

## “Will God Be Just”

### Matthew 20:1-16

You have heard that the mercy and grace of God is so complete that whoever confesses that Jesus is Lord will be saved. Jesus is not only the source of our salvation. Jesus is the gift of salvation from God. It removes all doubts, fears, suspicions concerning God’s promise that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

In the story of Jonah we hear of the people of Ninevah being spared from the wrath of God as they repented for their sin of chasing after false God’s. This in spite of the prophet Jonah preferring their destruction because they were beyond the reach of God’s mercy and grace., confessed God as Lord of all.

Then there is this parable of the laborers in the vineyard. This is not about salvation in God’s promise. All labor, though for different periods of the day. The owner pays all of them for their work. Overlooking the difference in pay scale, they are all compensated for their work. In this sense the owner is just towards all as he fulfills his agreement with them. The owner has paid them for their labor.

There are two things going on here.

**First, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard is about the 9th (and 10th) commandment.** In a very real sense this parable is about coveting. While "covet" may not seem the most obvious word to describe what is going on here, it does fit both the emphasis of Jesus' teaching and the overarching emphasis in Matthew on the Law and Jesus' representation of it in a way that transforms our thinking and doing. Coveting lies at the heart of this parable in a couple of ways.

*We covet what God chooses to give to others.* We are invited to see ourselves in the story, and then apply it to ourselves. The wages at stake (even at the moment of Jesus' first telling of the parable) are not actual daily wages for vineyard-laborers, but

forgiveness, life, and salvation for believers. We need not literally *be* laborers in a vineyard, as we are all of us co-workers in the kingdom (1 Corinthians 3:9).

And in relationship, one believer to another, covetousness is a problem. The point here isn't necessarily that other folks receive blessings from God that we don't -- that they get more or better or lovelier gifts from God. The problem is that they get the same as us; and they don't deserve it, do they? They are less worthy, or later arrivals, or just plain worse sinners. They don't deserve the same as we get, do they? Not *nothing* maybe, but certainly not the same. .

We have a tendency, as the parable illustrates, to covet and to be resentful of what others receive from God. The owner of the vineyard asks those who have worked longest and hardest for him, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" The point is that God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness are God's to give away as God sees fit.

As a direct result of this, *we covet God's power to forgive* and God's control over who is forgiven and how. This parable is perfectly matched in the lectionary to the parable of Jonah, who has run away to avoid delivering the message of forgiveness that God has sent him to proclaim. Jonah complains, "for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing," and surely this cannot be for *them*? It is ironic that Jonah, who had earlier declared that "deliverance belongs to the Lord," a deliverance he himself has experienced, has rejected the good news of who God is for others.

**The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is about coveting, about our frustration with the grace of God as it applies not to us, but to others.**

Second, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard is about the first and the last. The parable itself displays a reversal of expectations -- "the last will be first and the first will be last"; this is not only the summary of the parable, but a critical aspect of message of the Gospel.

Notice the flow of the story as the workers are compensated for their labors:

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers 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. 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.'"

The last are literally first in that they are paid first. And the first, who have labored longest, must also wait the longest to get theirs. But notice as well that the first who are now last do not receive nothing or less, they receive the same, as the laborers themselves say, "you have made them equal to us...." So perhaps it should be said that the last shall be first, and the first shall be the same.

The scandal of this parable is that we are all equal recipients of God's gifts. The scandal of our faith is that we are often covetous and jealous when God's gifts of forgiveness and life are given to other in equal measure.

This parable is not also about God delivering salvation to the world. Whether in a lifetime of confessing Jesus as Lord or at the moment of death the gift and promise of salvation is complete. The warning in this parable is that the first can miss living in the freedom and joy of that salvation when they insist on pointing to their own faithfulness. So much so that when they see a late blooming confession of Christ as Lord their complaints reveal they have not fully understood salvation as a gift of new life.

But what if we lived in the joy of the gift and welcomed others who have received new life in Christ and to join in the work of the Jesus in the world? Maybe it would sound and look something like this...

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