

ENVY, GRACE, AND THE PARABLE OF THE LANDOWNER
MATTHEW 20:1-16

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

About 2500 years ago Aristotle observed, **“It is the desires of men and not their possessions that need to be equalized.”** That is a pretty astute observation. **“It is the desires of men and not their possessions that need to be equalized.”**

A whole lot of political theorists down through history have focused on equalizing the possessions of people. The thinking has often been that if we can just equalize the possessions that people have, we will have a pretty good society. That nice idea in theory has not worked out so well in practice. Too often the people charged with equalizing the possessions have ended up with most of the power and a disproportionate part of the possessions.

A scholar by the name of Helmut Schoeck was born in Austria and educated in Germany. He went to the US and taught at several colleges and universities here, including Yale University. Then he finished up his life teaching in Germany. Helmut Schoeck's most famous book was *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour*. In this book he has two basic propositions. One is that envy is a big problem in forming human societies. The second is that the role of envy is often hidden. Those two propositions seem to me to be pretty consistent with what the Bible says about human society.

Schoeck says that in the underdeveloped world there is little generosity, charity, and willingness to share. Such societies fear success and equate it with betrayal of the group. This is envy at work. But this scholar claims that envy is at its worst when a society comes closest to equality. He writes, **“Man's envy is at its most intense where all are almost equal; his calls for redistribution are loudest when there is virtually nothing to redistribute.”** Thus it is that **“envy threatens every individual who can never be sure that, somewhere, an envious man is not waiting for an opportunity to avenge the fact that the other is doing better than himself.”**

We Christians recognize that we still have sin natures. We are still subject to the pull of envy. But as children of God we have tapped into a new source of power. The Bible says that we are new creatures in Christ and that we have divine power to overcome the worst effects of sin, including envy. But foundational to overcoming the worst impact of envy is being aware of its danger. Such is the focus of Jesus in the parable which we are going to consider this morning.

Last Sunday we looked at the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. There Jesus explained the realities of hell and the hope of heaven. Today we shall see how envy can hinder that hope for heaven.

I.

We will begin by looking at THE BACKGROUND OF THE PARABLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE BACKGROUND OF THE PARABLE) That is described in vv. 16-30 of #19 in Matthew. A man comes up to Jesus and asks what good deed he must do to get eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. The man asks which ones. Jesus summarizes the Ten Commandments. The man claims that he has kept them. Jesus then says that if he wants to be complete, he should give away his possessions and follow him. The man goes away sad, because he does not want to give up his stuff. Apparently he trusts in his riches more than in the true God.

Jesus then tells his disciples that it is tough for rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven. The disciples are surprised by that. In their Jewish education they were taught that material possessions are evidence of God's blessing and a sign of God's approval. Then Peter points out that he and his fellow apostles have left everything to follow Jesus. He wants to know what he will get in the end. He wants to know exactly what the benefits will be.

Jesus assures Peter and friends that they will have a place of leadership in this coming kingdom, and they will have eternal life. In v. 30 Jesus concludes with this enigmatic statement: **"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."** This coming kingdom will hold surprises. Even the evaluation of the people of God about others will be off. Prominent leaders of the people of God may not be so richly blessed. Little old ladies who were prayer warriors may be especially honored.

Central to the discussion of what God is doing in the world is "the kingdom of heaven." Verse 23 makes specific mention of entrance into the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven in Matthew's Gospel has two aspects. One aspect is the time in the future when Jesus will return to earth and set up His earthly kingdom. According to Revelation #20 the saints of God will be resurrected from the dead and will rule with Him over an earthly kingdom for a thousand years. So it is that in v. 28 the Jesus tells His disciples, **"Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."**

By the time of Jesus' ministry in #12 and #13 in Matthew it has become clear that the Jewish leaders are rejecting Jesus as the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. So the earthly kingdom is not going to be set up at this time. Jesus then begins to speak in terms of parables. He talks about a mystery form of the kingdom. While the establishment of the earthly kingdom is delayed, God will rule in the lives of people who accept Jesus as their Savior. In my sermon about the Parable of the Weeds I talked about this form of the kingdom. Thus we have the setting for the parable which Jesus gives at the beginning of #20.

II.A.

