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The Surprising Case of the Compassionate Employer

a sermon on Matthew 20.1-16

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When I was in seminary, I had to write a paper on this parable for a New Testament class. I got an A. I was happy with my grade and pleased with myself ... until I found out that everyone in the class got an A. Apparently a graduate student had been assigned to grade the papers, and he was busy, and he figured no one would complain about an A, so he gave them a quick once-through, made a few notes, and doled out A's to everyone. I felt cheated. When I first got my grade, I thought my A meant "excellent" and marked me as a superior student. I found out it meant "average." ... Ironic isn't it? The irony was not lost on me. I realized my attitude was just like the workers who complained in the story. I had worked hard. Some other students probably slapped something together at the last minute. We all got the same grade. Also like the day-long workers in the story, I would have been content with my A had I not known of the grace given to others. That is when I realized where I fit into the parable. Jesus was talking to me.

We live in world different from first century Palestine where Jesus told this story, but despite the differences, some things never change. The practice of hiring day laborers for agriculture or landscaping continues today. Farmers know where to go to find workers desperate for a job. Usually these are migrant workers, often illegal immigrants. They go to the place, hoping for a job for the day. They are paid in cash at the end of the day. Another thing that never changes is human nature: I'm sure if a farmer pulled this stunt today, he would hear a lot of complaining too. Still another, the story offends us. The landowner gives a perfectly acceptable defense: He can do whatever he wants with his own money. He didn't cheat anybody. We still feel he was unfair, though we cannot find fault with him. And finally, just like back then, so today many people are desperate to find work. It is a parable for our times. In fact, although Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God and our attitude toward other Christians, and his point is not about economics or labor practices per se, the employer does remind us of the Christian virtue of compassion. It is good when employers have compassion for their employees. It is good when we all have compassion on those in need.

I do not call this parable "the parable of the workers in the vineyard." That's its traditional name. I prefer to call it "The Surprising Case of the Compassionate Employer." The story hits us with three surprises, which convey its meaning. And the

focus throughout is on the employer. I owe much of my insight into the nuances of this parable to Kenneth E. Bailey. He was a missionary who taught New Testament at the seminary level for forty years in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cyprus. One of his many books is *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. I recommend it to anyone. His experience of Middle Eastern culture and his scholarship bring the gospels to life. It feels as if he knows the people we read about in the Bible. He opened my eyes to several details and a couple of surprises I had not noticed; and now I want to open your eyes as well.

Before we dig into the story Jesus told, we ought to ask: Why did he tell it? If we know why, we will better understand what he was trying to say. Matthew alone passes this parable on to us. And where it comes in his gospel tells us a lot about what it means. This parable is sandwiched between the account of the rich young man and the request James and John's mother made on their behalf. The rich young man went away sad because Jesus told him if he wanted eternal life, he would have to give up his wealth. Simon Peter pointed out to Jesus that he and the other disciples had given up everything to follow him. Jesus assured him he had made a good investment, but then added, "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." The kingdom of God turns things upside down. God does things differently from us.

We know the first being last and the last being first hold the clue to our parable because Jesus repeats it after he tells the parable. Very soon after this, the mother of James and John tries to secure for them positions of respect and power in the kingdom of God. This caused such a stir among the disciples that Jesus had to explain to them that in God's kingdom things work differently. Their greed for power and position proved they did not understand the kingdom.

Our parable then is about the attitude Christians have toward one another and the values they embrace. The parable of the prodigal son warned Jesus' critics against resenting the grace of God given to others. This parable sounds a similar warning for Jesus' friends. Following Jesus is not about being the best or getting the most. It is about love and giving of self. Those who want God's grace for themselves but begrudge it for others do not fit into God's kingdom.

Now let's look at the surprises and some of the details you might have missed. A landowner goes out early in the morning, probably around 6:00am, to hire workers. Nothing unusual about that. It happened all the time in Jesus' world. You should be aware already who the landowner represents: God. In Jesus' parables, the person with power – the landowner, the king, the master, the father – always represents God. In this story the workers agree to work all day for the standard wage. There is grace here, if you can see it. These men were at the marketplace (and they would have been men in those days) because they needed income. They supported themselves and their families as day laborers. Some days maybe they didn't get work, in which case they or their

wives and children might go hungry. They were poor; they needed work, and they were glad to get it. The wage agreed on was a fair wage, and no doubt they set about their work feeling good because they knew that at the end of the day they would go home, money in hand, dinner on the table. So there is grace for them too. If you've ever been unemployed you know the joy of finding a job with decent pay.

