

UPB 12th Mar 2023 _____ (n)everseeing – Parable of the Compassionate Employer

FOCUS: God is unfairly generous and bewilderingly gracious! And runs his kingdom accordingly. Our response to his gracious generosity to others reveals our own kingdom character.

FUNCTION: That hearers would 'get' the difference between God's way and our way and would examine their own response in order to be changed.

1. Intro – experience the sting

To keep you alert and to reward you in advance for your rapt attention, I have brought some chocolate with me this morning. Who would like one? Hand out one, then two, then rest of the box.

Let's read the parable we are exploring this morning –

"For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work.

³"At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. ⁴So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. ⁵So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing.

⁶"At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?' ⁷"They replied, 'Because no one hired us.' "The landowner told them, 'Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.'

⁸"That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. ⁹When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. ¹⁰When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage. ¹¹When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, ¹²'Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.'

¹³"He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? ¹⁴Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as

you. ¹⁵Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?’

¹⁶“So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last.”

2. Backgrounding the story

Do you know this story? Workers in the Vineyard / Compassionate Employer. Jesus’ parables are not just teaching stories, they don’t set out easily understandable information or give us clear answers. They have a way of tipping over the status quo and exposing and unsettling our assumptions and preconceptions before we realise it, often leaving a sting in the tail. There are parables which I have become so used to, that I don’t feel the sting anymore, but this one, no matter how many times I revisit it, the sting still gets me. I know I should agree with the landowner, but I still feel like the first workers got set up. And I think that’s because I know, if I’m honest, that I would probably have reacted the same way as them, at least initially. How do I see in this story what Jesus wants me to see, hear what Jesus wants me to hear?

Let’s look at the landowner. He upends everything we know about business owners. (btw I don’t think this parable is about how to run a business!). This landowner doesn’t do his numbers, work out how many workers he needs for the day and hire who he needs the first time! He’s not even going out later because his circumstances have changed and he needs more workers. He just seems to be hiring them for no reason – and he does this three more times through the day!

According to historians, in most towns at that time, there’s always a particular corner of the marketplace where day workers gather early in the morning hoping to find work. These are people who for whatever reason have found themselves without ongoing employment. It’s insecure work, it’s hard physical labour, there are no guarantees of any conditions, but there’s no choice because without it they will starve. God’s law in Leviticus provides that these workers must be paid at the end of the day for this very reason. (Lev 19:13 *Do not make your hired workers wait until the next day to receive their pay.*) The employers arrive early too and the strongest and healthiest workers are chosen for the day. The later employers choose the next best and so on, like kids picking teams in the playground. The ones left, who stay there all day just in case, are the weakest, poorest, least able and least attractive to employers. They stand there all day, in quiet desperation, as passing people either smirk, shake their heads in judgement or turn away.

This landowner has business in town and so he's keeping an eye on who is still on the marketplace corner. His many trips are likely to be for the drama of the story but the most significant trip is the last one. He sees the social dregs still standing there hungry and humiliated. It's obvious why they haven't been working today but he asks and is told, 'no-one has hired us'. So he sends them off to his vineyard for the last hour of the day.

The landowner is not hiring these workers for his own needs – he is hiring them because of their needs. And then, he pays them a full day's wage for one hour! Now no-one is being cheated. The landowner is not being unfair – he pays the first workers what they agreed. But he is being **unfairly generous**. He is not endorsing equal work equal pay! He cares about the first workers too, but not in the way they'd prefer. He pays them backwards not to humiliate them but to help them see their own lack of generosity and grace.

Interestingly, the landowner enters into different relationships with the workers. The first workers feel they have some sway with the landowner. They have a good opinion of their value as workers. So the landowner enters a contract with them – to be paid a day's wages. The next few groups of workers are less certain of their own value and more conscious of their own need. They are willing to accept a fairly open ended promise from the landowner 'whatever is right', being convinced, I'm sure, that it will be much less than a full day's wage but still better than nothing. The last group of workers – well, they'd had a fruitless day, were feeling bad about themselves and had probably already given up on eating that night. They don't even ask for a promise – it's just an opportunity to do a bit of work – at least they can say they were hired and who knows? there might be some squashed grapes they can score.

When the pay is handed out, everyone's expectations are upended and all is revealed – the first workers want fairness and recognition, but the last workers are just happy with grace.

3. **Unfair generosity is the way of God and his kingdom**

If you haven't guessed already, the landowner in the story is a symbol of God. Not a perfectly accurate photograph but a quick approximate sketch. And the catch, the sting, the message of hope to Jesus' hearers is that God is **unfairly generous, bewilderingly gracious** and so is his kingdom.

It's fascinating, isn't it, that despite over 2000 years and an entire culture's distance, the way the world runs today is actually pretty similar to the first century world in this respect. Jesus' world runs on contracts, fairness, rights and comparison. But we feel it too, don't we? Did you

feel it when I handed out the chocs? The sense that everything should be fair, and fair from our point of view. This is how our world has taught us to respond and how it functions.

The people with the best living and working conditions are the ones most concerned about their rights. People are judged on their merit and not on their needs, whatever their disadvantages. Those in power give little attention to the effect of their actions on the powerless. Even in our current climate of a thousand different POVs, the weakest and least able to speak up remain unheard at the bottom of the heap, while the loudest and strongest get the attention. But in this parable Jesus is saying that the way the world runs is completely foreign to God's kingdom! This kind of thinking is unthinkable to God, unthinkable to Jesus.