Consider then THE PARABLE ITSELF. (II. THE PARABLE) It divides into four parts. In vv. 1-7 of #20 we learn about THE HIRING. (II. THE PARABLE A. THE HIRING) Jesus

says in v. 1, **“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.”**

The implied comparison of the master of the house is Jesus. He takes the initiative in calling workers to work in his vineyard. These workers are not people who sought out the vineyard owner. He sought them out and called them.

The typical workday began at sunrise, which was regarded as 6 AM. Perhaps the land owner finds these workers in the town marketplace, which served as the union hall back in the day. It becomes clear that this man has a big vineyard and lots of resources. He also needs lots of workers. It appears that it is harvest time, and the grapes are ripe. There is much work to be done.

According to v. 2, **“After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard...”** One denarius per day was the typical wage paid for a common laborer back in this time. Notice that this is the agreement to which both parties agree. This is what Peter seemed to want back in v. 27 of #19. He wanted the benefits package laid out for him that would result from his involvement with Jesus.

Verses 3-4: **“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.’”** The third hour would be 9 AM. The master of the house still needs more workers. Notice that there is no defined agreement about compensation. The landowner asks the workers to trust him to give them what is right. So there is some risk involved on the part of the new hires who agree to work for him.

Verse 5 tells us: **“So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same.”** At noon and then at 3 PM the landowner goes out again to hire more vineyard workers. The financial arrangements are the same as for those hired at 9 AM. The workers have to trust the boss that they will be paid fairly.

According to vv. 6 & 7, **“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.’”** Notice again that these workers are dependent upon the initiative of the landowner. He hires these guys at the eleventh hour of the day, which would be about 5 PM. It was understood that the workday was from 6 AM until 6 PM. Thus these last hires work only for an hour. There is apparently a lot of work to do and a need for lots of workers. The landowner is willing to employ these last guys, even though it is almost the end of the day.

B.

We come then to THE PAYING (II. A. B. THE PAYING), described in vv. 8-10. Jesus says in v. 8, **“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.’”** It was typical to pay workers like this at the end of the work day. The

unusual thing is that the most recent hires are paid first. Normally one would expect the first workers to be paid first. The landowner is creating a difficulty in paying them first. If he decided to be generous to these most recent hires, one would expect that he would pay the others first. By showing generosity to these recent hires, he is creating a situation of disgruntlement from the other workers.

Verse 9: **“And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius.”** So here is the difficulty. The recent hires are paid the same amount as those who worked all day. The all day workers are kept around to witness the situation. You don't have to work in the human resources department to realize that this may cause some resentment from the watching workers.

Verse 10: **“Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.”** The hopes of the all day workers are dashed. Seeing that the last minute workers get paid the same amount as they are paid creates resentment. You can be sure that there will be complaints made to the union stewards. This has the makings for a class action law suit. Where is the fairness?

C.

We come then to THE GRUMBLING (II. A. B. C. THE GRUMBLING), described in vv. 11 & 12. Here is the complaint which is registered: **“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.’”**

The sense of fairness of these workers is offended. Most of us can relate to this. These guys worked all day. They worked in the hottest part of the day. Then these last guys show up and work only for one hour, and then in the part of the day which is cooler, and they get the same amount of pay as they did. Where is the fairness?

The landowner seems to rub their faces in it. He might have avoided the grumbling if he had just paid off the early workers first and sent them on their way. But, no, he intentionally has them witness his generosity to the later workers. At the same time we need to recognize that the early workers got just what they had agreed to receive for their work.

D.

We come then to THE ANSWERING (II. A. B. C. D. THE ANSWERING) in vv. 13-16. According to v. 13, **“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’”** It is tough to claim that the employer was unjust when he followed the labor agreement to the letter. These earlier workers had a contract paying one denarius for the day's worth of work. That is just what was paid. How is the employer being unfair?

Jesus drives home the point in vv. 14 & 15: **“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 landowner is wealthy. He is generous. If he wants to be generous to some, how is that being unfair to others?

Will people "begrudge my generosity?" The text says literally "Your eye is evil." It could also be translated as a question: "Is your eye evil?" The connection of evil with eye and the evaluation of the situation described points to a problem of envy.

The lesson concludes in v. 16: **"So the last will be first, and the first last."** This is a variation of the theme introducing the parable, which appeared in the last verse of #19: **"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."**

III.

