

# Covenant Word

## ***A God That Is Too Nice***

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

cloak the extra mile? Is it the Old Testament part about divorcing your infertile wife or stoning your disrespectful children, or the New Testament part about loving your neighbor as you love yourself?

We can use Scripture to defend most any position that captures our attention. Every now and then, when we really listen to the Bible, we can come across a story so strange that it rubs right up against all of our cherished suppositions. The Bible, at this point, doesn't seem to be a solution for anything. In fact, it may just create such uncomfortableness that we squirm in our pews. Take today's gospel reading as a prime example.

We don't expect to find a story like this in Matthew. Other gospels may focus on the love and gracious acceptance of God, but this is not typical of Matthew. As far as Matthew is concerned, even though Jesus Christ brings us salvation, all the legalism still applies. Therefore, this gospel is full of stern demands, lists of injunctions with a gavel coming down in the great heavenly courts of the Almighty. Other

*A Message by  
The Reverend Sarah  
Jackson Shelton  
Pastor  
Sunday  
September 24, 2017*

When Lloyd arrives home each day, I greet him at the back door holding the latest political advertisements that came in the day's mail. I want him to feel safe knowing that there are politicians who are out to save our Christian values, who will protect us from those terrible people who cross borders, and who will place Old Testament Scripture in the midst of the judicial system. One candidate feels free to show target practice while touting a Christian agenda. The other is quick to add to his wife's television commercial that he approves the ad and he loves the messenger. I fear that after today some of you may not approve of my message nor of this messenger! You see, I have about reached my limit. I am tired of being manipulated with ads that play on the fears of good, common folk. I am losing patience with individuals who parade their religiosity, each trying to outdo the other with proof for who is really religious, when the money saved from their commercials and full color brochures might be used to feed the hungry and house the homeless.

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gospels have stories about a good bad boy who comes back home after carousing in the family car with his dad's credit cards. He's still hung over and yet, that old man welcomes his prodigal home with open arms and orders a banquet to be thrown in his honor. Stories like this one, however, are not in Matthew's gospel. Oh no, Matthew tells stories about foolish virgins standing in the darkness begging for entrance to the wedding. "Too bad for them," says Matthew. Matthew tells of servants not paying their debts and ending up in jail forever. In Matthew, you get what you deserve; you make your own bed and sleep in it; you reap what you sow. "Actions have consequences," ol' Matthew says, "so be careful what you do, because in the end, you will be judged, and the sheep will be separated from the goats!" (William Willimon, "Graciousness and Grumbling," 9-23-84, Duke Chapel) Today's parable feels like a ticking bomb in the middle of Matthew's straight-laced, ethically earnest gospel.

In conversations, usually in deference to my profession, I sometimes hear, "But we need to get back to the Bible. The Bible has all the solutions to our problems." As a minister, I agree that getting back to the Bible would be a good thing. Who shouldn't begin their day with a reading or two, a "daily dose" of holy writ? The problem comes with determining which part of the Bible we want to "get back to?" Is it the Old Testament part about an eye for an eye or the New Testament part about forgiving seven times seventy? Is it the Old Testament part about smiting all our enemies or the New Testament part about carrying our enemy's

**Dear Friends,  
Thank you for  
wanting to read and  
study these thoughts  
more carefully.  
Please know that I do  
not take full credit for  
anything that may be  
contained within,  
because I may have  
read or heard  
something at some  
point during my  
pilgrimage and do not  
remember its source  
and thus, cannot give  
the rightful author  
his/her credit. I pray  
that you will find  
inspiration and  
encouragement.**



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morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible  
study at 10:30 a.m.

Clarence Jordan of Koinonia Farms once said that we should be very careful with the stories known as parables, because it is like Jesus lights a stick of dynamite and then covers it with a story. If this is true then the gospel of Matthew is a battlefield. We hear Jesus over and over again: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in a field." "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...like leaven...like treasure hidden in a field." "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls...like a net thrown into the sea." "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wishes to settle accounts." This was last week's gospel. And then today, "The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard."

