

The Parable of the Laborers Matt. 20:1-16

Introduction

A few years ago on an airplane flight I noticed the flight attendants eating corn flakes for dinner. Because I knew that they usually ate the same food served in first class, I asked them what was being served in first class. Corn flakes! I couldn't believe it. They explained somebody really goofed in food service. First class is so expensive because they give you extra leg room AND really good food and drink.

Well, if I had spent the enormous surcharge for first class (\$1000 more than coach for service from Richmond to DFW) (which I never do, although one time I upgraded with frequent flier miles), and then received corn flakes for dinner, I would have been livid. I would have gone straight to an airline representative upon arrival and complained. I would have demanded justice: Give me compensation! I paid for good food, I'm owed good food.

Does that attitude ever creep in to your faith? I've been good, God owes me.

Is it true, the more we do for God, the more God owes us?

In context, it appears that is the disciples' thinking.

They've just witnessed Jesus' dialogue with the rich young ruler, and ask Him in v.27, *Behold, we left everything and followed you; what then will there be for us?*

Sounds like "contractual religion."

Do you have a contractual religion? God should treat us as we deserve, or as we *think* we deserve.

One way to know is how you'd respond to news that Saddam Hussein had been converted just prior to execution. This man, guilty of heinous crimes, worse than you can imagine, repents and believes the gospel and receives eternal life. How do you feel? How do justice and mercy fit in your view of things?

That's what Jesus is exposing in this parable. A parable is a comparison- "*the kingdom of heaven is like*"- relating the familiar, something in life we can all relate to, with the otherwise unknown nature of the kingdom of God. Why? We don't naturally get it! The kingdom of God is counter-intuitive; it's not what we'd normally think. In the stories or analogies Jesus uses, there is usually a twist in an otherwise familiar scenario, a "but wait". It's at the "but wait" we find out where we stand with the kingdom.

Let's put ourselves into the parable to find the "but wait":

(which was not hard to do in Ft Worth, TX because every morning men would stand along a street downtown waiting to be hired for common labor)

You and I are common laborers. We stay up late watching Monday night football.

Tuesday morning I'm up early on time for work, while you sleep in. When you finally arrive at work I give you a grin which says, "I'm going to make more than you today".

We notice folks arrive for work at noon, three, and five pm, one hour before quitting time (which would not be unusual for agrarian work if rain was coming).

The whistle blows, folks line up to get paid (in Jesus day they were paid daily, perhaps in keeping with Lev.19:13 and Dt.24:15).

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns. You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he may not cry against you to the Lord and it become sin in you. Dt.24:14-15

We notice something unusual, the “but wait”:

The foreman paying everyone starts with the last guys hired, and they’re getting one denarius, a full days’ pay. (v.8) We’re thinking, wow, is the boss generous.

So our expectation begins to build. V.10 “*they thought they’d receive more*” You wonder if you’re going to get a full days pay, I wonder if I’m going to get more. After all, I worked more than they did, I should receive more.

You receive a full days pay, and I’m happy for you.

Finally, I stick out my hand with a big smile, and the guy puts in it one denarius. And I wait a second, but that’s it. In an instant, anger swallows up my hope for more money.

So I begin to grumble. I feel cheated. The man has cheapened my work. He’s made us all equal, while clearly our production wasn’t. I’m going to call the FTC, the BBB, the EEOC.

I deserved more! Is that right?

It is true that the others got more than they deserved: they did NOT deserve full pay. But no, I received exactly what the landowner promised: one denarius. We had a contract for one day’s labor. I met my part and he met his.

The landowner’s contract with the latecomers is, strictly speaking, none of my business. He was totally just with me. He could be just with the others, or generous with them, if he chose to be. There is no law forbidding mercy. Hence the climatic question in v.15, *Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?*

All he did was create this situation:

No one got less than what was promised.

Some got more than they deserved.

If your religion is contractual- God owes me- it tends to show up when others get mercy. If you grumble when Saddam Hussein converts before execution, you don’t understand the kingdom of God.

Jesus is saying, before you call a lawyer, let me ask you a few questions:

1. Do you really want justice?

It's important to separate human and divine relationships.
The bible is clear that justice is important in human relationships.

Prov.20:10: *Differing weights and differing measures are an abomination to the Lord.*
Fair play, whether in business, insurance claims, advertising, school, legal matters, all are important to God. Should the airline compensate the first class passengers for their corn flake dinner? Of course.

But, do you want such a contract with God? Do you want performance based acceptance? Do you know what that requires? Because He made you, and is the Moral Judge of the universe, you owe Him perfect adoration, praise, gratitude, trust, delight.
Ps.43:4 says, *God is my exceeding delight.* Anything less is cosmic treason.
Are you as holy, righteous, wise, and pure as God is, ALL the time?

Do you love Him with all your soul, strength, heart and mind?

Do you think exactly like God about everything in life, making a perfect appraisal?
One of God's attributes is he is generous with the poor and needy, are you?

God is also longsuffering with his enemies, are you?
When God metes out punishment, it's always perfect, no more or less than what is deserved. Do you always have that kind of discernment?

God never slanders or gossips.
God always gives more than is deserved- do you?
Do you love your neighbor with the same degree of intensity as yourself?

If not, you're guilty.
Have you given up everything to follow Jesus? If not, you're saying he's not worthy of all of your life, and therefore he's not God. That's cosmic treason.

