

"A Story of Perplexing Generosity" Matthew 20:1-16 Septuagesima  
2024

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Diversity. Equity. Inclusion. DEI. There is a movement in Canada to try and not just have equal opportunity, but also equality of outcome, and that angers some people. If I work harder and longer hours than someone I work with, I don't want them getting paid from my work and getting what I make. That's not fair at all, yet that's what this parable seems to promote. Everyone ends up with the same amount, even though there are some that only work for only one of the 12 hours. How can this be?

Reviewing the parable again, only the people at the beginning of the day agree for a denarius, which was a typical day's wage. When it came to the third hour, he only said, "I will give you whatever is right." He doesn't even talk about wages with the sixth, ninth-, or eleventh-hour people. Maybe he said the same thing to them, "I'll give you whatever is right." So, the last people only worked one hour, but they didn't know what they were going to get for pay. They were just happy to have a job. They trusted the landowner to be fair. Yet they all ended up with a denarius, which again was typically what you'd get for a whole day of work, not an hour of work. However, the landowner didn't take from the denarius of those who worked the

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full day. He just paid the same from his OWN account. So it's different from that aspect.

We assume that Jesus is talking about people who work for God in His kingdom while still on this earth. When God calls you into His kingdom, He brings you to a living faith in Jesus, not a dead faith. Jesus does all the work of our salvation. He gives it to us by grace. He washes our sins away in baptism. He makes us look holy. That's the easy part, at least for us, as we do none of the work and He does ALL of it. Yet even though salvation is free, He doesn't call you to do nothing. He calls you to work while you are a part of this kingdom. Pick up your cross, and follow me, Jesus says. James writes that faith without works is dead.

As you try and resist temptation and live out your faith you realize how difficult this really is. Pornography is not a good thing. You know you must resist it. You know how God wants you to speak with your spouse with patience and kindness, even when you are tired and worn out. This is not an easy thing. You know just how easy it is to fall in line at school or work with the "I don't care" attitude. You know how easy it is to be lazy and not take time to spend with your children or do what your parents ask you to do. You know how tempting it is to not be generous with your time and your money, and

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how difficult it can be to share what you have with others. Yet this is part of the deal. The Holy Spirit moves into you, and He changes your mind and your will and your desire. You know from the Word of God how the Lord wants you to work, and if you take your Christianity seriously you can become frustrated by your own failures and the failures of those around you, especially as you see fellow Christians who are lazy and not doing what they could or they should. They are in some instances bringing embarrassment to the church and to Jesus.

What is your attitude as you work in God's kingdom? It seems that is the heart and core of this parable. Jesus has issue with the longest working workers in the attitude that they have towards their work. They are much more concerned about the pay than the 3rd, 6th, 9th, or 11th hour workers. They were the only ones who went into the day agreeing on a payment. The payment seems to be the focus of their work. So, if you reflect on that, what does that mean? If you look at your life of work as a Christian as a deal with God, "I'll do this if you do that for me," then you're thinking of your life only in terms of work and reward. You're constantly asking the question, "What am I getting out of this?" And maybe you are constantly comparing what you are doing to what other Christians are doing.

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“Why do I always have to do the dishes? Why don’t more people volunteer at church? Why doesn’t anyone else put in overtime?”

That can sour your whole outlook on life and make you sour towards God too if you’re constantly living life as a competition or constantly looking to God for the reward of hard work.

There’s also the problem that there are many times on this side of heaven that the hard work doesn’t pay off. The faithful wife ends up with a cheating husband. The good parents end up with rotten kids. The good working employee gets laid off just because of their race or sex, or maybe because they don’t play the politically correct game at work. It’s not fair, and they’re angry about it. They have reason to be.

Yet that doesn’t mean they should just give up on hard work. We need faithful workers who do their duties even in bad circumstances and show up on time and do a full day’s wage. God isn’t against the lifelong Christian who faithfully performs. But if you compare the potential attitude of the worker who works the whole day with the other workers, what is the key difference? The 3rd, 6th, 9th, and 11th hour guys are just happy to be wanted and to have a job. They will take whatever they can get, not expecting half as much

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pay as the other workers who have been there longer. They're not in it for the pay.

