

Matthew 20:1–19

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[0 : 00] Again, the scripture text is Matthew 20, verses 1 to 19. Please stand for the reading of God's word. For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

After agreeing with laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace.

And to them he said, You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you. So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same.

And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, Why do you stand here idle all day? They said to him, Because no one has hired us.

He said to them, You go into the vineyard too. 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.

[1 : 08] And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.

And on receiving it, they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

But he replied to one of them, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give 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 me my generosity? So the last will be first and the first last. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning. Well, if you're walking in today new to Christ Church Chicago, we are on the back end of a fall preaching series titled Following Jesus as King, Lessons Learned Along the Way.

[2 : 25] We simply took the moment of Peter indicating some awareness that Jesus was the Christ and aware that at some point Jesus will enter into the city and all the material in between of you're the one we're looking for and now he arrives in the city, he has these lessons to be learned along the way.

Fourteen to be exact, and we are at lesson number twelve. It's simply titled this. Generosity is the currency of Christ's kingdom.

I like the way that sounds. Let me run it again. Generosity is the currency of Christ's kingdom. It's what he wants us to know along the way.

When it comes to what consumes our public discourse today, the matter of justice, not generosity, takes center stage.

It's more prevalent. This is not negative necessarily. After all, the well-being of our social fabric and life together depends on becoming a just society.

[3 : 45] Without justice, there will be no social fabric in which we engage with one another rightly. And so from ancient times, from Aristotle in his book on ethics to Plato and his republic, people have considered the idea of justice and life in order that we might actually live well with one another.

And so prevalent today in our public discourse is justice. You can't miss it, can you? Areas where justice ought to be restored.

Conversations swirling with great vigor on justice as it ought to be reformed. The repairing and the reparation of justice that might have been neglected.

The securing of justice. The question of what is just or right in every situation. Justice rises as a preeminent concern in the culture in which we live.

The kingdoms of this world, what I'm trying to say, are rightly concerned with justice. And along comes Jesus and he talks to us not about the kingdoms of this world, but verse 1, the kingdom of heaven.

[5 : 11] This breaking in of his own rule. This parallel kingdom that's at play in the world. The followers of Christ and his kingdom and the way in which they live in this world and its kingdoms.

And interestingly, for Jesus, generosity would join justice at the table of our conversation.

I want to just divide it simply in three simple units. There's a story told. There's a surprise ending given.

And there are a host of lessons for us on the relationship of justice and generosity to be learned. The story. Right there.

Verse 1. The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now, you should know that in the agrarian culture of first century Palestine, the workday would have been sunrise to sunset.

[6 : 23] We think in terms of nine to five and people wonder about the 40-hour work week and moving to four-day work weeks. But in the ancient world, when the sun rose, people got up and went to work.

And when the sun set, well, then the day was over. The workday was considered really in terms of a 12-hour day. And so very early in the morning with the rising of the sun, a master goes out to hire laborers for his vineyard.

After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And so he appears. Those looking for work, this temporary workstation in the midst of harvest, are hired.

A number of them had risen before dawn and made their way to where they knew the master of the house would be hiring men for the day. And they arrived and they were ready and they stood.

And as the sun rose, he said, I'll give you a denarius for a day's work. A denarius was simply the fair payment of a day's work. That's what it was.

[7 : 31] It was a day's wage. And so these workers go out into the field. The story goes on. About the third hour, he saw other standing idle in the marketplace and said to them, you go into the vineyard too.

You can imagine now. This is 9 a.m. He's in the marketplace moving just from the walls of his own place and vineyard where people were probably waiting outside the gate for an opportunity to work. Now he's off to his own day and others are there and he hires more. And he says, I'll give you what's right. So they went.

Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. So here is this man trying to get his harvest in and evidently has a need for more and more laborers to bring everything in before the season closes and the weather changes and the harvest is lost.

And so at noon, more are hired. And at 3 o'clock, more are hired. And then, interestingly, verse 6, about the eleventh hour, he went out and found others standing and said to them, why are you standing here idle all day?

[8 : 44] And they said, because no one's hired us. And he said to them, you go to the vineyard too. That's the story. Some people went to work at sunrise under terms of a day's wage.

Others joined them at 9 and at noon and at 3. And interestingly, some even joined them at 5. They were going to work an hour or so.

The story, though, has a surprise ending in verses 8 through 10. And I divide it there because the time of the day seems to be the literary marker in the chapter.

Verse 1, out early in the morning, but by verse 8, and when evening came. And with evening coming, the surprise of the story emerges.

Here it is. The owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, call the laborers and pay them the wages, beginning with the last up to the first. And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received the denarius.

[9 : 47] And when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. Now, that's a surprise.

