

“Do You begrudge God’s Generosity?” Matthew 20:1-16 Pent 16A 9-24-17

Did a less qualified employee get the promotion you applied for? Or is he paid more for less work? So much social turmoil is stirred by envious comparisons. They jam the courts and congress with demands for fairness in labor laws.

Our parable shows that God applies not law, but grace to all who labor in His Kingdom. Yet in this there is a warning to us that Bible scholar Richard Lenski sums up this way. *“Those who will learn nothing about divine grace even when they are working in the church will finally be left without this grace; those who are set on justice and refuse to go beyond it shall finally have justice.”*

Jesus ends the parable by saying that the last will be first and the first will be last. He is not saying that the last are those who will come at the end of the line. Rather, they no longer will be in line. They will be last and lost. They are those whom Lenski had in mind when he also wrote, *“To accuse and condemn grace is the surest way to lose grace.”*

Just before this parable Jesus gave this same warning when Peter asked him what reward they would get for having given up so much to follow him. The parable cautions us against asking such questions.

The vineyard is the church. Jesus is the owner who calls people through the Gospel to work in the Church. The pay is not heaven, which is a free gift, but the blessings now that come through God’s Church: the Gospel, the sacraments, the care and ministry of fellow believers.

The first laborers work all day only after a wage is negotiated. The point of comparison to us is not the pay itself, but the attitude that we must have some tangible reward for serving God. While some clergy do work to get rich, it is not just the paid worker that may have a reward motive. Volunteers also can be tempted to serve by the recognition of others or by the belief that their heavenly reward will be greater. Jesus said that those who do good to be seen by others have all the reward they will get.

For those laborers He hires later in the day no pay is negotiated. Using grace language, He promises only to give them what is right, not pay them what they earn. Yet, they labor in the vineyard with only that promise .

Finally, he calls those in the eleventh hour. This symbolizes that Jesus calls people to the kingdom right up to the very end. They too receive the same blessing, though their accomplishments will be far less than those who labored longer.

If it is all by grace then why wouldn’t they? The sacrifices of all who labor in the Church, whether for pay or volunteer, whether for a lifetime or a few days, are pleasing to God only when done by faith in response to God’s gifts of grace.

Those who begrudge God’s grace forget that they too have received all things by the same grace. They have been privileged to serve longer, accomplish more, not for personal gain, but for the joy of serving God who first served and saved them. In addition, by being called into the kingdom earlier in life, they have been spared many hardships endured by those who came later.

Jesus dismisses the complainers with harsh words. You got what you bargained for. Now, go. You have your pay, but no more. Having condemned grace, they lost it. They were first, but became last and lost. “Do you begrudge my generosity?” he asked. Yes, they did.

What Jesus asked them literally was, “Is your eye evil because I am generous.” Earlier he said *“The eye is the lamp of the body; ...if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.”* Their attitude revealed the content of their soul.

How is your eye and soul? Do you begrudge the generous grace of God to those whom you deem less worthy than you? Do you want Him to be fair and just?

I don’t. I rejoice that God is not fair and does not give me what I deserve. What a blessing that His ways are not our ways and his thoughts are higher than ours. Otherwise He would judge us as we judge others, with harsh justice.

God is not only graciously unfair to us, so was He to His own Son. He put on him our punishment and gave us His righteousness. By his unfair generosity we are saved.

We deserve to be last, least, lost. But by his grace and his grace alone we are first. Do I begrudge his generosity? Not at all. By it I have many blessings in this life and in the next eternal life. Because of it, I gladly work all day, every day in his kingdom, sharing the love and mercy He first gave me. May it be so for you as well. Amen.