

“Stories of God and Life: Labor Day”

This is the last message in this series on the parables of Jesus. These are parables *of the kingdom of God*, the rule and reign of God...how God relates to us...what it's like when God rules in life and society.

In Palestine, the grape harvest ripens toward the end of September. Then the rains come. There is a race against time to get the grapes picked before rain ruins the crops. Farmers and landowners need all the help they can get.

Jesus says God's kingdom or rule is like the owner of a vineyard who goes to the market place looking for workers to harvest his crop. The market place was like the labor reserve or job pool – men would go there hoping to get work for the day. Many common laborers in Palestine eked out a living day to day. If they couldn't get work on any particular day, they would probably have little or no food that night and the next day for their family. The fact that some in this story stayed in the marketplace until 5 p.m. shows how desperate they must have been for work.

Old Testament law commanded the Israelites not to withhold any wages due poor and needy workers: “Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is an Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin” (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). In this parable the owner of the vineyard goes “early in the morning” (that would be sunrise, 6 a.m.) to hire workers for the day. He agrees to pay them a “denarius”, which was about 20 cents, the usual day's pay. About 9 a.m. he saw others unemployed, so he agrees to hire them for the rest of day, not stating the wages. “I will pay you whatever is right” (Matthew 20:4). About noon, he hires more. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon he does the same. The day wears on until it's 5 o'clock, and he sees others standing there, desperate for work, hoping someone will hire them. So he says, “You also go and work in my vineyard” (Matthew 20:7).

About 6 o'clock in the evening it's time to pay the hired hands. The owner tells the foreman, “Call the workers and pay their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first” (verse 8). Those hired at 5 o'clock (those who worked only 1 hour) got not one hour's pay, but a *full day's wages!* “Boy, this is our lucky day! What a generous guy!” they mused. We are not told what the workers were given who were hired at 9 a.m., noon, and 3 p.m.

When those hired about 6 in the morning came for their pay check, they must have assumed they would get a lot more for working all day long. To their dismay, they get *1 denarius* – just the day's wage. “What! Those guys only worked 1 hour and got what we got! We sweat and bust our butts all day long – 12 hours – under the brutal sun, and we don't get any more than they do! What's going on here!” Well, the owner of the vineyard hears their grumbling. He replies, “Look, I'm not doing you any wrong. Didn't you contract to work for the usual day's pay?” “Well, yeah...” one worker responds. “That's what I gave you. Take your money and go. I chose to give to the last group of workers hired the same amount I gave you.” Then the zinger, “Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:15).

That's the parable. Does this story leave you feeling uneasy, like something just isn't fair? I mean, how would *you feel* if you were one of the workers who put in 12 grueling hours of hard work under the hot sun, and then didn't get any more than those who only started working at 5 o'clock? Imagine a business or corporation operating by those standards! Do you think a labor union would put up with that? If you are employed, and are a good worker, do you ever get perturbed at a coworker who's a slacker? He or she doesn't carry their share, spends time chit-chatting instead of working? Yet that person perhaps is making the same pay as you, or maybe even more?

But this story is not meant as a guide for labor relations, or a policy for a personnel department. It is about God's *kingdom* – how God rules, how God treats us! So what's the point of this parable? ***This is a parable about the nature of God's grace and mercy – about rewards, and what we have a right to claim from God.***

Perhaps Jesus told this parable in response to a question Simon Peter had asked earlier. In the previous chapter the gospel writer Matthew relates how a rich young ruler turned away from following Jesus when Jesus said he should sell everything he has and give to the poor. Peter gets to thinking about how much he and the other disciples have sacrificed for Jesus – their jobs, time with their families, the interruption of their previously normal lifestyle. Peter says, "We have left everything to follow you! *What then will there be for us?*" (Matthew 19:27). What's our pay, Lord? What's our reward for all our good efforts?

It's like Peter is thinking we can make a "deal" with God. I'll give God something, and in turn God's obligated to give me something back! We give the Lord years of service, and in return He owes us our "pay"! And the longer and harder we work the better our "pay" from God!

But this parable says "No!" God doesn't relate to us in that way! The rewards of His kingdom are not measured by what we think we deserve, but by God's *graciousness*.

God gives what He wants to whom He wants! The decision is not based on what we think we deserve, but what God chooses to do with His generosity and mercy!

It's really hard for us to shake off this belief that our relationship to God, our ultimate salvation, is based on how hard we work and how good we are! The Bible clearly states that we are saved only by the kindness and generosity of God in Christ! New life in Christ, eternal life, is a *gift* we cannot earn and do not deserve! Titus 3:4-5 states, "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy".

Most people *outside the church* assume that if there is a heaven, we get there by being "a good person". But many *in the church* still cling to this notion that we will get into the kingdom of God if we can just be *good enough*. "Lord, look at all the time I've spent going to church, all the good things I've done for people. Here's my spiritual time card, Lord. All the hours I've clocked in being a Christian! Certainly I deserve a paycheck for all this!"

