



A QUESTION GOD ASKS

MATTHEW 20:1-16

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**20
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The workers in the vineyard grumble when those who came to work later get paid the same amount as those who started their labor early in day. (No matter that a wage had been agreed upon from the outset.) The phrase that jumps out from the parable: “They thought they would receive more.”

Those first laborers, upon seeing that the last received the amount the master had agreed to pay them, do the quick math. If the master pays a full denarius for such a limited amount of time, then their hourly rate has just increased significantly! They thought they would receive more. And why wouldn't they? If those who only worked a few hours got a denarius, surely those who worked double, triple, quadruple that amount of time would get paid more. It is, after all, only fair. We would expect this to be the arrangement, right? The workers see a business arrangement; the master instead cultivates relationships. It appears the bottom line for the owner of the vineyard is not money. It is mercy. Such a calculation remains difficult for us to understand. Therefore, we like the full-day laborers, grumble in the face of God's grace. We thought we would receive more. After all, that's how the world, our world, works: merit not mercy, grit not grace, contract not covenant, transactions not trust, payment for service not ongoing relationship.

The master in Jesus' parable upends all our norms and we are left baffled by such generosity and grumbling when we think we should receive more. We don't know what to do when there's not a gradation of value among people, when the comparisons by which we evaluate ourselves and others don't matter, when we can't calculate what we and others are worth. Grace confuses the system we thought was a given.

We want to get what we think we deserve. Yet in this parable, Jesus tells us that God, in God's infinite mercy, does not give us what we deserve. Why do we want more of what is utterly incalculable? Why do we begrudge God's generosity to others when God has been unbelievably generous to us? God asks, “Are you jealous because I am generous?”

Are we jealous over what others receive? Are we envious of what others have?

I don't know if you've ever read Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Thousands of lines in length, this poem recounts the adventures of the narrator as he is led through hell, purgatory, and heaven. Its numerous scenes present great truths in rich symbolism. These scenes speak to the human heart. The memory of them lingers.

For example, Dante experiences Purgatory as a mountain of hope. Those climbing it have been saved by grace and look forward to the glorious vision of God. Yet their journey remains incomplete. It is a process of growth that happens only gradually and includes a pain that helps to heal. Each stage along the way removes the effects of a different kind of sin. On each terrace, Dante is shown the effects of a particular sin on the sinner, together with examples of the opposite virtue.

In the place where envy is overcome those afflicted by this sin are clothed in coarse garments and sit among the rocks like pitiful blind beggars, each leaning on a neighbor's shoulder. They hear sounds around them, but they do not see. Their eyelids have been sewn shut with iron wire.

Dante depicts the envious as blind. They cannot see the light that surrounds them. But their blindness is no accident. It results from the many times they chose not to recognize life as a gift freely given to everyone even as the daylight is a gift. The envious always wanted what others had. They could not celebrate the gifts those others had received. They closed their eyes to the light of a shared life and sewed them shut.

Envy is blind. This is a self-inflicted blindness. And we can see this in the parable Jesus tells about a labor-management dispute. It seems that a vineyard owner pays his whole crew a full day's wage whether they worked for only an hour or spent all day laboring in the summer heat. Those who worked a full day are enraged. They call the owner's action unjust.

The owner sees it differently. The all-day workers have not been cheated. He has rescued them from a situation in which they didn't know how they would feed themselves or their families that day. They have received the agreed-upon wage, and they have enough to live on. The vineyard owner looks with compassionate eyes on the other workers. He knows that they also need a full day's wage in order to get by. The wage he pays them represents a fresh start, new life for those who have borne the heavy burden of unemployment through long hours of the day.

Yet the all-day workers know only the arithmetic of jealousy. Though they receive what they expect and what they need, they want to deny life's necessities to others. Their eyes are sewn shut by envy. They no longer see the human faces of their neighbors. How sad are the eyes of the envious! Their lids are sewn shut with wire! They sew their eyes shut themselves and find no pleasure in the work. Author Henry Fairlie put it this way, "If all sins are loveless, Envy's eyes are particularly so. It seems to find nothing to love in all the world, not in the whole of creation, not in anyone else, not even when they are turned up to what is lovely. It is unable to love, because it is riddled with fear."

