



Preach **Matthew** notes

Proper 20
18th September 2005

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Ps 145:1-8
Phil 1:21-30

CONTINUOUS

Ex 16:2-15
Ps 105:1-6,37-45
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Matthew 20:1-16 (NIV) **Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard**

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

“About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

“He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

“‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

“The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

“But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last,”

This parable looks very straightforward- it is a story about the treatment of different groups of workers in a vineyard- or is it? Perhaps it is about envy, about eyes set on denying others rather than set on thanking God for what was given to us? The first labourers agree, before they start work, a wage that is a perfectly acceptable, perhaps even generous rate for a day’s work. The labourers who start work three hours later at 9.00am are promised simply a just wage (*dikaion*). The assumption is that this will be proportionate to the day’s wage of a single denarius. The parable has a sting in the tail, however, because those who work just one hour are

paid exactly the same as those who have worked through the heat of the day.

The heart of the parable comes in verse 15, “Is it not proper that I do what I will with what is mine, or are you envious because I am generous?” The second part of the verse has more of a cutting edge than the English translation indicates. The Greek translated as “envious” is a Jewish ethical phrase “the evil eye” (*ho ophthalmos ponēros*) which denotes an intent born of an inner darkness. The workers react badly to a display of generosity despite the fact that they themselves are recipients of a wage that is fair, even generous. This is not about just rewards in the



workplace but a deeper envy and covetousness that puts self at the centre and is not only selfseeking but also denies generosity to other people.

The Greek word for “grumbling” which Matthew uses (*gongguzō*) occurs only this once in his Gospel.

Tellingly it is the same word used in the Septuagint (that is the Greek

translation of the OT used by the Gospel writers) in

Exodus 16 to describe the grumbling of the people of Israel, which led to the gift of manna and quails in the

desert. The gift of manna is at one and the same time a blessing and a judgement on the people of Israel. A blessing to those who trust and collect what they need, a judgement on those who over collect and cannot trust for Sabbath provision that the manna will last two days. In 2 Corinthians chapter 9 Paul will use the same story to illustrate the equality and sufficiency of God’s provision as the basis for calling the Corinthians to proportionate giving to the needy church in Jerusalem.

The key word here is perhaps “contentment”. The Gospel challenge is to learn to be content for all we have is born of God’s grace and generosity. Our measure is not to be what other people receive but the measure that God gives to us. So we might ask, “What prompts our own discontent?” Is it the power of advertising that tells us what we should own, or the promise of an unsecured loan to get what we want, or comparison with those who appear to have and be more than we are? Or, to take the image of the evil eye, which Matthew uses – how do we see these things? If we look at a beautiful piece of embroidery

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(and this might be a simple sermon illustration) we can either see the pattern on the top or the chaos underneath. For some there is a pattern of grace that is reflected in contentment, for others there is the disorder of unfulfilled material desires. There is, of course, no virtue in poverty itself and the parable cannot be used to reinforce the right of capitalism to do what it pleases with it’s money. The point of the parable is that there is negotiation with the workers, a fair price agreed, the creation of employment, the equal treatment of part time and full time workers and prompt payment on the day, as the Law of Moses required.

There is a hard lesson in this parable. The workers are told to work in a vineyard, an OT metaphor for Israel’s relationship with God. The Greek word *hupagete* translated as “go” is used in v 4 and 7 to send workers into the vineyard; the same word is used of their exclusion. A generosity of grace must be replicated in those called into the Kingdom. Self-exclusion from the Kingdom results from instead adopting a miserly, covetous spirit that cannot rejoice in generosity.

Stewardship reflections

Of course the question of generosity runs much deeper than simply our financial dealings; it includes our time and our talents as well as our treasure. But the parable is not told about money for no reason. Somehow money is the raw nerve of life which, when touched, sparks the most profound reaction. It is possible to feign, even to ourselves, the depth of our discipleship in our service, our knowledge or prominence in leadership. But it is the nature of our giving which exposes us as we really are. If our eyes



are set on God and on thankfulness, then we may more easily learn to be content. If our eyes are set on our neighbours who have more than us, we will more readily be discontent and more inclined to grumble.

Core

One of the key elements in the parable is the employers claim to sovereignty over his wealth, “am I not free to do what I will with my money”. Money gives us freedom and choice, but it cannot guarantee the quality of the choices we make. (Paul Schervisch). The freedom of this employer is expressed in his choice to be generous. Would the early workers in the vineyard have made the same choice? The challenge to mature Christians is to move beyond calculating what we give and discovering a new and deepening spirit of generosity which Jesus teaches lies at the heart of kingdom life.

Congregation

“I have learned”, says St Paul, “to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty” (Phil 4:11-12). Before we can know how much to give we have to know how much we need to live. Without contentment we will always be seeking more and that is not fertile ground to grow generosity. Discontent is like a river periodically bursting its banks and flooding the land around it. We need to establish the channels. The discipline of setting aside an amount we wish to give to God’s work through his church at

the beginning of the week or month is an effective discipline. When we discipline ourselves to giving as a priority it revolutionises our self-understanding. Before we seek for ourselves we exercise a grateful generosity in giving. It is a reminder of who is, or should be, at the centre. We need to engage with what Professor Dan Hardy terms “the generative generosity of God”

Fringe

Charles Swindoll tells the story of a GI in London in



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the later days of the war. A young boy watched wistfully as he went into a baker to buy a pile of doughnuts. On leaving, and seeing the ragged, hungry child the GI asked if he also would like some

doughnuts – and gave him a dozen. As he walked away he felt a tug at his greatcoat – it was the young boy; “Hey mister, are you God?”. The boy could not believe a man could have such ability to be extravagant and generous- especially one who spoke in such a strange accent! We reflect the nature of God most when we learn to be generous. The hardest and most rewarding area in which we can learn to be generous is with our money. Making simple definite decision to give regularly from the first of what we have and not what is left over is to make a decision to be a little like God. ■