Now we get our first surprise. At 9:00am the landowner goes back to the marketplace and hires more workers. Why? Was he bad at estimating how many workers he needed? Were there not enough there earlier? We soon get our answer, because he goes back at noon and hires more. No landowner is that dense, so he is not motivated by the needs of his vineyard. Why then does he go back? The most obvious answer is compassion. He sees there are a lot of men needing work. He feels for them. We could easily imagine he went early in the morning and found quite a crowd. He hired some. He went back at 9:00 hoping most of the rest had found work, but they hadn't, so in his compassion he hired more. He went back at noon and did the same thing.

Notice, by the way that when he goes back each time, he does not settle on a specific wage. He merely promises to pay "what is right." These later hires no doubt expected a portion of the standard wage. He goes back at 3:00. This is an unrealistic detail in the story. Bailey had seen the day laborer system in action in Palestine, and he noted that by noon those who had not been hired gave up and went home, no doubt to disappointed families. In Jesus' story, workers are still looking for work at 3:00 and 5:00. We can only assume they were desperate.

At 5:00 the landowner goes back one more time and hires the last group, who will work only an hour. No mention is made of pay at all. Perhaps they thought he was giving them a tryout, and if they worked hard he would hire them for the next day.

The first surprise is that the landowner kept going back. This shows us the heart of God. God is compassionate. He is merciful. He keeps reaching out to us. Of course, there must be a limit to his patience. Scripture assures us there is, but God is amazingly compassionate and does not want anyone to be lost, just as the landowner in Jesus' story did not want anyone willing to work to go home empty handed. God comes to us where we are. He comes to us in our need. And he calls us. He says, "I want you. Come, work for me. Be part of what I am doing." God sees our need. He has compassion. He gives us grace.

To catch the next surprise, you have to know something about gentlemen farmers in ancient Palestine. Verse 8 says, "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager ..." At which point Jesus' original audience would have gasped, "What?! He has a manager? Then what was he doing going out to hire workers in the first place? That's the manager's job. If he has a manager, then he is a wealthy gentleman. He doesn't bother himself with the details of day-to-day operations. He has his

manager handle them. The manager should have hired the workers. *Why did the owner go himself?"*

That is a very good question. Do you remember other sermons I have preached on Jesus' parables? I have said before that Jesus' parables give us insight into who he thought he was. Often Jesus told parables to defend his ministry. This one does not have that purpose, but like the others, it is a kind of map, and when we see where Jesus puts himself on the map, we catch a glimpse of his self-understanding. So what is one question we should always ask when interpreting a parable? *Where is Jesus in this story?* Once you know about managers and gentleman farmers, the answer is obvious. This is a story about an owner (God) who goes himself when he does not have to. The owner shows up himself, in the flesh. That's Jesus.

Look at it from the other side. Where in the real world do we see the owner meeting with workers and hiring them? What does that part of the story look like in reality? The ministry of Jesus! Jesus went around calling people to follow him. He sent his disciples out to proclaim the kingdom. That is the compassionate call of the landowner. Once again we hear Jesus telling a parable in which he identifies himself with God. It is fairly subtle in this one, but it is there, just as it is in so many others, some of them not subtle at all. Skeptics who want to argue that Jesus never claimed to be divine simply write off his open claims, such as John 10.30, "I and the Father are one." They say later Christians made those up. But they cannot write off his parables. Over and over again in the parables, we hear Jesus, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly equating himself with God. And of course, if he did so in his parables, there is no reason to reject the other occasions he made that claim.

Surprise # 1: The owner goes back again and again to hire workers. He had compassion for them. Surprise # 2: The owner went himself, although he did not have to. Surprise # 3: At quitting time he has his manager pay everyone "the wage," beginning with those hired last.

