

"Life-Giving Lesson:
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Equal Pay for Unequal Work?"
Matthew 19:30-20:16, Isaiah 55:6-13
June 18, 2017

³⁰But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

20 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius^[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³"About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

⁷"'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

⁸"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

⁹"The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

¹³"But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶"So the last will be first, and the first will be last." [Pray.]

How many of you like to be last? Or first?
"It depends" is the most common response. How many of you like to be

first to be served at meal time? First in line? Last in an TSA line at the airport? First in the line at the DMV?

Our response may be conditioned by previous experience. As youngsters, my sister and I always went to the dentist together but as the younger of the two, I went first! In my mind, that was ok as I got it over with faster as the dentist's office is not my favorite place.

This is a so-called Kingdom parable, in that Jesus says it reveals to us a truth about the King and the King's character and rule. I think this is significant. In the Wizard of Oz, the wizard appears to be remote, all powerful, and not necessarily benevolent. In reality, the "wizard" was unmasked as an ordinary human being, hiding behind a curtain, and some special effects.

So what does this parable reveal to us about the King/God? And what does it reveal to us about human nature? This parable has as "bookends", Jesus' statement that "the first will be last, and the last will be first". (And if something is repeated in scripture, that means...pay attention: this is important!)

Shel Silverstein has written a telling tale, titled: LADIES FIRST.

Did you hear about the little girl who was a "tender sweet young thing"? Well, that's the way she thought of herself. And this tender sweet young thing spent a great deal of time just looking in the mirror, saying,

"I am a real little lady. Anybody could tell that: I wear lovely starched cotton dresses with matching ribbons in my lovely curly locks; I wear clean white socks and shine black patent leather shoes; and I always put just a dab of perfume, behind each ear."

When she was at the end of the lunch line at school, all she had to say was, "Ladies first, ladies first!" and she'd get right up to the front of the line.

Well, her life went on like that for quite awhile, and she wound up having a pretty good time—you know—admiring herself in mirrors, always getting to be first in line, and stuff like that.

Then one day she went exploring with a whole group of other people, through the wilds of a deep and beastly jungle. As she went along through the tangled trails and the prickly vines, she would say things like:

"I have got to be careful of my lovely dress, and my nice white socks and my shiny,shiny shoes, and my curly, curly, locks, so would somebody please clear the way for me?"

And they did.

Or sometimes she'd say:

"What do you mean there aren't enough mangoes to go around and I'll have to share my mango because I was the last one across that icky river full of crocodiles and snakes? No matter how last I am, it's still

"Ladies first, Ladies first!" so please hand over a whole mango, please."

And they did.

Well, then, guess what happened?

Out of nowhere, the exploring party was seized, grabbed up by a bunch of hungry tigers. They tied up all the people and dragged them back to their tiger lair, where they tried to decide who would make the best dinner.

"How about this one?" said the tiger chief.

"Naah, too bony," said the others.

"What about this one? It's got a lotta meat on it."

"Unh-uunh, meaty but muscle-y."

"Oh for heaven's sake, don't take all night!" said the chief tiger.

"I never saw such a pack of picky eaters!"

"How about this one then? It looks tender. (sniff sniff) Smells nice. In fact, I never saw anything quite like it before. I wonder what it is."

"I am a tender, sweet young thing," She said.

"Far out!" said the tiger chief.

"I am also a little lady. You should know that by my lovely clothes, and my lovely smell. And if it's all the same to you, Tiger Tweetie,

I wish you'd stop licking me this instant. My dress is getting mussed."

Yes...well, as a matter of fact, we were all just trying to decide who to untie first."

"Ladies first, Ladies first!" she said.

And so she was. (picture in book portrays the tigers belching with contentment!)

And mighty tasty, too!

Jesus tells about a vintner whose harvest is ready. He is in need of help in order to bring in the grapes in a timely fashion. He goes to the local Lowe's and hires some fellows at 6 a.m. They are glad to go into the vineyard, assured of a day's wage which will allow them to provide for their families.

He returns at 9 a.m., noon and 3 p.m. Put yourself in the sandals of those hired at 3 p.m. There must have been a sense of relief that even a few hours work would be welcome. Finally the boss returns at 5 p.m. and hires a few more.

At the end of the day—at 6 p.m. The landowner tells his property manager to pay the last hired—those who worked the shortest shift—first, and to pay everyone the same amount, a denarius, or the standard wage. Naturally, those hired later in the day are delighted with the generosity of the boss. Likewise, those hired first thing in the morning, are incensed. When first hired, they were content with the daily wage, whereas now they believe they are entitled to more than those who were hired last, since they had worked a full shift. Now the grumbling begins...

Instead of being pleased that everyone receives a days' wage—for their "daily bread"—they are offended by the boss' generosity! Yet were they to change places with the ones hired at the end of the day, no doubt they would change their tune in a heartbeat.

No injustice has occurred. It is completely within the purview of the landowner to do as he wishes.

If, as Jesus says, this is a Kingdom parable, and if the landowner represents God, we are indeed reminded that God is free to be generous.

Salvation itself is not earned; it is a gift. Some may receive it before others, but that is no reason to be upset; rather it is reason for rejoicing when others also receive it, even if they come to faith later in life.

On the cross, Jesus was flanked by two thieves, also on crosses. One, with his dying breath, confessed faith in Christ; to which Christ responded: "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Friends: this was pure grace! For that thief, as well as for each one of us.

The perfect recipe for *discontentment* begins with comparing oneself to another, or with a sense of entitlement or deserving. In either of those scenarios, nothing will ever satisfy, or be enough.

Even the disciples were not immune to these pitfalls. James and John asked Jesus if they could sit at his right and left—places of power and privilege, when he established his Kingdom. It was pretty gutsy to make such a request, but when the other ten heard of this, they became indignant! They wanted their piece of the action too! In response, Jesus says something similar to "the first shall be last" reversal.

⁴² Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials

exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mark 10:42-45

Clearly the Kingdom of God reverses the order of some relationships, from what we would normally expect! Servants are great, the first are last and the last are first. In other words, we will be in for some major surprises when the Kingdom of God is fully realized!

However if we view all of life through the lens of grace, we are filled with gratitude. Grace is **not** getting what we **do** deserve—both in the here and now, as well as in the Kingdom of God.

Grace means when we are at the end of the line, we need not worry about getting ahead. God’s got our back.

Grace means that there is no need to be overcome with anxiety about where our next job/meal/car payment might be coming from...God’s got our back.

Grace means that we need not jockey for power or position in church or society; God needs/can use servants everywhere. Servants now, will be rewarded later. The truth of it is, servants today receive the intrinsic reward of knowing that God is smiling when we choose to serve others in God’s name, as an expression of our gratitude for all God has done for us. We don’t need to be first!! This is good news! Thanks be to God!