

10 July 2016

The Generous Master
Matthew 20:1-16

It's not as easy as you might imagine to talk about God. Think about it. God, we believe, is the one who created all that is, not just the world, but the universe, the laws of physics that govern it, and all the senses and intellectual capacities by which we are aware of that universe. So God is beyond all that we know and all that it is possible for us to know. When we try to explain God, it's as if a video game character is trying to explain the software engineer who designed him. The engineer exists in a larger world than the video game character, limited to the world of the game, could possibly grasp. In the same way, God is beyond our understanding, and any God that we claim to understand isn't really God. The best we can do find hints of what God is like in things that we *can* understand. We could say, for instance, that God's like a father, or a judge, or a king, but better. The problem is that we keep forgetting that last bit – “but better” – which is how we end up picturing God as an old man with a white beard sitting on a throne, for instance.

We have the same problem when we talk about the “Kingdom of God.” Jesus used that phrase all the time, especially in his parables, describing what it would be like to live in a world in which God's priorities were observed, where God's power was set free. But of course, when we hear the word “kingdom,” we automatically interpret the “Kingdom of God” as something like an earthly empire, only with God running the show. In this kingdom, we imagine, good people (which would include us) would be rewarded and bad people would be punished. And that does sound good. In a world like ours, filled with such injustice, where greed is rewarded and virtue punished, it is natural to long for a kingdom where justice reigns, where all are treated fairly. And then Jesus tells a parable like this.

We read Matthew 20:1-16:

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, “Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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 the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

So, just to make sure you got all that: a landowner hires people to work in his vineyard for the standard day's wage. Some work a full twelve hours, six am to six pm. Some work nine hours, some six, some only three, and one final batch of laborers, hired at the last minute, work just one hour. But when they line up for their pay, they are all paid exactly the same thing – the standard day's wage. When the ones who worked all day complain, the landowner points out that it's his money, and he can jolly well pay as generously as he wants to. He hasn't taken anything away from them, so what are they complaining about?

Okay, can I just point something out here? It's nothing new: you've probably already thought it yourself. In fact, you've probably thought it every time you've ever heard this parable, but you may not have said it out loud. This landowner is kind of a moron. I mean, yes, technically he's right: there's no law against him overpaying some of his workers. But what does he think is going to happen tomorrow when he goes out at six am to hire laborers? Who's going to sign on for twelve hours of hard labor if they don't have to? "You know what? I'm kind of busy right now, but I'll be free to work in your vineyard about five." Wouldn't you?

Let's update it. You've got the manager of a chain restaurant. She works fifty hours a week, minimum, is responsible for scheduling all the staff, dealing with all customer complaints, hiring and firing, ordering supplies and keeping the books, filling in herself when someone's sick or quits, and meeting all the demands that come down from the corporate office. It's a hard job, but she makes \$65,000 a year, which enables her to keep up with her bills and buy a newer model used car every five years or so. Then the CEO of the chain comes for a visit and announces that under a new compensation policy, the manager's annual pay will be unchanged, but they're going to start paying all the ten-hours-a-week 16-year-old after-school dishwashers \$65,000 a year as well. Does that sound reasonable? That's how Jesus' parable sounded to his original audience: ridiculous, imbecilic, and most of all utterly, unspeakably, unfair.

The Kingdom of God's like *that*.

You see, sometimes when we talk about God we have to admit that God is not just like things that we love on earth *but even better*. Sometimes we have to accept the fact that God is *not like anything on earth*. The difference between God and us is not just quantitative, but qualitative. God doesn't just do things better than we do; God also does *different* things. God doesn't just make smarter decisions than we do; God makes decisions based on completely foreign criteria. In Isaiah 55:9 God says, *For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts*.

In this parable we see one of the ways that God is simply different from us, perhaps the one that is hardest for us to accept: God isn't fair. From childhood to the grave, we treat fairness as the baseline for right and wrong. This is the bare minimum standard for ethics, and it is deeply ingrained in us. As children, we might be disappointed if there's no dessert, but we'll live with it. But if there *is* dessert, and our brother gets a bigger piece, that'll reduce us to angry tears. (Unless, of course, we're the ones with the bigger piece, then we don't see any injustice at all. But that's a different issue.) And it's not just children. Adults are just as hyper-aware of anyone who gets a bigger piece of the pie than we do. Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat, came

to the young United States in the early 19th century to see the American experiment himself, and his book *Democracy in America* remains a classic study of our nation. At one point, de Tocqueville says, “Americans talk a lot about liberty, but as far as I can tell, they don’t actually care about liberty. What they care about is that nobody else has more liberty than they do.” It’s all about fairness.

Now I’m not opposed to fairness, we need it in this world. It may be the lowest of all ethical standards, but it’s still one of the best tools we have for holding back the darkness of our own greed and cruelty and racism and hatred. Besides, we struggle even to achieve this minimum standard. So we continue to push for justice and equity in this world. At the very least, we should be able to make things more *fair*.

But as far as I can tell from the New Testament God doesn’t care about fairness. What God offers us in the teachings and in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not justice but grace. And grace isn’t fair. By definition it isn’t fair. In the Kingdom of God, we are not allotted a reward based on how much we’ve done, how many good deeds we accomplished, how faithful we were in church attendance and giving, or whether we avoided certain key sins. And we certainly aren’t rewarded for doing all the above better than someone else. God doesn’t give rewards. God gives grace, and grace has nothing to do with what we deserve. Grace is helping those who don’t deserve help, giving to those who don’t deserve gifts, loving those who don’t return your love, forgiving those who have done the unforgivable.

The Kingdom of God’s like that.