

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

Matthew 20:1-16 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.³ When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same.⁶ 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?’⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’⁸ 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.’⁹ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,¹² 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.’¹³ 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?’¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

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An Evil Eye Matthew 20:1-16

This parable reveals one of the greatest problems we humans have, and that is, letting God be God. We have the hardest time doing this, which is probably why God made it the top priority when he gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The first two are both about letting God be God.

“I am Yahweh your God...you shall have no other gods before me.”

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, then bow down to it.”

In other words, let God be God.

Our first problem is, we keep trying to make other things into God, so that we end up worshiping all kinds of things that aren't God, like money, sex, and power, to name three of the biggest ones. Popularity, success, and self come in right after those. Whatever we make the highest priority in our lives becomes our god, and frequently that thing we make into our god isn't Yahweh.

Our second problem is, even when we let God be *our God*, we keep trying to make him into other things. We keep trying to change God into the kind of God we want him to be. You remember that quote I've shared with you before by Anne Lamott about how we can know we have made God into our own image when it turns out God hates all the same people we do. Well, that's one way we do it, but there are others. This never ends well.

It's like getting married to someone who isn't exactly who we want them to be, because nobody is, and instead of accepting them for who they are, warts and all, we keep thinking that, with time we will change them into the husband or wife we want them to be. I've seen it a lot because those are the couples who end up coming to me for the name of a good marriage counselor. Trying to make other people into the person we want them to be always turns them into someone we like even less, because they end up liking us even less for not accepting them as they are. Trying to make God into the God we want him to be has similar negative consequences.

This is what happens in the parable Jesus tells this morning. It is important to keep in mind that all of the workers who are hired during this day, they are all in the same boat. None of them has a steady job. They are unemployed day laborers hoping to get hired by an employer who has a little more work right now than they have workers. They need a few hired hands for the day. So all of these guys are living hand-to-mouth, trying to keep food on the table to feed their families. In short, they are all desperate. The landowner in the story offers grace to all of them by giving them work to do that will feed their family for the day.

So this landowner comes to market at 6:00 in the morning to hire some workers, promising to be fair with them – they will be paid a day's wage for a day's work. He takes them to his vineyard, puts them to work, and then turns around and goes back to hire another group, promising to pay them what is “right.” When you factor in travel time to and from his vineyard, which would have been outside the town, it is likely that he does little else that day than go back and forth to market. Five times in eleven hours he goes to market. Six o'clock, nine, noon, three, and just two hours later at five o'clock, he hires workers, takes them to his vineyard, then turns around and does it again.

This is odd behavior.

Either the landowner is a really poor planner who doesn't know how many workers he needs, or he is that concerned with the fact that those men at the market need work. At the end of the day, we find out which it is. He tells his manager to call the laborers in from the vineyard and pay them, starting with the last-hired and moving toward the first.

Again, this is strange, too. Why not pay the first workers first and let them go on their way instead of making them wait while everyone else, who has not worked a full day, gets paid before them? He clearly wants those who worked longer hours to see how gracious he is to those who worked fewer hours. They stand there at the back of the line and watch those who only worked an hour get paid for a full day's work. Who would do that? Who would be so extravagantly generous as to give people twelve hours' pay who deserve an hour's pay? They say to each other, “Would you look at the odd duck we worked for today? Surely a boss that generous is going to pay us handsomely, indeed!”

But then the 3-hour workers get a day's wage, and the 6-hour workers get a day's wage, and the 9-hour workers get a day's wage, and those crack-of-dawn workers can see what's coming, so that when it happens, they are already in full grumbling mode. One man must be grumbling louder than all the rest, for the landowner addresses him, even though the whole group is grumbling.

“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?”

There are three very important statements within the questions the landowner asks the grumblers:

1. I am fair – I paid you what we agreed to this morning.
2. I am free – it is my money, I can do what I want with it.
3. I am generous – extravagantly gracious

Since we know that this parable is about the kingdom of heaven, and the landowner represents God, these are the three things Jesus is teaching us about God:

God is fair, free and extravagantly gracious.

Then the landowner asks the most pointed and convicting question of all: “Or are you envious because I am generous?” Now, the literal Greek contains a figure of speech we are not familiar with, which is why it is translated this way. Literally, the landowner asks, “*Is your eye evil because I am good?*” The expression goes back to Matthew 6:22 when Jesus says, “*The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.*” An evil eye reveals the darkness of a soul that is living outside the gracious generosity of God. An evil eye belongs to someone who wants God to see things their way, rather than their seeing things God’s way.

When we refuse to let God be God, and insist that God do things the way we think they should be done, the evil eye within us is revealed. The parable is a warning against projecting our own opinions about how things should be unto God. It is a window into three of the most important characteristics of God: God is fair; God is free; and God is extravagantly generous with his grace.

The question Jesus poses in this parable is: how do we respond when God exercises God’s freedom to be extravagantly generous with his grace toward people we know don’t deserve it? Are we envious? Is our eye evil, revealing the darkness in our soul that resents God’s grace toward others, instead of celebrating it, instead of enjoying watching the joy they get at this surprise gift of grace?

If the workers standing at the back of the line had not had evil eyes, how would they have reacted as they watched the scene unfold in front of them? They would have seen men whose families were at home waiting and hoping to have food to eat. And, when the landowner hired them for an hour, they would have thought, well, at least they get something. Perhaps I could give a little to them to help out. But when they see the manager give them a full day’s wage, these workers with healthy eyes, loving eyes, would have rejoiced – not because they thought they would get more, but because the landowner made sure those men’s families ate that night. They wouldn’t have been thinking about themselves, other than being grateful that they, too, were able to work and take home enough so that everyone in the family would go to bed with full bellies, thanking God for giving them their daily bread.

That’s what happens when our eyes are healthy, when light fills our souls, and when we are able to let God be God –

fair,

free,

and extravagantly generous with his grace.