

The Church's Economy

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[0 : 00] Hello, hello, hello. It's nice to see you. If you're joining with us for the first time tonight, my name is Aaron. I work at St. John's and I look after the service.

And we're in a series in Matthew chapter 20. My first summer job at university, when I first started university back in the old country, my first job was cleaning buses.

So they had a big machine that cleaned the outside, but I cleaned the inside. And so I worked at the depot and I would, first job was to scrap the chewing gum off the floor, scrap chewing gum off the floor, and then you'd sweep it out, polish the floor, and you got paid \$10 extra if you cleaned up vomit.

It was a good job. They were different times. And I had a pretty good sort of, you know, Protestant work ethic. So, oh, I could clean about 15 or 20 buses in a day.

Day three or four, the manager comes up to me and says, listen, Aaron, change your plan. When you get here in the morning, clean a bus, and then just hang out for a while.

[1 : 18] And just hang in there till morning tea. Then have your morning tea. And then clean another bus. And then just sort of, just relax until lunch.

And then after lunch, clean a bus. And then just do whatever you want till afternoon tea. And then if you want, you can clean another bus. Up to you. And then you go home.

And I said, I didn't understand. I said, look, I can clean, that's like four buses. I can clean quadruple that amount in a day. No problem. And he looked very sheepishly at me and he said, listen, you're just here for the summer.

And the permanent unionized staff are here all year. And you're kind of ruining this really sweet gig they've got, basically.

Because all the management thinks we can only clean four buses in a day. And you're making them look really bad. So I just, I did what he said.

[2 : 23] And I remember a few days after that, he came up to me and he said, Aaron, when you sleep on the bus. So it wasn't like, what are you doing sleeping on the bus?

It was like, when you sleep on the bus, would you mind sleeping in the far corner of the bus so the office staff can't see you sleeping in the bus?

So this was, this is a true story. This was an incredibly incompetently run business. And even as a kid, I just thought, this makes absolutely no sense.

So we have this parable, which we heard Harlan read so well for us. We have this parable of Jesus. And we have this business owner who, from a fiscal point of view, makes no sense what he's doing, right?

This is no way to run a business. So let's dig in there and work out what's going on. So we're going to work our way through it. Jesus starts by saying, I want to tell you what the kingdom of God is like.

[3 : 29] And then he tells us a story, a parable. So he's a vineyard owner, and this is a serious business. They needed to hire seasonal workers. So they hired people to plant.

They hired people to maintain the vines. They hired people to harvest the grapes. So he needs these workers. And there's no job center to go to. So the vineyard owner would go to the marketplace in the center of town.

So all the day laborers, the people that didn't have regular jobs, that's where they would go if they wanted work. They'd go to the center of town, and they'd wait for somebody to hire them.

So being a day worker, a day laborer, this is a tough gig, actually. You're in quite a vulnerable place being a day worker, because if you don't work, you don't eat. There's no social welfare.

There's no safety net for these folks. In fact, it would have been better if they were slaves, probably, because at least they had guaranteed meal and lodging for the day.

[4 : 25] So the master of the vineyard, he needs some high-stim workers. So he goes to this marketplace around 6 a.m., and he picks up a group of guys, and he makes a deal. He says, I'll pay you one denari for a day's work.

And normally the story would end there. But the vineyard owner, he goes back at 9 o'clock, picks up some more folks. No arrangement, no talk of money, though.

He just says, basically, I'll look after you. Then he goes back at 12. Then he goes back at 3. Again, picks up guys every time, two more groups, sends them to the vineyard.

No talk of pay, just says, look, I'll look after you. Then it's 4 p.m. It's an hour before work finishes.

He goes back again to the center of the market, picks up yet another group of workers. So these guys have been standing there all day, hoping to get some work.

[5 : 29] They must be very desperate people. Perhaps they're thinking, well, maybe we could get a couple of hours work in. It's not enough to get through the day, but maybe we could get enough just to feed the children tonight, perhaps.

But there's a bit of a conversation the vineyard owner has with these late-in-the-day workers. An hour before it all closes down, he has a conversation. He says, so how come you guys are still here?

What's going on? And they say, no one picked us. Now, the inference here is that this is the bottom of the barrel. There was something about these folks that said, you know, don't hire me.

Perhaps they didn't look very well. Perhaps they were very sickly. Perhaps they were very old. They just didn't look like good workers. But the owner of the vineyard sends them to the vineyard anyway.

Now, did the owner miscalculate how many people he needed? Well, that's not the impression you get. He kept going back. He kept going back. You get the sense that he kept going back to the marketplace because he was driven by great compassion, even hiring the unhireables.

