

The Generosity of Our King Matthew 20:1-16

Good afternoon! We're starting a new series today we're calling simply "The Parables of Jesus". We're going to look at a few of the many parables that Jesus shared with people during his earthly ministry. His parables are scattered throughout the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and perhaps, one or two in John. Although some say that those parables in John are not really parables. Altogether we can say that his parables number more than 30. They can be as much as 46 as one Bible teacher asserted. Anyway, in our series, we're going to look at only eight of them which should bring us up to the end of August.

What is a parable? The dictionary defines it as a usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle. It comes from the Latin word parabola and it means "comparison". And we all know that is how the way Jesus told his stories. He used allegory or makes comparisons between two people or events or situations or concepts then sometimes explained the meaning or sometimes let his hearers try to find out the meaning. A parable is often defined in Sunday school as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning".

Jesus told parables because he loved to tell stories. He was a master storyteller, using common subjects and everyday experiences to share deep truths about God, his kingdom and ourselves. He told stories because he knew that people love to hear stories. In this series, we'll take a closer look at several of these stories and how they impact us today—in our own life stories.

And talking about stories, let me tell you a story. This is the story of a wise man, let's call him Andrew, who was known to tell engaging parables like Jesus did. It is said that he offered a surplus of insight through his use of parables. Wherever he went, on barefoot, he would share stories.

His travels caused his feet to build up an incredible amount of hardened skin. To make things worse, his minimalist diet and eventually his age led him to become very frail. But above all, he was known for his horrible, horrible breath. But people listened anyway to his parables. So, in other words, I guess that you could say that this man was a **Super-Calloused Fragile Mystic Hexed by Halitosis**. Ok. That's my joke for the day and let us go on to our real story.

Today, to start off this series I'd like to talk about the Kingdom of Heaven. There are several parables whose topic is the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. I've chosen the one in Matthew 20 as the parable I'm going to talk about today.

I've entitled this message **"The Generosity of Our King"**. In this message, I'm going to share with you certain things we should keep in mind with regards to God's generosity toward us.

Read Matthew 20:1-16.

Let's look at the meaning of this parable. This parable is not about God's preferred economic system. That's why we shouldn't say that God is like a communist or God is unfair. This parable is not all about modeling for us the way we should treat workers.

What is the parable about? Why did Jesus tell this story about the landowner? We always have to read Bible verses and stories in context. One important rule in reading the Bible is to remember that the chapter divisions that we find in our modern Bibles and the verse divisions are not inspired by the Holy Spirit. The words in the Bible are inspired by God. But the chapter and verse divisions are entirely human and often very unfortunately placed.

History tells us that the chapter divisions we find in our New Testaments were invented by the Archbishop of Canterbury back in the 13th century to help people with citations of the Bible.

And the verse divisions didn't come at least until the 16th century. Many of these chapter divisions and certainly many of the verse divisions are really unfortunate. And we miss the meaning of this parable if we don't read it in context. The context here is what is said in chapter 19. Jesus is speaking to a rich young man about the kingdom of God. And he tells this very wealthy, very moral young man that he can't receive the kingdom of God while his hands are filled with his own money. If your lungs are full, you need to exhale before you can inhale. He had no capacity to receive the kingdom. It's like Jesus' command that we need to forgive to be forgiven. You need to exhale forgiveness before you can inhale and receive forgiveness. He needs to let go of his money, let go of his wealth, so that there is room in his hands to receive God's grace, God's blessings.. The man wanted his money more than he wanted God's rule over his life. His money was more important to this man than God. So he walked away from Jesus very upset.

We read in Matthew 19:23-24: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'"

Peter was listening to the dialogue between Jesus and the wealthy young man. And Peter said in Matthew 19:27, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" We read Jesus' answer in Matthew 19:28-30: "Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.'"

Then Jesus goes on and tells this parable about the generous landowner. And it is specifically addressing Peter's question and an underlying attitude that Jesus discerns in Peter's question. Why does Jesus tell this parable? Not to teach us about human economic systems, or the way we should conduct our business with each other. The parable is designed to communicate that God, the King of the universe, the landowner in this parable is exceptionally generous.

You see, throughout history, kings have never been known for their kindness, goodness, and generosity. The Jews, who were listening to Jesus were perfectly aware of that. All the kings who ruled them except for a few were abusive and ungodly. That's why kingdoms have risen and fallen. That's why there have been revolutions and rebellions against kings throughout history. Kings have often been pictured as oppressive, cruel, and greedy for money. All they wanted was their subjects' taxes. So, Jesus was trying to make a distinction. He was trying to let them see that God is a different kind of King. He is a king who loves them, who cares about their needs and who is extravagant in giving.