One of my children was given an exercise in, I believe, fifth grade to write a surprise ending to a well-known story. I think he chose the three little pigs and the wolf.

And interestingly, the wolf did some surprisingly kind things at the end. I'm not sure how the story went, but the exercise was, write a surprise ending to a well-known story. And here you definitely have a surprise ending. The ones who had worked a solitary hour received a denarius, a little bit of a They were 12 times in proportion to their contribution. Now, that is, is it not, what Plato would have argued for in regard to an inequitable distribution, that justice would mean that you receive in proportion to your contribution. [11:03] That's what's fair. But these workers received disproportionate resources for their contribution.

Twelve times! Not a bad day for that late night crowd. The ones who had worked therefore from the three o'clock hour or the noon hour or the nine o'clock hour, they all received disproportionate resources for their contribution given.

It's only the first group that, that received precisely what was fair, just, right.

No bonus for them. So, the story moves to this surprise ending on really the generosity of the owner where some received more than was their due.

It's no wonder then verse 11 comes as it does and the lessons now begin to move for you and for me. The story with its surprise ending moves toward particular lessons for us along the way on this relationship between justice and generosity.

[12:44] On receiving it, they grumbled at the master of the house saying, these last worked only one hour and you've made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

They grumbled. Lesson number one on the relationship between justice and generosity. Those who grumble don't get it.

Grumbling is never in the scriptures as far as I can tell with just an anecdotal or cursory look.

Grumbling is never put in a positive light.

I think of Israel in this sense. They were called in Isaiah God's vineyard and they weren't producing the fruit or the righteousness or the justice that God had wanted and yet there was a grumbling that was in play.

This sense of that's not fair. I think even further back God's people in the wilderness after being freed from slavery and bondage to Egypt grumble.

[14:06] They are characterized by grumbling on the backside of his gracious generosity. Let me put it to you this way. If you are a recipient of God's gracious generosity then grumbling should not be a characteristic of your life.

That's why the New Testament even when it talks about the church those who are part of the kingdom of heaven it says do everything without grumbling or complaining because because it's disposition isn't fitting to your nature.

Even in Jesus' own day the religious leaders grumbled at the notion of him spending time with tax collectors and sinners. You think of the parable even of the older brother and the younger one who squandered the possessions the older brother grumbles at the generosity of the father toward the younger one.

You see there's something in the human spirit there's just something in us that doesn't like it when others receive more generously than that which is warranted especially when we feel like we've been the ones working in the field all day.

But it's there it's a lesson for us. I think of it even in regard to this notion of the first become last or the last will be first and the first will be last.

[15:37] I think of Israel as the heir of God's promise his vineyard and the Gentiles come along so much later they're grafted into the tree as it were and yet both are heirs of the kingdom both will receive heaven both get the fullness of the kingdom the ones who come later get the fullness of that which those who entered into the field earlier.

The Bible has much to say about grumbling about not getting what you perceive to be yours and I'm just here to tell you it's never in a positive light.

So if you're grumbling if somebody's getting greater generosity than you if there's a notion that keeps welling up within your heart that's not fair just check yourself there might be some internal heart work that needs to take place do all things without grumbling do not grumble against one another interestingly in the Old Testament 16 times grumbling occurs it's always against God's leaders or God's God himself and in this sense against the master of the house we grumble up we

never grumble down in line we're never worried about those who are getting less than us but we're always concerned that we're not getting what others might be getting where we feel as deserving lesson number one then if generosity is the currency of

Christ's kingdom then those in the kingdom of heaven by disposition begin to learn how to live life without grumbling second the generosity of Jesus evidently exceeds exceeds our conversations on justice look at verses 13 and 14 but he replied to one of them friend I'm not I'm doing you no wrong did you not agree with me for denarius 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 the generosity of Jesus exceeds our understandings of justice the point to be made here is simply when it comes to getting hold of the kingdom of heaven

God will be more generous to some in bestowing that gift than he is to others let me get it this way just because all people are equal doesn't mean God treats all people the same in this way he's going to give the thief on the cross who spent his whole life in rebellion to God's understanding he's going to get the fullness of the kingdom today you're going to be with me in paradise he's going to get it all in that sense then God is more generous to him than to the one who was just walking with God all the way through God's conception of generosity actually exceeds some aspects of our conversations on justice and with this caveat

[19 : 54] God is never unfair he's not unfair but some do receive greater portions of his generosity than others why is this so Jesus says is not God allowed to or the master able to do with what belongs to him as he pleases if God wants to show greater generosity to others should that be a problem for us this is an incredible truth with Jesus we all get better than we deserve that's the thing we've got to remember Jesus isn't unjust he's simply more than just if we really wanted to talk to Jesus about getting what's coming to us we would all be in trouble his mercy is more let me make it really in terms that might be appealing to you it's never too late for you to begin following

