

The Generous Master (Matthew 20:1-16)
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In today's passage, Jesus tells a parable about workers in a vineyard. These workers are like the day laborers you can find outside Home Depot. In the parable, the master hires laborers at 6 in the morning, and offers them one denarius (a day's wages) for their work. Then at 9, 12, 3, and 5 o'clock the master goes into the marketplace, finds more idle day laborers waiting to be hired, and offers them employment for the day. We would like to think that when the end of the day came, the master paid each according to the number of hours they worked. That's only fair. But Jesus says that the master gave all the workers a full day's wages. The workers who were hired first were understandably incensed and envious. And this is how most of us would feel too. In today's society we demand the right to equal pay for equal work. We also have the idea of first come, first serve. But Jesus says in the kingdom of heaven, the first will be last. We like to think of a reward in heaven based on our work, as if it were an exchange. But this is not God's way. He is generous. His grace is not earned, but given freely. All we need do is receive it. All the work we do for God is in response to the grace and forgiveness He gave us first. It isn't to earn His grace. The master in the parable wasn't being unfair to the workers who came first. He gave them what was agreed upon. He had the right to be generous to those who came last.

All the workers were in the same position before they were hired. They were all desperate for work. If they were not hired, they couldn't feed their families. Employment was a blessing that all of them should have been grateful for. Those hired first must have been relieved to know that they would have the money they needed for that day, while those who were hired last spent most of the day in this state of idle desperation. And though they only worked for the latter part of the day, the master was compassionate and generous, and made sure they too had enough pay for that day.

This parable begins with the word "for," which means there is a connection with what came before. In Matthew 19:16-30, Jesus encounters a man who thinks he can earn his way into heaven by obeying the Law. Jesus tells him that to enter the kingdom of heaven he must give up his riches and follow Him, and the young man couldn't bring himself to do so. Jesus was telling this man that his works couldn't justify him in God's eyes. But Peter, who had left everything to

follow Jesus, asked Him what reward he would get for it. Jesus describes the reward in heaven, but then goes on to tell the parable of the workers in the vineyard to address the disciples' misguided thinking. They too viewed God's grace as an exchange. They thought they should receive a greater reward for giving up more for Jesus. Jesus tells them that though there will be a reward for those who follow Him, the first will be last and the last will be first. This phrase also appears at the end of the parable. Both the rich man and Peter had the same misunderstanding. They saw entry into the kingdom of heaven as a transaction with a high price. The rich man wasn't willing to pay, but the disciples were. But Jesus says that this is not how the kingdom of God works. God is generous. The word "generous" (*agathos*) in 20:15 can also be found in Matthew 12:35, 19:16, Mark 10:18, Acts 11:24, and Ephesians 4:29, and it means goodness of character and the deeds that result from this goodness. It's not about bargaining for entry into the kingdom, but rather about trusting in God's generosity and responding to His offer of salvation in His Son Jesus Christ.

So through this parable we learn three lessons. First, sinners enter the kingdom of heaven entirely on the basis of God's generosity. Nobody can do enough to earn it. Second, believers should serve God faithfully, trusting in God's generosity rather than focusing on a reward for their service. Our work doesn't earn God's grace, but it is in response to God's grace. And it is a privilege to serve in His kingdom, no matter how long we have served. When we receive His salvation and how much hardship we may encounter as a result of following Jesus is all a part of His sovereign plan, and it is not for us to question. Third, believers should be generous toward others just as He was towards us (Proverbs 22:9). In this society besieged by materialism, generosity is important to combat the desire for more. This giving should not be out of obligation but of our own free will. Matthew 6:3 tells us that we shouldn't give with the expectation of receiving any reward or praise. Generosity like this blesses all those around us and points them to God's generosity. It should be our hope that we will be remembered for generosity that comes from having the life of Christ in us. Let us therefore be generous as God is generous to us.