God is generous. He is an extremely generous God. That's what this parable is about. God is the landowner. He is the owner of the vineyard in this parable.

How generous is God?

1. God is so generous that we can trust him even when there are no guarantees.

Compare the workers who were hired first with the other workers. Let's look again at Matthew 20:1-2: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard."

A day in the ancient Roman world was divided into 12 hours between sun up and sundown. So, the first group of workers was hired at sunup at say 6:00 a.m. In verse 2 we read: Matthew 20:2 (NIV) "He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard."

This first group of workers who were hired earliest in the morning insisted on a wage agreement. Maybe they negotiated with the landowner; maybe they haggled with him. I don't know. But they struck a deal with him. They wanted a denarius which was a normal day's wage for a normal day's work.

Now, compare them with the other groups. Look, for example, at this second group of workers 3 hours later in verses 3-5: "About nine in the morning 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 noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing."

Note in verse 4 that there is no agreement; rather, the landowner said: "I will pay you whatever is right." What a difference between the first group of workers and all the other groups.

You know, we are so often like that first group of workers. We say: If I take this first step of obedience in following you, Lord, what guarantee will you give me that this new ministry that I'm starting will succeed, that it will grow? What guarantee will you give me that if I serve you on the mission field that no one in my family will get sick? What guarantee, God, will you give me that if I choose not to get an abortion, and I decide to have my baby, that I will still have the career that I want, or that I won't struggle to make ends meet as a single mom? Lord, I need to know. What guarantee do I have from you that if I decide to return to my marriage and work at it and go to counseling and try to reconcile with my husband or wife that our marriage will make me happy? That I won't be hurt again in the future? Or if I keep myself sexually abstinent as a gay Christian, as a heterosexual single Christian, that I won't end up lonely and alone?

And to all of the questions about what will you guarantee to me, Lord, if I obey you, God says: No guarantees. No guarantees.

Folks, this is a hard truth. There is no guarantee that if you serve the Lord, you won't get cancer. No guarantee that if you are faithful to him, you will not be laid off with other workers. No guarantee that all of your desires will be fulfilled. No guarantee that if you pray and pray, you will not get covid. No guarantee that you will not experience in some way or other that you are protected from disappointment, trial, loneliness, sickness, or difficulty.

This is the way it is when you and I sign up to obey God's calling in a mission, in a ministry, in a marriage, in our workplaces, in our life. But note this, God says: You can still trust me with your entire life – your past, your present, your future, your relationships; all that you are and all that you ever hope to be. I am a generous God. It is my nature to be generous. When you sign up to follow me, you are signing up to follow someone who is exceptionally generous. How is God generous? In the way he expends his grace and peace and joy in your life.

This is what God guarantees you. He promises to be in the present and in the future with you. You will not be alone trying to cope with life by yourself. If you turn your life over to him, he promises to be with you.

Jesus makes a promise to his followers: I will be with you until the end of time. And he created the church to be a large extended family so that we might have tangible human relationships to do life with. Even in this pandemic situation, you may feel you're alone and that God has forgotten you or this nation or this world, but God has not. He never has. Think of the two World Wars, the holocaust, the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, the Great Depression. I'm sure people then have also wondered and worried during those times. Where is God? Has he abandoned us. Is he in control? Doesn't he care about our hardships, our loneliness, our desperate situation?

The truth is, God has come through. He saved people. He rescued people. He fixed a lot of broken things that people caused in this world.

You see, this world will continue to experience tragedies, calamities, chaos, destruction, because as I mentioned last week, Romans 8:20 says that “creation was subjected to frustration” since Adam and Eve sinned. The whole creation is under a curse and that’s why we see death and suffering all around us. Were it not for God controlling this world, all of us and this planet would have imploded, would have vanished forever. We have the capacity to destroy ourselves. But... God loves us. He is generous with his love for us. He himself came to earth to save us. The king became a servant to serve us and die for us because we are a stubborn people. All we are is wickedness inside. He wanted to save us from ourselves, from our sins. And a time will come when his Kingdom will truly reign not only in our hearts but in the whole creation as well. In Revelation, it is prophesied that a time will come when “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads...And they will reign for ever and ever.” (Rev. 22:3)

I long for the day when the curse is lifted. Instead, blessing will flow in creation.