Why does the owner pay those who worked only one hour a full day's pay? The obvious answer is compassion. It wasn't a handout, but it was generous. It was grace. A better question: Why did he have the manager pay the workers in reverse order from when they were hired? If he had paid the ones who worked all day first, they would have left happy. The next groups would have been happy, and the next. Everyone would have been happy. The way he did it guaranteed he would hear complaints that he was unfair. The reason he called the last hired to be paid first is, I think, because only this way does the parable work the way Jesus wanted it to. He is making a point about the grace of God. He does not want his followers to resent the grace given to others. The parable only works if the first workers grumble, as of course any workers would in that situation. They feel it is unfair that they worked twelve hours and those who worked only one hour were paid the same.

Are they right? The owner defends himself well. They cannot say he is unjust. He promised them the standard daily wage, and he paid it. He was just, *but was he fair?* He paid everyone the same wage, whether they worked one hour or twelve. Is this unfair?

I feel a certain unfairness about it. I can't help that. I just do. On the other hand, since the owner represents God, I am hesitant to call him unfair. After all, who am I, a human being, to pass judgment on God or to call him to account? Job went down that road, and when he got to the end of it, he saw his mistake. We are not in any kind of position to charge God with being unfair. We do not know enough. We do not understand enough. What looks unfair from our perspective may look very different to someone who understands all the mysteries of the universe. That's why I hesitate to call the owner unfair.

Also, I think the real problem is in the hearts of the workers hired first. They ought to be happy for their neighbors who can now afford to put food on the table. Why do people have to be so competitive and jealous? Why can't we be happy when a neighbor gets something good? The answer is, of course, because we are sinful and our hearts are selfish. The manager identified the real problem when he asked the grumblers, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

However, although I am hesitant to do so, and even though I know the real problem is in our hearts, not God's, I am going to step out on a limb here and say, yes. Yes, the manager was unfair. He was just, but he was unfair. And to that I also say, "Woohoo!"

I think the manager was unfair, and I am glad he was. Do you know why? Because I tend to think of myself as being among that later group. Perhaps in the kingdom of God I am not among those hired just an hour before quitting time, but I know I am not one who bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat. Sure, I am a pastor. I'm a life-long Christian, very serious, very committed. But when have I ever really suffered for my faith? There are humble Christians in places like China that make me look pampered and spoiled. What have I done for the kingdom? Any success I have had was because God was at work. It was never me. In fact, God accomplishes things more in spite of me than because of me. On the Day of Judgment, when the great landowner calls his workers in to receive their pay, I am going to be counting on grace. I would be embarrassed to stand before Christ and say, "Look at all that I have done for you!" I'll be saying, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." And he will.

When I read this parable, with whom in the story did you identify? Most people can tell the owner is God and do not put themselves in his place. I suspect most think of themselves among that first group. When we get to the end of the parable, they feel the situation is unfair because they put themselves in place of the day-long workers. And in fairness, the parable invites us to do that, so that our attitudes are called into

question. But I encourage you to think of yourself as part of that last group hired. The situation may still feel unfair somehow, but it won't bother you.

God never gives us less than we deserve. But he often gives us more. If you make sacrifices for God and his kingdom, you can be sure you've made a good investment. He will not let you down. At the same time, do not resent the grace given to others. Who has more? Who is better? These questions make no sense in the kingdom of God, because there everything depends on God's grace. If he gave us only what we deserve, none of us would enter the kingdom, much less advance in it.

Through Jesus, God has given us costly grace. He comes to us where we are. He calls us. He reaches out to us over and over. When you respond to his call, he gives you grace. Eternal life, forgiveness of sins, the kingdom of God, a new heart that can love perfectly just as God does – these are a few of the good things he gives. When you go to work for him, though, your relationships change. You have to love your brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as your neighbor. You have to want for them the grace you have received. Love doesn't leave you any room to be competitive or envious. You live for God and for his glory. That is enough.

It is enough for me. Just let me be there, when the kingdom of God fully arrives. I want to be part of things when God's glory covers the earth as the water covers the sea. To see Christ, face-to-face, to behold to glory of God – what does anything else matter? I want to experience perfect love. God loves me perfectly now, but I want to love God back perfectly. I want to see the glory of God reflected from the faces of my brothers and sisters, and not feel jealous or envious, but rather joy and wonder and excitement. Let me be there. Let me take a seat at the banquet table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And that is enough. The sacrifices I have to make do not matter. Rank and title and prestige do not matter. Power doesn't matter. Not then. All that matters is the grace ... and the glory ... of God.

God never gives us less than we deserve, but thanks be to God, he often gives us much, much more. Amen.

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