We have no problem with the fact that the householder hires laborers. He has a crop to harvest and needs the extra hands. But let's look closely at these laborers. They are out early. I imagine that they are highly skilled and able. They have resumes on cream colored paper that tout alphabets besides their names: B.S., B.A., M.Div., M.B.A., Ed. D., Ph.D. They are the brightest and the best. They are published and have ideas to share with exemplary work ethics. Possessing glowing recommendations, they ate dinner last night and breakfast this morning. Their employment brings medical and dental insurance, so that their bodies are strong and healthy. Because they are informed about the labor laws and what the determined minimum wage is, they negotiate their pay: a denarius for a day's work. It is equal pay for equal work. And did I mention that they have enough self-confidence to not be intimidated by the land owner? This becomes more evident as the story progresses.

***He wants everyone to end the day with the dignity and security of a living wage and the capacity to go home to feed a family.***

But before I get ahead of myself, let's look at the other laborers. They are hired throughout the day. If you look closely, there is not one mention that the landowner needs them. How could he when he has already hired the exceptional? But, because he sees them standing "idle," in other words, without work to perform, he offers them a job. He seems to be obsessed with the thought that every last person gets a place in his vineyard, because he selects laborers four more times – the early bird and the latecomer, the able-bodied and the infirmed, the young and the old, the popular and the forgotten. Our thought is that economy revolves around the needs of the boss, but

in this story, please note that the story line progresses because the workers have need. They have people at home who are hoping to eat. The fact that this landowner hires the workers, even when he doesn't really need them, is our first glimpse of his incredible generosity. He wants everyone to end the day with the dignity and security of a living wage and the capacity to go home to feed a family. Some workers go merely on the landowner's assurance that he will be fair. Others go to work at his summons. They simply trust the character of the landowner. (Thomas Long, <https://www.onscripture.com/imagining-economic-justice>)

Everything literally blows up when the end of the day comes, and the foreman asks the workers to line up according to the hour that they arrived on the job. The latest arrivers are placed at the front of the line. Those who worked all day are placed at the end of the line. Already, the reversal associated with the kingdom is becoming evident. The late comers are paid a full denarius, a day's wage. It is the very wage that the early birds' negotiated. Observing this, those who worked the full day naturally assume that they will be paid more. But every worker, whether they labored all day or only a few hours, are paid exactly the same. Those who are hired late, are ecstatic! But the early workers howl: "This is unjust!" And the landowner responds with "You got exactly what you agreed to – no harm, no foul. Don't accuse me of injustice because I choose to be generous! If you want a world that operates on deals and bargains, bean counting and rules of fairness, then you need to find another parable to be in. Because in this parable, everything moves according to generosity, and everybody gets enough to live." And they grumble. They murmur. They leave angry and not in gladness.

In reality, this may be the most accurate picture of the kingdom of heaven. Everyone is grumbling. Everyone is murmuring about injustice, and not a one of those early laborers is grateful for the generosity of the landowner to the later workers. It is a hard lesson that God is not fair. No, God is generous. Why do we get so upset at this generosity?

Think back to your school days. Do you remember the teachers telling you to keep your eyes on your own paper, how cheating is not to be tolerated, and that if you cheat, you will only hurt yourself? Then remember the kid who asked you daily if you had your Latin homework. He had had a late date the night before or football practice ran long, and so he did not get his work done. And so you shared. It was just homework, not an exam. What was the harm? It would catch up with him on the test, right? Then, Senior Honors Day arrives, and the whole school gathers in the auditorium to pay homage to the top students in the graduating class. Guess whose name gets called out as the prize student in Latin? Guess who gets to walk across the stage and shake the principal's hand? It's not you! (Willimon)

Think about your life as a believer: all the time you have spent in Bible study and worship, singing in the choir, serving on committees, chaperoning youth retreats and volunteering in the nursery. You read your Bible (every now and then), and summon up enough of an offering to satisfy the annual stewardship campaign. You serve the community through the scouts, take food to your neighbors, and treat your family respectfully. You have filled your life with doing good, being good, sharing good. And then, there is that person on death row, making a deathbed confession, seeking to erase a lifetime of corruption and greed. Really, he receives the full treasure of God, just like you, when he dies? That doesn't seem fair!