4. How do we respond and what does it say about us?

So what do we make of all this? The truth in this story can make us feel uncomfortable. It makes us realise how much of the world's thinking we have absorbed and accepted.

The pointiest point of this parable is this – we love God's unfair generosity, his bewildering grace towards ourselves but how do we feel when someone else, someone less deserving than ourselves, receives that same generosity and grace? What does our response show us?

For most of us, if we are disadvantaged compared to others, this is called injustice. If we are advantaged compared to others, this is called good luck, or even blessing. What's more, as we compare our relative blessing, we feel less content. Ever been satisfied with your holiday to Mt Gambier until you hear of a friend's trip to Japan? I have. And there's an extra stinger for us parents – it can feel more righteous to fight for your child's 'fair treatment' than for your own, even if that's not what they need, or even want. I've been there too.

Sometimes we use our idea of justice to actually limit generosity and grace. This is what the first workers do - they complain that generosity to the last workers means injustice to them. But God's idea of justice is completely different! He doesn't play by the world's rules. God's justice includes, even embraces, mercy and generosity.

How does generosity and grace operate within our church family? Do we ever feel - it's all about the young people, or it's all about the older people? Do we feel our own demographic or point of view should get more of the airtime? Do we wish the worship leaders would choose more of the songs we like and less of the ones others seem to like?

Let me point out something we do have – and he's not going to enjoy it one bit!

Jason Hoet, our lead pastor, lives and ministers amongst us like the landowner. He has the same care and respect and time for every individual in this church and beyond. He will take the same time to talk to a stranger come in for a foodbank voucher as he will for the chair of the council, the same attention to an elderly person, a middle aged person, a teenager or a child, the same for a committed active member of his own congregation as a person who last attended the church two years ago. He is generous with himself to all with no distinction. I say this to honour him, but also to test our own response. Do we feel like saying – Jas, shouldn't you be investing more in us, in the people who contribute our time and money to the church regularly and pay for your salary? Do we feel like saying - Jas if you didn't help the AB church or the Iranian church we could have a night service for our own young people? I hope we don't, I hope we pass the test, because Jason is an example to all of us of God's unfair generosity and bewildering grace. We could all do with following in his footsteps.

5. Jesus embodies God's generosity and grace

Let's do even better, let's follow the footsteps of Jesus! Jesus not only tells this story, he embodies it, lives it. This parable is very carefully placed by Matthew to show Jesus interacting with his disciples. For this story is told to and for the disciples. Immediately before the parable, we have Jesus talking with the rich young ruler who walks away from him. Peter turns to Jesus and says, *"We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get?"* (19:27) and instead of shutting him down, Jesus says, *"everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life."*³⁰ *But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then".* (First will be last and last will be first) Are the disciples the last workers who become the first? That's how they probably heard it.

Immediately after the parable, Jesus again says the first will be last and the last will be first. But then the mother of James and John steps forward and asks Jesus about her sons' position in the coming kingdom – will Jesus seat them to his right and left when he sits on his throne? A prime example of worldly comparison and the rights of the first. Those who supported Jesus early on, who were his favourites, will surely receive special rewards, more than the daily wage, when the time comes. The fact that the other disciples are upset about this request only goes to show that James and John are not the only ones thinking this way. Now the parable seems to suggest that the disciples should not presume that they are the last and will be the first. They will have worked harder and longer but the grace given them will be the same. We all get a full day's wage.

Tom Wright – *“God’s grace... is not the sort of thing you can bargain with or try to store up. It isn’t the sort of thing one person can have a lot of and another only a little. God doesn’t make contracts with us as if we could bargain or negotiate for a better deal. He makes covenants in which he promises us everything and asks of us everything in return.”* (Matt for Everyone, 57)

This is where the truth stretches beyond the parable. The thing is, none of us can really bargain with God’s grace, it is something we never have and never will earn, and don’t deserve. No-one is entitled to their full day’s wage. God really, really, doesn’t make distinctions. It is truly bewildering and unfairly generous. In the end it is a deeper level of the gospel of Jesus than we can fully understand. There is no reasoning our way into it.

We see Jesus embodying unfair generosity and bewildering grace again as his death draws near. He knows Judas is planning to betray him, yet Jesus treats him with the same grace as the rest of the 12, giving him chances to step away, and even when he doesn’t, not stepping in to stop or punish him.

Even as Jesus hangs on the cross, he turns and offers unfair generosity and bewildering grace to the criminal beside him – *“I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.”* (Lk 23:43) – no probation, no work completed, you get the full day’s wage. After all, that’s why Jesus is there in the first place. This bewildering grace is free but it has to be paid for and it costs Jesus everything. Will we respond in gratitude not only for his unfair generosity and bewildering grace to us and to those we love, but that same generosity and grace to everyone and anyone at all?

Tom Long – *“God’s generosity spills over the levees we have built to contain it and surges mercifully over the landscape of human life. The rush of God’s generosity bears away in its flood every rickety shack built on human schemes of merit and of this world’s view of goodness. Whose spirit can match the mercy of God? Finally, only one human being was capable of that – Jesus. ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain...’”* (Matthew, 227)

How can we grow in grace and generosity?

We can become more aware of the depth of God’s grace to us

We can guard against thinking which places us above other people

We can place our hearts and minds in the hands of the Holy Spirit every day, asking him to give us kingdom eyes, and kingdom ears – to value what Jesus values