But this parable says, “Sorry, that isn’t the way it works with God.” Not one of us can stand before God and say, “I *deserve* Your forgiveness. I’ve *earned* eternal life. You’re obligated to give me some sort of reward!” Rather, salvation is based on God’s sheer ***graciousness and generosity!***

This is “grace” that we’re talking about! In Christ Jesus, God gives us far more than we can earn or deserve! PBS once did a TV special called “Amazing Grace”. It described how an Incredible number of singers have recorded this song. Bill Moyers hosted the program, and interviewed some of these artists. He asked them what the song “Amazing Grace” meant to them. It was a very inspirational program! It is a liberating thing to experience God’s ***grace*** – His amazing kindness and generosity in Christ. *When we do experience God’s grace, it changes our life!*

But there is another side to this parable and its meaning. ***This story has to do with our looking at what God gives us, and comparing it to what God gives someone else.*** The people who worked from sunrise to sunset, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., got what the owner promised them. They were not cheated or lied to. It was only when they *looked at what the others got* that they got upset.

Again, the key words in this parable are found in verse 15, “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” The last phrase in the Greek literally reads, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” The imagery here is of an evil eye, scanning about, inspecting what God has given to other people and comparing it to what we have received from God.

Isn’t this easy to do? Casting the evil eye! We look around at what other people have, and then feel cheated or slighted by God. A man tells of being the union rep for his police department. One of the things that he did was negotiate their annual pay raise. He related how their city had experienced a real commercial and industrial growth spurt which impacted the tax base tremendously. Realizing this, he went in to the negotiations and came away with a 10% raise across the board. He says that he got some real pats on the back from fellow officers for that one. But then the mood turned very sour, very fast. The rank and file discovered that the public works department rode in on their coat tails and also received a 10% raise. The prevailing attitude was that they were inferior in some way and didn’t deserve to receive the same pay raise as the police department.

This kind of comparing and thinking you deserve more can happen *in the church*. We can assume, for instance, that older Christians, or longer time church members, are entitled to more “pay” and “benefits” than new Christians or newer members. This “casting the evil eye” and begrudging God’s generosity comes out when we look around and resent others’ good fortune. Here’s someone who isn’t half as serious in their faith as I am, but he or she seem to have all the luck in the world. Or we think of wonderful Christians who go through one difficulty after another in life, while some others who are careless in the way they live seem to be so blessed by God.

The sour grape attitude towards “latecomers” can be seen when longtime Christians resent someone becoming a Christian at the “5 o’clock hour”. Near the end of their life they give their

hearts to the Lord. And they're given salvation! They get the same kingdom we get, even though we've spent a lifetime doing our best to be a Christian.

Someone once asked me to visit a family member in the hospital who was dying. She had no church. The relative who spoke with me wasn't sure of the lady's salvation. What was my response? "Sorry, I'm not going to visit her. She had her chance. If she never came to the Lord all these years that's her fault. She should have thought of this sooner!" Of course that's not how I responded. I went to see the lady. I tried to tell her the Story of Jesus and lead her to the Lord. It is so easy for us to try to figure out who deserves what reward from God! But someone has remarked, "You will never be able to see the goodness of God with a jealous eye."

What we've been talking about really has to do with the idea of "entitlement", what we're entitled to. This young man had just graduated from college and was at his first job interview. He was applying to be an accountant. Reaching the end of the interview, the human resources person asked him, "What starting salary were you thinking about?" The young man replied, "In the neighborhood of \$100,000 a year, depending on the benefits package." The interviewer said, "Well, what would you say to a package of 5 weeks vacation, full medical and dental, Company Retirement Fund to 50% of your salary, Executive Share Option Scheme, Profit Related Pay and a company car leased every 2 years?" The young man sat up straight and said, "Wow! Are you kidding?" The person doing the interviewing replied, "Yes, but you started it."

There are some other words of Jesus that fit in here. They are found in Luke 17:7-10. "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" Even at our best, *none of us* deserves God's goodness. We are unworthy servants!

We live in a time when professional athletes get outrageous contracts – millions and millions of dollars. Sometimes free agents will turn down contract offers of 5 or 10 or even 15 million dollars and more per season. I once saw a news clip that got my attention. It showed a pro football player driving an old Volkswagen "bug". This football player said, "I'm overpaid. I'm overpaid to have a wife I love. I'm overpaid to have kids. I'm overpaid to have good health. I'm overpaid to have the privilege of playing football."

I don't know about you, but I believe I'm overpaid! I'm overpaid that God offers me forgiveness and a relationship to Him and life forever in His kingdom. I can't ever earn or deserve that. I'm overpaid to have food to eat, clothes to wear, and a roof over my head at night. I'm overpaid to have people who love me, the beauty of nature to enjoy, the joy of helping others in need. God's been so generous to me in Christ that I don't have to worry about what God gives or doesn't give to someone else.