There's something to be said for that attitude in a Christian. "I'm just happy to be wanted. I'm happy to have a God who tells me how to live and looks after me, wants what is best for me. I'm happy to have food and clothing and a roof over my head because I don't even deserve that. Who am I that God would bring me into His kingdom and let me represent Him? That He would prepare good works in advance for me to do? That He would send His angels to take care of me?" It's an attitude of gratitude for having something to do, anything to do in God's kingdom.

Doesn't that simple attitude make all the difference in the world? It seems to me that most people today have no sense of belonging and no sense of purpose. It's as if they are just standing around through life. But if our duty is to fight the good fight of the faith on the pathway to heaven, then that changes it, doesn't it? When I come to worship and pray with my fellow Christians and for them, sing with them, battle Satan with them, then my sense of duty and belonging and purpose change. When my offerings can send missionaries across the world and save souls, then I have a greater purpose behind my job. Even if I can't work anymore, God promises

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me that He hears and answers my prayer. That makes me important. We have the deeper truths that we rely on and fall back on. There is a God who created us. There is a God who loves us. There is a God who knows us better than we know ourselves. He is with us always, even when our spouse and children are gone. He has a loving purpose for us, whether it be success or failure, poverty, or riches. We know that death doesn't end our lives with them. We get to see them again.

God's grace in Christ makes us all look equal, whether we've been lazy or hard working. If we've been Christians, our whole life or last minute converts. When I'm baptized into Christ and you're baptized into Christ, when I believe in the same Jesus as you do, we both look the same in God's eyes. I look as holy as you do. The thief on the cross was saved by the same grace as Paul was. Paul had to go on three grueling mission journeys for years, and the thief only had to suffer on a cross for an hour or two. And if we all look holy, and we all look like Jesus, long time Christians or last minute Christians, well isn't holy good enough for you? Shouldn't it make you happy that YOU look holy and all of us look holy, to be completely forgiven? If Jesus is the great equalizer, and that equalizer gives us salvation, shouldn't I be more than happy about

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that, especially when I know I have not come close to living up to God's standards, even as a lifelong Christian?

The simple truth is that none of us deserve the denarius, none of us deserve the grace, no matter how long or how hard we've been working. The conclusion is simply logical, just as God reasoned with Jonah outside of Nineveh. It's God's grace. It's His salvation. It's His to hand out with how He pleases. If He wants to be generous with those who have wasted most of their lives in sin, why should we be angry about it? Should we just be happy with what we have, by God's grace too?

So how will this all shake out in the end? The people that we think should have earned special accolades from God, maybe they won't be so praised in heaven. Whereas those who were nothing in the eyes of the world, like the poor beggar Lazarus who had the dogs lick his sores, the ones that nobody else recognized, maybe they will be the most renowned in heaven. Why? Because they were simply thankful for God's grace. And that's what matters the most to God. He appreciates your work and uses your hard work in this life. It's how He keeps things together in this messed up world. But He's more concerned about the attitude and the reason behind your work. That seems to be the story behind this story. What is your

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attitude towards working in this kingdom and even being in this kingdom of heaven on earth?

This simple story teaches us to be thankful for the simple thing in life, the denarius of God's grace in Christ. None of us deserved such a calling. Whether we're called to a lifetime of hard service in the kingdom, or whether you are a last minute convert after a life of wandering . . . whether you have a lousy job or a well paying job . . . whether you have lots of jobs to do or seemingly not much to do at all . . . be thankful to be called God's child, to have Jesus as your Lord and Savior, to have full forgiveness and mercy in Jesus, to belong to Christ crucified. I don't deserve Him any more than anyone else does. Don't get wrapped up in who is getting what, or whether you think you've deserved more than someone else, or whether you've had to work harder than someone else in this life. It's all a gift. Take what is yours and go. I want to give to the last one hired the same as I also gave to you. He wants to give you Himself, a gift of perplexingly generous grace, and He is the greatest gift of all. That's more than good enough. That's perfect. Amen.