Envy is unable to love. That has its sad results.

The first is what envy does to the heart. All sins make the heart hard, but envy goes further. Envy frets and gnaws the very heart of those who harbor it. Envy doesn't simply make us indifferent to others, to God, but envy causes us to murmur against others, against God, for when we become sad because someone else experiences good, then we are saddened by God, who is the author of all good, and what we speak against is actually God's mercy.

Another result of envy is what Parker Palmer terms “the scarcity assumption.” The envious see the world as a place where whatever we need must necessarily be in short supply. This attitude justifies every form of competition. It makes nonsense of community life and acts of compassion.

However, we will do well to admit that the scarcity assumption is subtle and seductive. To the degree we act on it, we help to make it stronger. Envy touches each of us from time to time and we all have a strange urge to shut our eyes and sew them together with iron wire so that we no longer see daylight or the splendor of creation or the face of Christ in our neighbor.

The relief for this is two-fold.

First, we must practice thankfulness to God. Thank God not only for what is rare, but also for what is ordinary, and we’ll find that glory flashes in every plain place, that God leaves no day or hour unvisited. As we practice thanking God, the scarcity assumption will not make sense; we will recognize it as a lie. As we become regular in thankfulness, we just might be able to experience abundance. It is not that the world will change, but that our eyes will open.

The relief’s other part is to show kindness to others. We must do this if we are to escape from envy. Show kindness, and the less people deserve it, the better. Let’s not be the ones who reserve our courtesy for saints. Take God as your example, who makes the sun to shine on the good and bad alike. Pray the most for those you like the least. This just might be the blowtorch needed to soften your heart, to make it pliable again. Practice kindness, and you will find community, but perhaps not in the way you expected. And through that difference, your healing will happen. Kindness is Dante’s virtue opposite to envy.

But kindness and thankfulness do not originate with us. They are only responses to what we hear in our hearts. For if we listen carefully, we will hear in our hearts a question that today we heard in Scripture: “Are you jealous because I am generous?” (a literal translation),

When envy shuts our eyes, as it does from time to time, kindness and thankfulness can offer a way to new sight. The simplest and hardest element of a life of discipleship may be *not* surrendering to the cultural narrative that we deserve more, and therefore others should receive less. In a world in which we get bombarded with the message that we always need more, that we deserve more, that strives to make us perpetually on the hunt for more, we might at times struggle to rejoice in God’s generosity and grace.

But thank God that our worth is not synonymous with our productivity. God seeks us out to participate in the work of the kingdom. God enlists whoever says “yes” when asked to go to the field. So much of what we value, and count and measure does not matter to God. This parable comes right after Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man. Let me stop right there and point out that he already has much of what the world holds dear—he’s *rich*, meaning he has economic power, he’s *young*, meaning he has what the world will consider considerable potential and attraction, and he’s *male*, meaning he already has access to patriarchal power and authority over others. He knows the cultural rules and he’s benefited by following them. However, this young man asks Jesus, “What do I lack?” Certainly, he expected Jesus to say: “Not a thing. You’re good to go.” But instead Jesus tells this rich young man to sell all he has, give the money to the poor and follow. Jesus invites him into relationship — with others, with God. And relationships cannot be calculated; they must be entered into and lived.

Jesus' parable of the vineyard challenges some of the dominant North American cultural priorities in which productivity is paramount. The dominant culture ties our value to what we get paid. The last don't get to be first in the dominant culture. But Jesus through this story lets us know that God's calculus is different than that of the dominant culture. God is generous to everyone in the vineyard. Why do we grumble at such grace? Why do we forget that we are, in fact, the ones late to the field?

Perhaps if we pictured ourselves as the workers who came at the end of the day rather than those who arrived first thing in the morning our response to God's grace could be different. As we recognize the undeserved, unearned grace of God given to us, we are more freely able to truly rejoice at God's goodness and mercy to others.

God asks, "Are you jealous because I am generous?" This question, once asked of irate workers, can lead us places. It can lead us from murmuring to thankfulness. It can lead us from envy to kindness. It can cause us to rejoice in a generosity that extends to others.