

The Generous Master

Third in a Series of Four Sermons, “Connecting People to Jesus”

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 23 and 24, 2023

Texts - Matthew 20:1-16, Isaiah 55:6-9

The Kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard...Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?

Dear Friends,

Our sermon theme these four weekends in September has been “Connecting People to Jesus.”

- *Two weeks ago - Jesus the Passionate Lover, loving as we have first been loved*
- *Last week - Jesus the Merciful King / forgiving as we have been forgiven*
- *Next week - Jesus the Obedient Servant*
- *Today, Jesus, the Generous Master*

In today’s parable, God is the wealthy owner of the vineyard. Jesus is the Generous Master or the Steward who finds, hires, and compensates the laborers. The laborers who worked the full 12 hour day include the first disciples and lifelong Christians. Laborers who were hired at the 11th hour include the thief on the cross and those who repent and believe in their dying days.

There are at least two mindsets we can take each day as laborers in the Kingdom. The mindset of *gratefulness* to God for grace received, or the mindset of a *complainer* who moans and groans about life being unfair.

We find the mindset of gratefulness in today’s Epistle Lesson, where in hindsight, Paul could see that all that had happened to him, including persecution and imprisonment had actually served to advance the Gospel.

We saw the mindset of gratefulness to God for grace received in last Sunday’s Old Testament lesson, where Joseph was able to say to his brothers, after all the dust had settled, after decades of being sold into slavery, “you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”

The main goal of this sermon is that as we explore the amazing generosity of our God, His Spirit would work inside of us a mindset that is increasingly grateful to God for grace received. Two lessons we would learn about gratefulness directed towards God in heaven above.

Lesson #1 is that gratefulness has a way of squeezing out this desire to complain about life being unfair.

The tendency of our sinful human nature is to complain about what is wrong in life instead of focusing on all that is excellent and praiseworthy and of good report.

Years ago, three or four of our couple friends from Minnesota spent a week or so at an all-inclusive resort in Mexico. Those of you who have enjoyed such vacations know that there are a thousand and one reasons to be grateful. Describe breakfast buffet / lunch buffet / fancy suppers / unlimited food and beverages and activities / top notch service. And yet I know two or three Minnesotans who found it possible the very first morning that the coffee didn't get to our table soon enough, the coffee wasn't strong enough, and the coffee cups didn't get refilled fast enough. Can you imagine good and decent people finding reason to complain at an all-inclusive resort?

In today's parable, all the laborers had every reason to be grateful to their employer, and yet those who were hired first complained that they didn't receive more than those hired later. There were three kinds of laborers, those hired at 6am, those hired during the middle of the day, and those hired at 5pm. The Master hired the first group with an agreement to pay them one denarius, which was the going rate in that day. He hired the middle of the day group by promising to pay them what was right. And after asking the final group why they were standing around idle, he hired them to go and work. At the end of the day, he paid the first group exactly what he had promised. He paid the middle of the day group what was more than fair. And he paid the third group with a generosity that tempted the first group to moan and groan about life not being fair?

The Master answered the complainers with three rhetorical questions.

- Did you not agree with me for a denarius?
- Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?
- Or do you begrudge my generosity?

By attending church this morning, you are putting yourself in a position where the Holy Spirit can be your Teacher on the subject of divine generosity. Specifically

this morning, we are asking the Spirit to move our hearts up on the scale of gratitude to God in heaven above for blessings of grace received, one right after another.

Towards a spirit of thankfulness that more and more squeezes out what comes naturally to all of us - fussing and fretting about that which seems unfair or unsatisfactory in life. Towards a gratitude that is noticeable and even contagious in our life together.

Dear friends in Christ, how blessed we are!

- Blessed and ever so grateful that God loved us with a generosity unmatched in human history.
- Grateful that He sent and sacrificed His one and only Son to the cross so that our sins could be forgiven and our Names written in the book of life!
- Grateful that Jesus Christ came first of all not to be served but to seek and to save the lost and give His life as a ransom for many.
- Grateful that Jesus suffered all that He was appointed to suffer, that He died the death that we needed Him to die, and that He rose up again on the third day in glorious fashion.
- Grateful that God is the keeper of every one of His promises, including that whoever is baptized and believes shall be saved.
- Grateful that whether we were baptized into the family of God as infants or repented of our sins in our dying days, Jesus is the generous Master who greets us at heaven's entrance with a smile and the words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."
- Grateful, dear friends, in a way that is noticeable and even contagious in our marriages, in our families, in our congregational life, and in our neighborhoods.

Which brings us to the second part of our sermon today.

Lesson #2 is that gratefulness inspires us towards asking good questions.

The workers who had put in a full day in the scorching heat grumbled that those who only worked an hour received the same pay. Their implied questions were, "Why don't we get paid more than the others? Why are you treating us unfairly? And even, "Why are you so stingy with your money?"

The Master answers by reminding them that He did them no wrong. That He had given them exactly what they had agreed to. He urged them to be content with their wages and resist the temptation to begrudge his generosity.

While on the one hand, asking bad questions often leads down a road with no good results, the opposite is also true. Studying specific Scriptures and then asking good questions on the basis of that section of Scripture has the potential to lead us into the very presence of God.

Today's parable suggests questions like, What does it look and sound like when we are content with the circumstances of our lives? What does it look and sound like when we resist the temptation to envy those we think have life better than we do? What dangers are there in comparing our levels of prosperity with that of others? How would our life together get better if we were to follow Jesus closely instead of at a distance?

This is how the folks at Hosanna in Mankato, MN answer that last question,

The pastor starts out, *When we follow Jesus at home*

And the congregation finishes, *our families get stronger*

The pastor starts out, *When we follow Jesus together*

The congregation finishes, *We get the support we need*

The pastor starts out, *When we follow Jesus into our neighborhoods*

The congregation finishes, *Our neighbors get the care they need*

A story is told about a preacher who was telephoning in his topic to the local newspaper. He informed the religion editor that his sermon theme would be "The Lord is My Shepherd." The religion editor asked, "Is that all?" The preacher replied, "That's Enough."

And so when the church page came out the following week, the sermon topic was listed mistakenly, "The Lord is my Shepherd, that is Enough." The preacher rather liked the new and expanded sermon theme, and so he worked with it.

For those of you who are worried about Pastor Griffin leaving and a new pastor arriving, I remind you that the Lord is your shepherd, that's enough.

For those of you struggling with all kinds of health concerns or financial concerns or "what is my purpose in life" concerns, I remind you that the Lord is your shepherd, that's enough.

For those of you ravaged by the guilt of your past or worried sick about the challenges of your future, the Lord is your shepherd, that's enough.

To be sure, on this side of heaven, you will have your bad days, your good days, and your really good days.

On your bad days, you will be complaining about what could be better. You will be following your Savior at a distance, and you will imagine that God isn't treating you fairly.

On your good days, you will be confessing your faults and failures to God and to one another. At which time the grace of God will sweep over your souls and rule in your hearts. In the midst of uncertainty, you will remember that God's ways are higher than your ways, and His thoughts are higher than your thoughts.

On your really good days, the generosity of your God will produce a gratefulness in your heart that is noticeable to those around you. On your best days, this mindset of gratefulness will be downright contagious.

Jesus said it best, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

On every day, no matter what, Jesus will be the passionate lover of your soul. He will be the King who delights in showing mercy. And He will be the Master who is generous towards you. In Jesus' Name. Amen.