[6 : 45] Five o'clock. Whistle blows. Time to finish for the day. It's pay time. Verse 8 in our passage. The owner directs the foreman to pay the guys that came last first.

And he pays them a denarii, pays them a full day's wages for doing an hour's work. So the first point of the parable is the owner is an incredibly generous person.

Now, you could probably work out for yourself that the vineyard owner represents God in this parable. And Jesus is saying, God gives us what we don't deserve. Right?

That's fantastic. Joel, you like this idea? God gives us what we don't deserve. Who doesn't like that? This is fantastic stuff. This is great. We love it.

And we really love it when we're on the receiving end of it. But what about when God gives his grace to people that other people?

[7 : 48] What about that awesome, beautiful, fantastic, overflowing grace? What about when that's extended to others? Well, sometimes this parable tells us that it bumps up against our sense of fairness.

It bumps up against our sense of justice. Now, if this sermon had two sort of headings, if it was in two parts, what do you mean if it does? It does have two sermon headings, all right?

So that would be the generous owner, which we've talked about. The second heading would be the grumbling servant. The grumbling servant, the one who sort of is pretty unhappy with how generous this owner is.

So let's look at these grumblers here. Verse 10. The guys, well, first of all, they see that the folks that worked an hour get a whole day's wages.

And so they're thinking, we're going to make bank here. We're going to cash in. This is going to be unbelievable. Verse 10. Now, when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each owner receives a denarii.

[8 : 54] And they grumble at the owner. They're like, we worked all day in the heat of the day. Why do we get the same?

It's not fair. It is not fair. It's easy to understand where they're coming from. My kids say this all constantly throughout the whole day at my house.

It's not fair. They get more lollies than me. They get more whatever. They get more TV. They get more cuddles. It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair. It's so ingrained in us, isn't it? Just as an aside here, parables are very subversive.

They're quite subversive. One of the tricky things that parables do is in the parables, we start to side with the wrong people sometimes in parables, don't we?

And when we get to this part where it says, you know, this part here, we start to think, I don't know if you think this, I don't know if you think this, Joel, but you guys, it's like, maybe they have a point. [10:01] Actually, they do have a point. It's not fair. It's just not fair. It's kind of like the story of the prodigal son.

We get to that key point in the story and we're thinking, yeah. How come the dad never threw a party for the good son? For the older brother?

How come he never got a party? So we love grace for us. We love it. But when it's extended to others, sometimes it infringes on our sense of fairness.

When other people get stuff that we think we only really deserve. So the vineyard owner says in verses 13 to 15, we made a deal. I haven't ripped you off.

We made a deal. I promised you a denarii and that's what you got. And I'm allowed to do with my money what I want. Why would you begrudge my generosity to these other people?

[10:55] In other words, my generosity is something you should celebrate. But it's created bitterness in your heart. That's the big point Jesus is making here in this parable.

Now listen to this. God gives us what he promises us. He gives us what he promises us. He extends his forgiveness to all of us. He promises us his presence in our life.

He promises us eternal life. But it seems like other people get more. It seems like other people get a better deal in life.

And what we can do is we can go through life wearing these fairness glasses. F-A-I-R. Fairness glasses, right?

And what happens when we go through life thinking about what's fair and what's not fair and they have this and I don't have that. It can make us angry. It can make us bitter towards God. It can make us bitter towards the good things that we see God giving others.

[11:59] How come they get to be married? How come they get to be joyfully single? How come they get to look like that and I look like this?

How come they have money and I don't? How come their kids, you know, sit still, right? Or, um, that's what I think, to be honest.

Every week. So I had this person describing this sort of social media. You know, like, have you ever seen hashtag blessed life?

And people are, something great's happening? Hashtag blessed life. Um, this woman on Facebook was saying, hashtag blessed life, um, my kids surprised us this morning by coming into our room and singing us hymns, right?

Like, literally, come to my house, we literally yell at each other for about an hour in the mornings. That's what my life looks like. Um, how come she has this great job and I'm stuck in this, this, whatever this job is.

[13:16] How come, how come, how come? It's just not fair. I was at Synod last week. Synod is like the country wide, the big Canadian, Anglican, AGM.

So, uh, we had lay delegates, all from the evening service, actually. Uh, lay delegates, as well as the clergy all go, and pastors, we, we're good at actually being grumblers.

Am I right? Am I right? It's a couple of pastors there. We're good at being grumblers here. We look at others and we want to be happy for their success, but sometimes it is difficult.

I talked to a mate of mine. I see him like twice a year at clergy retreat and Synod. And, um, I saw him six months ago and he says, and he says, oh, I said, how's church going? And he says, great, my church has doubled in size since we spoke last year.