We come then to THE LESSONS. (III. THE LESSONS) This is one of the more difficult of the parables of Jesus to determine the exact lesson which Jesus was intending to convey. Thus there have been a variety of interpretations which have been offered down through the centuries of church history.

Martin Luther suggested that the point of the parable was to teach that equal rewards will be given to all true believers. We Christians can expect to be rewarded the same in the heavenly kingdom. That idea, however, would seem to conflict with other passages in the Bible. In 1 Corinthians #3 the Apostle Paul speaks about Christians who develop different foundations. He says that **"if the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward."** But then he says that there are some Christians who will not have much work worth remembering. Yet he says that they will be saved.

In Revelation #2 and #3 Jesus sends a message to seven churches in Asia Minor. He speaks about how faithful Christians will receive different crowns. So it doesn't seem that the point of Jesus' parable can be that all Christians receive the same reward.

John Calvin said that the point of the parable was that faithful service is the key. Christians who are faithful to the opportunities and the challenges before them will get extra rewards in the heavenly kingdom. He says that early workers can grow lazy and fall down in their faithfulness. That may be true. But there is no indication in the parable that the early workers were lazy in their work. Reference is made to their toil in the scorching heat.

Other interpreters have argued that the references to hiring of different workers at different times was intended to be understood in terms of God's work in Biblical history. In the beginning God called Adam to serve him. Later he called Noah and Abraham and then the apostles. The earlier workers in God's kingdom had the harder job because they had less knowledge of God and His plan. They didn't have the Holy Spirit resident within them. The difficulty with this interpretation is that there is nothing in the story or what Jesus says about it to suggest that this was the point that Jesus had in mind.

Other interpreters have suggested that God is making reference to the Jews in their earlier calling to follow Him. Soon the Gentiles will take a lead in advancing God's kingdom. They are the ones who are, in a sense, the latecomers. This might make a certain amount of sense. The Jews in the early church were sometimes resentful of the Gentiles and their participation in the church. Some of the Jews wanted the Gentiles to follow the Law of Moses like their people did for centuries.

The problem with this interpretation is that there are four times when the landowner went out to call more workers into his vineyard. If the point was to focus on the calling of Jews vs. the calling of Gentiles, why did Jesus talk about four times when the vineyard owner went out to call for more workers to be employed by Him?

My suspicion is that Jesus wanted His people to have a more general spiritual interpretation of this parable. So I find at least three lessons that come out of the parable.

A.

The first lesson that I find is that we should AVOID COMPARING OUR CHRISTIAN STATUS WITH THAT OF OTHERS. (III. A. AVOID COMPARING OUR...) In the parable those who worked the longest in the vineyard were upset that the newcomers got the same remuneration as they did. It was a problem of comparing how God blesses other people and withholds some blessings from us.

Some among us seem to have more health challenges or more financial challenges or more family challenges than others do. Some newer Christians come along and seem to flourish without these challenges. They see more fruit from their witnessing efforts. They have churches that grow faster than our church grows. They have Bible studies that attract more people. They have families that don't seem to have the same relationship challenges that we have. They seem to get prayers answered quicker than our prayers get answered.

From our earliest years we are exposed to the dangers of comparison. We compare our academic progress with that of others. We compare our athletic abilities with that of others. We compare our popularity with that of others. We compare our looks with that of others. We compare our income with that of others. All of this focus of comparisons can carry over into our Christian life in our perspective on how God treats us in comparison with His treatment of others. This parable assures us that God will treat His people fairly. We should not begrudge Him if He seems to be extra generous toward fellow believers.

B.

This leads to a second application which I see coming out of this parable. It is that we should AVOID ENVY. (III. A. B. AVOID ENVY) That is the heart of the problem here. The workers who were in the field the longest were jealous of the treatment which the latecomers received. They justified that concern on their perception of justice and

fairness. At root the problem was one of envy. It was the problem identified in the Tenth Commandment. It was coveting something that appeared to belong to another person.

