

**“The Last, the First, and God’s Generosity”****Matthew 20:1-16**

Many of Jesus’ parables function as both warning and encouragement, and this is one of those. You can’t really get around the final words that say, “the last will be first, and the first last.” But those words aren’t just the *final* words. If you go back one verse from the beginning of our reading, Jesus says, “many who are first will be last, and the last first”—the same teaching in the reverse order. So the parable is framed by this idea of reversal... but the parable’s system of reward doesn’t convey much of a reversal. In fact, at first glance, the reversal Jesus teaches is mismatched to the parable. Laborers are hired in the morning, who go to work. Later in the day, other laborers are hired, who go to work. And “when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’” Now if it’s true that “the last will be first, and the first last,” we’d expect the last to receive some indication of being first... but nobody ends up first, since everybody receives equal pay! Those who began at the first hour received the same pay as those who began at the third... who received the same pay as those who began at the sixth... who received the same pay as those who began at the ninth... who received the same pay as those who began at the eleventh. You could revise the parable to express “the last will be first, and the first last” simply by paying those hired at the eleventh hour what was offered to those hired at the first hour (one denarius), while paying those hired at the first hour the prorated portion of those hired at the eleventh hour (one-twelfth of a denarius). As it is, the vineyard owner pays everybody equally, so everybody ends up first.

That idea in and of itself is offensive. Equal pay for unequal work goes against our DNA. Of course, if you’re the one getting paid for working less, you’ll probably take the money despite your DNA. No doubt those hired late in the day commenced happy hour in joy. But who can fault those hired at the first hour with bellyaching? Wouldn’t you grumble if you found yourself in their position? You might consider suing your supervisor... or at least submitting a formal complaint and preparing your résumé. Equal pay for unequal work doesn’t fly. And with that idea in mind, the parable forces you to consider. With that idea buried in our DNA, the parable conveys something beyond the ordinary. Like many of Jesus’ parables, there’s a kicker that doesn’t quite fit with expectations, and therein you find the theology. Because by the end we find out the vineyard owner isn’t paying the laborers based on their work... he’s paying them based on his generosity! Your English translation tries to take an ancient idiom and make it discernible, but in doing so the words lose their bite. When the owner asks, “do you begrudge my generosity?” he literally asks, “is your eye evil because I am good?” In other words, “do you look at my goodness and perceive something evil taking place?” This isn’t the first time Jesus has referred to “the eye” regarding spiritual perception. In the Sermon on the Mount he said, “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Mt 6:22-23). If you see the things of God rightly, you will be full of light; but if you see them wrongly, you will be full of darkness. To see God’s generosity as evil is to be full of darkness. And God’s generosity is this: He views every sin the same, and Jesus died for every sin. There isn’t one sin that doesn’t deserve eternal condemnation, yet Jesus died for them all, so that every person is viewed equally before God, no matter what or how many sins he committed (Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; Col 3:25; 1 Pet 1:17). That’s the equal pay from the parable, which we call “objective

justification”: Jesus has declared every person forgiven, because He shed blood for every sin. There’s not a soul in the world not absolved from sin. How perfectly beautiful is that truth!

But many find that truth offensive, just like the idea of equal pay for unequal work. Many think one’s eternal pay should be based on personal merit—based on what they did *or* didn’t do, since doing more good means doing less bad. They think God’s generosity is unfair. They think it’s wrong that God takes a hierarchy of sins like lying, stealing, raping, and killing, and draws a line down the middle instead of across, because drawing a line down the middle is just... too indiscriminate! How can God say murder gets the same pass as a white lie? How can He let the worst ones in and tell the best ones they haven’t earned anything? In fact, whether one sees God’s generosity as offensive *is* the dividing line down the hierarchy of sins: on one side of the line, the vineyard owner is praised for his generosity, on the other side of the line, accused of malpractice; on one side, a healthy eye, on the other side, an evil eye. And we see this dividing line in the parable. The laborers hired first in the day are very different than those hired later in the day. Those hired first in the day negotiate a specific monetary contract, whereas the others negotiate no such contract. The owner merely says, “‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right (δικαιον) I will give you.’ [And] So they went.” Those hired later in the day trust the character of the owner, whereas those hired first in the day want an agreement by which to hold the owner accountable. Those hired first in the day wanna make sure they’re working for pay, whereas the others are willing to accept whatever the owner has in mind. And when it’s time to receive one’s eternal pay, those hired first in the day grumble, which is really sad, because those who grumble over God’s generosity don’t have it, just like those who don’t forgive deny God’s forgiveness (Mt 6:14-15).

So “the last will be first, and the first last” isn’t really mismatched to the parable, because being first is living in God’s generosity—which is grace on account of Christ—while being last is complaining about it. Everyone receives the same pay because Jesus died for all, but not everyone believes that pay is fair. Those who think they’re first by earning their pay will be last because they trusted in themselves, and those they deem last for trusting in Christ will be first. To many, God’s generosity is offensive—a slight to those who are better than others. But to you it guarantees the eternal pay you could never earn and makes your work in God’s vineyard a joy. In His holy name, amen.

—Pastor Greg Bauch