

Parable of the Vineyard Workers

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by

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A story is told about a monk who went to heaven and saw a chronic drunk there who had constantly come to the monastery door for handouts after long binges. The monk in heaven said, "Lord, what is **this** fellow doing here? I've spent my life living my vows, doing good, and praying and here I find this ne'er-do-well, who drank all his life and gave in to all kinds of lustful desires. I discover him **here** in heaven with **me**. What **good** was all my hard penance? If I had known I could have gotten to heaven by giving in to all my sinful urges, I would **not** have joined the monastery and done **so** much praying." The Lord let this monk see what life had been on earth for the drifter: painful cirrhosis of the liver, abandoned by his family, fired from his jobs, tuberculosis, no friends, constant hunger, and despised by society. He asked the monk if he would like to go back to earth and live the life of this poor drunk. The monk quickly saw the **error** of his pride and shut up. The **real** question the monk is asking, is God fair? And our parable outrageously answers, no, God is **not** fair, rather God goes far beyond fairness, all the way to grace. Fairness and justice are human values and expectations which God happily turns inside out and upside down! If we were rewarded based on fairness, on what we **truly** deserved, well let's just say that Heaven would be hanging "For Rent" signs on its front gates!

Still as the parable reminds us, so **much** of our lives is spent in the tit-for-tat world of ungrace. From nursery school on, we are taught how to succeed in this world: from why is his piece of cake bigger than mine to keeping up with the Joneses to dog eat dog. Society instills in us that we are worth **what** we do, not **who** we **are**. We strive for success, compete for turf, size up and rank others based on what they can do for us, carve out a niche in the pecking order with our degrees, our years of distinguished service, or our titles as president, CEO, manager, senior associate, even deacon. Those who come out ahead and market themselves are rewarded, while those who fail to meet "minimum" requirements are punished. We grow up estimating our own value by external standards: how hard we have worked or how much money we make. So we do identify with the weary heat-stricken dawn laborers and their complaint that if someone gets what we're getting, but hasn't put in as much work as we have, then **we** are being cheated. The late cultural critic Studs Terkel summed up this attitude: "**I've** got it made because I deserve it and if **you** don't have it made, you **don't** deserve it!"

Alternatively, our Gospel confronts us with another perspective, the realm of divine grace, which is a great **democratizer** ripping away our **presumed** privilege and putting all its recipients on an equal level. Grace dares us to unburden ourselves of reducing spirituality to a merit system based on **substantial** rewards given for tasks well done. The dawn laborers were not so much **angered** by what happened to them, as **jealous** of the good fortune of the 11th hour laborers, which then blinded them to seeing their **own** work and wages as gifts. An English bishop sat for his portrait to be painted. Friends said to him, "I hope the artist does you justice," to which the bishop replied, "At my age, I ask for **mercy** not justice." And in this parable, God chooses to be **extraordinarily** generous, way beyond our expectations. Everyone gets the same benefits: a daily wage and what they need to live. The good news is that no longer does anyone **need** to exist in the envious world of comparison, but we **can** live in the abundant world of God's goodness. Similar to today's inner city migrant workers waiting on street corners hoping to be picked up for a day's job, for these parable laborers **not** to be chosen was **not** to earn enough to feed them or their families. The **gift** in this story is to be welcomed into the vineyard in the **first** place. No one **deserves** to be in the vineyard. One need not have been hired at all. It is **not** the **equal** pay for **all** the workers, **but** the landowner's repeated attempts to return and bring in **all** the laborers, **that** is the parable's image of grace. The only thing that counts is that one is invited, no matter how late it is in the day. No one is **better** qualified, enjoys **more** privilege, or is of **higher** status than anyone else, regardless of how long or hard anyone has worked in the vineyard. The focus of the landowner is **always** on the laborers, not the crop or his own profit. The owner hired more workers **not** because there were more crops to be harvested, but because he found laborers standing around, out of work, **unwanted** by others. The owner is motivated by **their** need for work, not **his** need for workers. **Yes**, the divine landowner employs even those the world ignores and forgets. It is like a children's playground baseball field, where everyone is standing around, waiting for sides to be chosen. Those with poor skills dread this moment, because they are always picked last, if at all! But God looks beyond our so-called deficiencies and weaknesses and graciously says, "Today, I can use **all** of you. Come be on **my** team." The owner won't be happy until **everyone** is at work in **his** vineyard.

The foundation of God's system is **mercy**, not achievement. Jesus's vision of God is that divine compassion greatly **outweighs** divine justice. Matthew redefines justice in terms of God's generous and saving intervention on behalf of those the world sees as outsiders or marginalized, the desperate and needy. Justice is determined, not by "what is right" (after all, the owner paid what he agreed to pay; he just paid it to **everyone**), but rather justice is established by the owner's unrelenting calling, and hiring, the invitation, to come into **his** vineyard. **No** one, the old, the sick, the rejected, is left behind! And what do we think of a God whose basic character is mercy and forgiveness? When God is lavish with loving us,

despite our shortcomings, then we're 100% for grace. And we don't even mind it when God is charitable to others, as long as God doesn't **overdo** it. After all, fair is fair. What we really resent is when we sense that God is **more** gracious to others than God is to us and especially if God shows mercy to people **we** don't think deserve it. Or to quote the Canadian musician Bruce Cockburn's song, "everyone wants justice done on somebody **else!**" Yet, **we** are the **leftover** laborers who worked only one hour. In spite of our faults and failures, we realize how unworthy we are to receive God's gift of love and grace, yet God mercifully accepts us no **matter** what we do or **fail** to do to deserve it. God treats **all** of us equally because we are **all** God's people and we are **all** God's favorite. The parable challenges us with a **decision**: Do we want to live in the world of **fear**, where there is a perceived scarcity of goods and rewards, so one must hoard, keep the best things for oneself, and even take things from others, or the world of **love**, where there is plenty of goods and rewards, where I can give to you because there is more than enough for everyone?

There is an old rabbinic parable about a farmer that had two sons. When they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and taught them everything about growing crops and raising animals. The two boys took over the chores of the farm and when their father died, they kept up their partnership. During every harvest season, they would divide equally what they had corporately produced. Across the years the elder brother never married. The younger brother did marry and had 8 children. Some years later when they were having a bountiful harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs **more** of this God given harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. In the dead of the night when he is already asleep, I'll take some of what I have put in my barn and I'll slip it over into **his** barn to help him feed his children. At the very same time, the younger brother was thinking to himself, "God has given me these wonderful children who will eventually take care of me. My brother really needs **more** of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know he's much too fair to renegotiate. In the dead of the night when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I've put in my barn and slip it over in to **his** barn." And so one night when the moon was full, those two brothers each on a mission of generosity, came face to face, dropping their bags of wheat, embracing each other. Just then a gentle rain started falling. It was God weeping for joy!

The great news is that our relationship to God is based not on what we deserve (as if any of us would want **that**) nor on how long or hard we've struggled, but that we are **all** invited by and receive the never ending overflowing mercy of God. So we can't help **but** out of gratitude embrace each other with generosity. Incredibly, like the 11th hour workers, we are **all** going to be treated **far** better than we deserve, being welcomed into Heaven as if we were St. Paul,

Francis of Assisi, or the monk in our story, even though almost all of us are **not** worthy of such praise. God refuses to leave us alone, looking out for **each** one of us, pursuing passionately **every** single person. And yes, God is not fair. Hallelujah! Otherwise, I wouldn't stand a chance of redemption. Would you?