It was the problem identified in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son demanded his share of his father's inheritance. The father gave it to him, and the younger son left home and blew it all on wasteful living. When a famine struck, he was suddenly left destitute. This Jewish boy had to go to work for a pig farmer. But he came to his senses and decided that maybe his father would at least take him back as a hired worker. But when the prodigal son returned home, the father treated him to a feast. The older son was jealous. His sense of fairness was violated. He was envious of his father's treatment of his brother, the prodigal son. He did not like it that his father was so generous toward one who was so undeserving. Jesus' words in this parable apply: **"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"**

Researchers from the University of Warwick and Cardiff in Britain analyzed data taken from a British study done several years ago. They found that people care much more about how their incomes compare to the incomes of their peers (people of the same age or region, for instance) than about how much they make in absolute terms. In other words, a pay raise is good, but only if it is more of a raise than a neighbor received. **"Earning a million pounds a year appears to be not enough to make you happy if you know your friends all earn 2 million a year,"** said lead researcher Chris Boyce, a psychologist at the University of Warwick. (*World*, 4/10/2020) It is the temptation toward envy which still rears its ugly head in our sin nature.

Charles Swindoll points out, **"Envy finds acceptable ways of expressing its resentment. One favorite method is the 'But' approach. When I talk of someone I envy, I may say, 'He is an excellent salesman, but he really isn't very sincere.' Or 'Yeah, she has a brilliant mind, but what a dull teacher!' Or 'The man is an outstanding surgeon, but he doesn't mind charging an arm and a leg.'**

"Another favorite avenue of expression envy enjoys to travel is the 'reversal' approach. Someone does a good job and I cast a shadow over it by questioning the motive. An individual gives a truly generous gift, and we mutter, 'He's obviously trying to make an impression.' A Christian couple buys a new car and a few pieces of nice furniture. Watch out! There will be somebody who will squeeze out an envious comment like, 'Well, they probably don't tithe. We'd have a lot more money to spend if we didn't tithe.'" (*Come Before Winter*, p. 98) Such are the challenges which envy presents. Our parable reminds us that we should not begrudge God's apparent generosity toward others, especially fellow believers.

C.

The third lesson which I find here is that WE NEED TO REMEMBER THAT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS BASED ON HIS SOVEREIGN GRACE. (III. A. B. C. WE NEED TO REMEMBER THAT...) The heart of the gospel is the truth that all of us

are sinners deserving of hell. It is only by God's grace that any of us become His children.

“For by grace are you saved by faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) Jesus told His followers, **“You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you...”** (John 15:16) We see that principle at work in this parable. The workers did not seek out the landowner to participate in his work crew. It was the landowner who sought them out. He was fair with all of them. He seemed to be extra generous to some. Some of the workers resented that extra generosity.

Pastor and Professor Daniel Harrell observes, **“Formerly sinners humbled by grace, we easily warp into do-it-yourself saints who don't need grace anymore. And once we stop needing grace, we stop giving it too.”** (*Christianity Today*, March 2021) Such was the problem with the grumblers in our parable. Such can be the problem with us.

Abraham Kuyper was born 185 years ago yesterday. He was born into a Dutch family whose father was a pastor. He did not have such a great attitude toward church. He resented it. When he went off to college, he was influenced by the secular humanism already present in college life back in that day. But when his fiancée gave him a novel written by a Christian author, he was greatly affected by it. The proud hero of the story was brought to a point where he knelt and wept before God with a broken and humbled heart. Abraham Kuyper so identified with this character that he felt compelled to do the same.

He went on to seminary and got a doctorate in theology. Yet in his first church pastorate he discovered low social status Christians who knew more about the Bible than he did. They especially had a clear understanding of the grace of God. Kuyper later wrote, **“Their unremitting perseverance has become the blessing of my heart, the rise of the morning star for my life.”** He added that his parishioners taught him to find rest for his soul **“in the worship of a God who works all things, both the willing and the working, according to his good pleasure.”** (*The One Year Christian History*, pp. 606-607) The Biblical understanding of the sovereign grace of God became central to the rest of his life's ministry.

Kuyper went on to become involved in helping to start the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880. He also got involved in Dutch politics. He became a member of the Dutch legislature. In 1901 he became prime minister of the Netherlands. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Such is the lesson of the Parable of the Landowner. We need to avoid comparing our Christian status with that of others. We need to avoid envy. We need to remember that our relationship with God is based on His sovereign grace.