***It's the same question I ask about the undocumented workers: what sort of big fish is so threatening that they leave their families and risk everything to jump in our boat?***

And then there is this parable that has two sets of workers: those who are hired at the first of the day and those hired late in the day, but all receiving the same pay.

I don't believe that those hired later were absent at the first call. I believe that they were there, but they are not hired because they are smaller or older, maybe weaker and slower, women not men, but even so, they still need a full day's wage in order to survive. And so they are left to wait in vain...idle...desperate to take anything home to their families. So when the landowner generously offers work, even at the last hour, they take it. They take it because anything is better than nothing. (Anna McArthur, "Eleventh-Hour Workers," Journal for Preachers, Lent 2002)

The Southern Poverty Law Center says that these eleventh hour workers are easily identifiable even today. (Injustice on our Plates) Most are immigrant women from Mexico, Guatemala and other Latin-American countries. The faces on the front of your bulletins are a few of the four million undocumented women living in the United States, and they are among the most vulnerable of all workers, because they are easily exploitable and disposable.

Maria, for instance, is a thirty year old from Guatemala. She came into the United States because friends told her that in the North, you can make good money. And so she works 12-hour days picking tomatoes in Florida. She earns 45 cents for every 32 pound bucket of tomatoes. To receive payment, she has to fill and dump 150 buckets of tomatoes a day. That is, when the bosses actually pay her for her work. So, at the end of a week, without rest breaks, sexually harassed and no benefits, Maria may have given her labor away for nothing, even though somewhere in

America, someone pays full price for the tomatoes that Maria picks. Maria and other undocumented persons are the backbone of our food supply. Their hands slice the chicken breast we eat for lunch. Their sweat brings fresh tomatoes to our plates, and their backs bend to pick the lettuce for our salads.

Being undocumented means that their presence in our country is illegal. I understand that. I know that there is a process for being here, but I balance this knowledge with a simple question: if they put their lives in danger to be here, how awful is what they are escaping and are we really offering them with anything better?

Lloyd was night fishing in the Gulf with a former employer. It was quite the sight to discover that in the dark, shrimp are fluorescent. To his surprise, the shrimp would jump into the boat. His employer said, "Can you imagine what kind of big fish is chasing the shrimp to make them jump out of the water and into our

boat?" It's the same question I ask about the undocumented workers: what sort of big fish is so threatening that they leave their families and risk everything to jump in our boat?

Now every commentator I read said that this parable is not a blueprint for labor practices or economic systems any more than the Prodigal Son is a class on parenting or the Great Banquet is a manual of table etiquette. Even so, this parable works on our imaginations in ways that have profound implications for the marketplace and economic justice. It allows us to enter for a moment into an alternative world, one that operates on generosity rather than greed, ambition, and competition. It allows us to experience a world in which those who stand ignored, idle and discarded by society are nevertheless of great value to God. They are worthy, regardless of their circumstances, to live with dignity each day. The parable discloses the surprising abundant generosity that flows from the very life of God, and because we are on God's payroll, we cannot look at a parking lot full of farmworkers, or individuals holding DACA signs, or even those who arrive at 4:30 to stand in line for dinner at 2117 University Boulevard as disposable. In fact, it should keep us up at night to realize that we are the first chosen with all the responsibility that comes with being placed there. (Long)

***It allows us to experience a world in which those who stand ignored, idle and discarded by society are nevertheless of great value to God.***

In God's vineyard, all are cherished and loved equally. God has freely poured out for each and every one of us God's love and forgiveness, goodness and mercy. It is the standard that we are all called to reflect. Whether it is fair or not does not

matter. What matters is that we will live in this world in unusual ways, more concerned about those who have less than those who have more. It will be hard at first, because you can't always see it from the front of the line. So will you move to the back of the line where the first become last, and the last become first not only in the parable, but also in hope, in kingdom time, and in faithful living? ("The Kingdom Where Latecomers are Equal to Those who have been Working All Along," [patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/howling-daca-generosity-god/#gfCCvjRUvmcYS6Ok.03](http://patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/howling-daca-generosity-god/#gfCCvjRUvmcYS6Ok.03)) May it be so, Amen.