And I admit to you that there was half a second in my brain that I stopped and paused before I said, praise God.

[14:23] So here's the question from the passage. Do we marvel over God's unmerited generosity towards others?

Or do we resent it? Folks, it is a mark of Christian maturity that we root for each other, that we cheer each other on, that we celebrate what God does in the lives of others.

And it's a mark of immaturity when we live in that place of saying, it's just not fair that they have this and I don't. That their life has worked out like that and mine hasn't.

We don't know how God is going to apportion his sort of blessings in people's lives. I don't know we get to, I don't think we get to question God on it.

He has made promises to us and we can bank on those. But there's a whole lot of other stuff. We just don't know how it's going to work out for us. I mentioned the prodigal son before.

[15 : 29] It's sort of a parallel story to this. If you don't know it, it's this younger son and he takes, you know, his dad's, mum and dad's money and he leaves town and he spends it on prostitutes and alcohol and then he's completely broke and he comes back and his father is so happy to see him, throws in the party of the ages and the older brother, the good son, the good son is bitter.

He can't bring himself to celebrate his father's incredible generosity towards the younger brother. I read a letter the other day, someone reflecting on recognising that they were the older brother in a situation in their life.

I'll read a section of it to you. It's a letter written by a Christian musician reflecting on Kanye West's conversion. So if you don't know, Kanye West became a Christian a little while ago and he released an album called Jesus is King, which I quite like actually.

And the response to this album though has actually been very polarising. So let me read a little bit of this letter that this Christian songwriter wrote. He says, I'm pretty unsettled at what this whole scenario has exposed in me.

Like no situation ever before, it's forced me into a face-off with my own wretched good son heart. Referring to the older brother and the prodigal son.

[17 : 01] No one ever thinks that they're that guy. So I hate admitting it, but it's totally me. I saw that album. I heard the buzz and my good son heart just couldn't take it any more.

What an injustice. What an outrage. Have I not given the last 25 years of my life to Christian music? I'm completely drenched in the blood, sweat and tears of his business.

Just look at my hard work. Thousands of songs written. Literally millions of miles travelled. Missing birthday parties and special events. Sacrificing in ways that will never be seen this side of heaven. And I've never once run away. But then this guy, who spent his whole life making much of himself with unbridled pride and arrogance and immorality and a glaring lack of biblical morals, gets bored, I guess, and decides he wants to do a Christian album.

It goes straight to number one. Are you serious? Did God fall asleep? Come on. Keeps going. He says this.

[18 : 07] Do you have any idea how many songs I've written declaring Jesus as king? And yet he gets to be the one who puts the message I've given my life to up in Times Square.

Where is my party? My deeply damaged good son heart on full display. Folks, are we angry about how God distributes his blessings?

Or do we celebrate it? If you're angry, if you think it's unfair, it's going to suck the joy out of your life. And it's completely wrong-headed. Because the last thing you want to be praying is, God, give me what I deserve. If we're in that place, it means we've forgotten that we have done nothing to earn our place in God's kingdom.

It's easy to forget that I'm only here because of grace. It's easy to forget that because meritocracy is just the lifeblood of the West. But we can lose sight of the cross, and it can cause our thanks and joy in our life to just grow dim, and we begrudge God's generosity in other people's lives.

[19 : 29] We become grumblers, and a church like that is just a sad, sad place to be. Jesus, he finishes his parable with this enigmatic line. He says, He says that line quite a bit, actually.

The last will be first because they know they're last. They know they only get to be part of the kingdom because of Jesus' work on the cross. They know it's grace. And the first will be last because they assume they should be first.

We want to be a joyful people. We don't want to be grumblers. Let's remember we belong to Jesus because of grace. When you drift from that, when you drift from that fundamental truth, peace and joy will drift off with it.

And envy and jealousy will take its place. So let's keep grace at the center of our faith. And we keep doing that. We can be people who celebrate God's generosity in other people's lives.

Without feeling bitter about it. Without being envious or jealous. So this is a very serious message from Jesus, isn't it? And I want to give us some space before we just go to prayer.

[20 : 48] I want to give us some space just to think about this. Just for a couple of minutes. So Emma is going to come up and play for us. Just a couple of minutes. And in these few minutes, before Alexandra comes up to pray, perhaps you could spend some time with Jesus yourself here.

God help me. God help me. I don't want to be an envious person. I do not want to be a grumbler. I find it hard to celebrate God's goodness in other people's lives.
I don't want to lean on my own record. Take me to the cross. Take me to the cross. So let's spend a few minutes just thinking about these things with Jesus right now.
God help me.