given a weird directive. “The last shall be first.” Weird, the ones at 5pm are the layabouts, the ones who slept in, who weren’t eager. The foreman is told to pay the people who came at 5pm a full denarius.

Lovely moment. Weird moment. You can

see the whispers back down the line. The new pay structure is one day's wage for one hour's work. We are going to get thousands of dollars for one day. Verse 10,

So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.

They grumbled. Which the landowner picks up in verse 13,

Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go.

Fourthly, God is generous. That's the point.

14 Take your pay and go. I want to

give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you.

I want to and I can. He is free to give us not what we deserve; to be compassionate to sinners like me.

Grace made former slave trader John Newton pause when penning the first line of his hymn: “Amazing Grace – (how sweet the sound) – that saved a wretch like me.”

Fifth and finally, grace exposes our hearts. Notice the warm and beautiful tone of the landowner. He looks at one of them,

“But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I

want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?

'Or' – here is where he looks into the man's soul... "Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Think and Pray

Take some time now to think and pray. Grace challenges our souls. All the anger, the jealousy, feeling ripped off, entitlement, judgmentalism. All washed away by grace. That's the genius of the parable.

Tim Keller: "Grace is free, but it is costly and indispensable. Just as love awakens love, sacrificial love awakens sacrificial

love.”

And when you work out that it is all about grace, you stop counting. And so take your next breath of forgiveness and thank God. Live by grace. Because God did not have to forgive you. But today – you can breathe life in his name. Grace needs to transform all relationships.