Jesus it's never too late the 11th hour is not too late this notion that it's too late for me to become a Christian I've done too much that's inappropriate to think I could become a Christian Jesus is here to tell you that generosity is the currency of his kingdom he's never short on generosity for you he'll give you all the generosity required to enter into his kingdom it's stunning it's amazing it's encouraging the person in our midst today who's a child in primary school say you're in fourth grade and you begin to follow Jesus today and you follow him for the next 80 years you get the fullness of his kingdom you get it all but so too is the one who rejects him in fourth grade and in twelfth grade and in university years and well into adulthood until he's an old man and he repents of his sins and he begins to follow

Jesus and he understands that he's been idle all day long without reason and he enters in and he goes to work and three days later he passes away guess what he gets!

that the fourth grader who followed him got now this idea that generosity is the currency of the kingdom is good for everyone is never too late for you to begin following Jesus this is why he says here the last will be first and the first last let me also say this then that those who follow Jesus ought to be the most generous people on the planet that that ought to be our that ought to be our currency generosity ought to be the currency of the Christian not merely being concerned that you get what's yours in relationship to others that you think are getting more than they deserve but no switch the mind begin to give more in ways that demonstrate you are a follower of

God and like his son in the dispensing of his wealth and his kingdom see generosity is the currency of the Christian this would be a wonderful thing if in churches the idea then of generosity began to be something we concerned ourselves with not just justice now don't get me wrong I'm not trying to say we aren't to be just I'm saying that generosity joins the conversation with justice and it's needed it's needed in our day I have a son who is attending and a member of a church in Manhattan and one of the things they do every Sunday is they recite what they call the generosity liturgy it's an interesting concept they actually say verbally as a congregation together the following each and every week holy father there is nothing

[25 : 18] I have that you have not given me all I have belongs to you bought with the blood of Jesus to spend everything on myself and to give without sacrifice is the way of the world that you cannot abide but generosity is the way of those who call Christ their Lord who love him with free hearts and serve him with renewed minds who withstand the delusion of riches that chokes the word whose hearts are in your kingdom and not in the systems of the world I am determined to increase and generosity until it can be said that there is no needy person among us I am

determined to be trustworthy with such a little thing as money that you may trust me with true riches above all I am determined to be generous because you father are generous it is the delight of your daughters and sons to share your traits and to show what you are like to all the world see this this is an amazing thing I can't hardly imagine a congregation doing this every week and they do right there in

Manhattan the center of our finance Christians gathering to not merely work and pray for justice but begin to work and exemplify generosity see they must go hand in hand see Christians don't merely say no justice no peace they say that but they also say no Jesus no chance and they also say without generosity there will be no compelling reason for the world to think that we're anything different so your generosity in the Christian community actually heralds and puts forward and exemplifies the currency of Christ's kingdom and as you exemplify the currency of Christ's kingdom you begin to demonstrate to the world what justice is now notice and the reading didn't take us there today but I'm going to take it anyway look at the last three verses 17 to 19 incredibly important to everything that I've said to this point and as

Jesus was going up to Jerusalem he took the twelve disciples aside and on the way he said to them see we're going up to Jerusalem and the son of man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes and they'll condemn him to death and deliver him over to the gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified and he will be raised on the third day these verses are critical to everything I've said lest you think that God's generosity comes at the expense of true justice see that's that's the critique that someone would in a shorthanded way level against all that I've said wait a minute a concern with generosity is obviously going to be a lack of concern for justice this is just false God's generosity to us does not come at the expense of upholding justice which is why these verses are critical because

Jesus will go and die on a cross a sinless man to satisfy the justice of God that sins must be paid for through the penalty of death so that he who was sinless and yet was the recipient of God's justice might be generous in God's mercy see this this is key you can't you can't pit these two against one another no matter how hard you might want to generosity is the currency of Christ kingdom and that not at the expense of God's justice so we labor and work for justice we speak of Jesus and we demonstrate through our disposition of being generous being kinder to people than what their effort really required of us to be being kinder to people than their effort in kindness being merciful to those who are unmerciful being generous with those who are undeserving being open handed with our provisions rather than closed fist this is all a lesson to be learned along the way Christ

[30 : 51] Church Chicago may you labor and work for justice in an unjust world and as you do may you speak often of Jesus through whom God's generosity can be known not at the expense of justice and as you speak for Jesus may you exemplify generosity lest the world have no compelling reason to consider him at all our heavenly father we give ourselves to you wrestling in this world as we do with what is right and just and fair and equitable and as we wrestle with these things and how to address them may we likewise remember your generosity toward us and may it compel even others to enter into your field in Christ's name amen men