The picture of the gulf between what we owe God and what we in fact give him is not jumping across a five foot wide creek, but rather attempting to jump across the Grand Canyon.

If you earnestly asked God for justice morally, all he could give you is hell.
Rom.6:23 *The wages of sin is death*
You may think your good outweighs your bad.
But one sin is enough for God to refuse us His presence.
If you had five gallons of pure water, would it be safe for your child to play with if I put in just a cup of cyanide?
Prov.20:9 *Who can say, 'I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin?'*
Rom.3:23 *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

Rom.3:10-12 *There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, not even one.*

2. Do you believe we're all equal?

V.12 says they complained, "you've made us all equal." How?

There may be an irony here, more than the laborer knows.

God has made us all equal, but in two ways different from what they laborer thinks.

a. He's made, or more properly declared, us all equal in guilt simply by looking upon our hearts as a moral judge. If none of us can ask God for justice, than we're all equal. It is true, Saddam Hussein has perpetrated more evil on mankind than any of us. But does it matter if you fall off a pier and drown with a 200 pound weight on your back, or a 200,000 pound weight on your back?

b. We're all equal in our dependence upon God.

God gives life and breath to all creatures. He sends the rain and sun on the just and unjust.

Pr.22:2 *The rich and the poor have a common bond; the Lord is the maker of them all.*

Ps.145: *I open my hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.*

Prov.10:22 *It is the blessing of the Lord which makes rich.*

It is the blessing of the Lord which makes anything.

If you have anything good, God gave it to you.

C. We all owe our existence to God.

D. We're all going to die; all material things will be stripped away, and it will be just you, your morality, and a holy God.

Therefore, if you live by grace, you won't stumble if other's get grace.

If you live by grace, you will be faithful to God, but at the end of the day, you won't say, I've been faithful, but rather, God's been faithful.

That's why Peter says,

Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God and he will exalt you at the proper time. (1 Peter 5:6)

3. So why are you envious if others receive grace?

Is your eye envious because I am generous? (v.15)

You may have your reasons:

I work very hard and so should others.

I paid with my own sweat for what I have, they deserve what they get.

I'm task-oriented.

I'm demanding, I have high standards.

I'm unloving because I wasn't loved as a child.

These are merely symptoms. What is your real problem? PRIDE.

Your attitude toward life is: I deserve.

The more you think you deserve, the more uncomfortable you are with God's mercy.

God says, I will dispense mercy as I will. Maybe I'll give it to the most undeserving, like the murderer Saul, who became the apostle Paul. 1 Tim.1:12-16

Why do you care?

It would be great news if you knew you needed mercy, right?

If you weren't hired until 5 pm,

-perhaps because your car broke down and you walked;

-because you took a sick child to the hospital;

-maybe a relative had a critical court hearing;

worked an hour and was paid a full days wage, had huge bills mounting up at home, you'd be ecstatic.

If you'd worked all day and received one denarius, you could rejoice with anyone else who was paid for any length of work...

...IF you truly believed God gave you the time, ability, health and opportunity to work.

Prov.10:22 *It is the blessing of the Lord which makes rich.*

So God is generous in a radical way.

He doesn't say, clean up your act and then I'll accept you. You're so indelibly stained by sin, nothing you can do will make you clean, except receiving the gift of salvation.

Pharisee and Publican

4. Do you relish what God has done about it?

v.15 *Is it lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?*

He sent His laborer into the vineyard. Jesus came under the father's instructions and did everything He asked him to do.

What did God's laborer earn? Eternal life. That's the reward for perfect law-keeping.

BUT, at the end of the day, what did Jesus receive? What were his wages? When he held out His hand for payment, the Father nailed it to the cross. Jesus received the wages of your sin.

Rom.6:23 *The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus.*

This is the great exchange. Jesus received the death sentence due to all who trust in Him, and exchanged that for His labor (perfect righteousness) and wages (eternal life).

Mercy is compassionate; it is also very costly. In the parable, it cost the landowner because he didn't get the labor for which he paid the late-comers.

Jesus didn't come to earth to give people what they deserve- to make good people better and blast the bad.

He came to give them what they did not deserve, eternal life, and remove forever what they did deserve. The unfathomable mercy of God in Christ. 1 Pet.2:21

5. Is there evidence in your life you believe the promise?

Verse 16 is the indicator. *The last shall be first and the first shall be last.*

The last in deserving shall be first in rejoicing.

The first in deserving will be last in rejoicing.

In other words, your sense of mercy will show up in every place in your life. Mercy can't be isolated, it fills the space where it goes. So

Ps.33:5 *the earth is full of the lovingkindness of the Lord.*

Ps.145:9 *The Lord is good to all; His mercies are over all His works.*

God is present everywhere, so is His mercy. Do you see it, hear it, smell it, feel it? Help each other to do so.

When mercy gets its sweet, tender grip on your heart, not just the head,

1. You'll never worship the same again
Worship is, among other things, a response to mercy, which is never half-hearted, dull, or thoughtless.
2. You never see money the same again.
3. You'll never see service the same again.

Luke 17:10

So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded of you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'

4. You'll never see people the same again.

Jesus said, *Those forgiven much, love much.*

You won't be envious of their gifts, but rather startled that you have any at all.

You'll pray for them to have the same mercy as you.

If they serve you corn flakes, you can give them a first class meal.

5. You'll never see your best efforts the same.

When something beneficial to others happens to others because of you, you'll sense very little reason to boast, but rather you'll humbly say, Look what mercy produced.