The second related point here is:

2. God is so generous that he invites us to serve him in order to meet our need.

The landowner in this story keeps returning to the market and finds workers to work in his vineyard. Now, initially, that’s not really surprising to us. Maybe there is so much work to do that the landowner needs the additional help with his vineyard. But that assumption is undermined when we get to the 11th hour workers. We read in verses 6-7 these words: Matthew 20:6–7, “About five in the afternoon 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.”’”

Now these workers couldn’t have been hired right before sunset to meet the landowner’s need. Rather, the landowner hired them to meet their need for a day’s wage. These men, by the way, must have been the least desirable workers. They said: No one has hired us. We’re the ones no one wants. Maybe they had a disability or they were old or infirm. Perhaps they were like the 55-year old worker today who has been laid off. He has lots of experience but can’t get a job. Companies usually don’t want to hire someone who is past his prime. Maybe the workers who are standing around on the roadway were a different ethnicity. They were standing around in a Jewish village and they were Gentiles.

They could be a minority group. They were marginalized. They were standing around waiting to be hired. The short of it is that for whatever reason, these were the least desirable workers who were not hired to meet the landowners need; the landowner hired these 11th hour workers to meet their need for a day’s wage.

It is always this way with our generous God. God never employs us to meet his need. God employs us; he calls us to serve him in a certain way, in order to meet our need.

Why does God give us things? Why does God pay us for what we do? It is not because we are doing something for him. God is our Creator. He gives us everything that we can give back to him. He is our Redeemer. He rescues us from the misuse of our lives. And he saves us from the misuse of our bodies and our time and our talents. God gives because he is fundamentally a giver. That is who God is – he is a giver.

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, defines God this way. He said: “God is nothing but burning love and a glowing oven full of love.”

That's who God is. And he gives not to satisfy himself, as if there was some hole in God. He gives to satisfy his creatures. You see, we are needy. We couldn't exist without the gifts of God. Without his gift of air and water and sun, the gift of our bodies, the gift of God holding our molecular structure together, we would not exist. We need God as our Creator and Sustainer. We need God as our Savior. But we've taken the gifts of God and ruined them by our sin. We are like a beautiful car that we've wrapped around a tree. Human beings are beautiful wrecks, and we don't function well unless the wreck is repaired by God.

That's what salvation is all about. God pulls the wreckage of our lives off of the tree that we've wrapped it around and step by step he begins to repair us. God gives because we need him as Creator, as Savior, as the Giver of eternal life.

Friends, there is one thing that no one else can give and] that is eternal life. It doesn't matter how smart you are; it doesn't matter how many degrees you have so that people call you Mr. Fahrenheit, or how much money you've got in the bank. We have no answer for death. Only God can give eternal life.

Jesus said that if we trusted in him, we would live forever. Who else can make that promise? No doctor you go to can promise you that you will live forever if you just trust their prescription. No employer can say, "If you join our organization, we can give you eternal life." Only Jesus, only Jesus, has the ability to fulfill the promise: If you trust in Jesus, you will live forever. God is so generous that he calls us to serve him in order to meet our need of eternal life in his kingdom.

That leads to the last thought.

3. God is generous but don't let that disappoint you and make you bitter.

Here is what we read in Matthew 20:10-15: "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 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, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one 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?’”

This parable addresses disappointed expectations. Those who were first hired had their expectations raised when they saw what the generous landowner gave to the last hired one. They said, “My goodness, these folks who worked only an hour got so much, I’m sure that the landowner is going to give us much more than what we bargained for.” And to some degree their expectation was logical. They only worked for an hour; we worked for ten hours; we’ll surely get more than a day’s pay...

We hear about a great testimony, something God did for someone else, and it raises our expectations – well, God might do that for us. That’s very reasonable. We all do that. We read something in a book; we hear something in a sermon and our expectations get raised. Part of what this parable concerning God’s generosity is about is what we do with disappointed expectations. Someone reports an extraordinary healing, a healing of a condition very similar to one that we have, or one that a loved one has – our expectations are raised. God gave them a lucrative job, God could do it for me, too. Well, God did this for this other person, he’ll probably do the same for us. And then, if God doesn’t do it, what do we do with our disappointment?

That’s what this parable is about. Do we just walk away and become bitter and accuse God of unfairness? You did something for them, but you won’t do it for us. You’re not really generous. I thought you would give me this job that I’ve been praying for. I thought you would give me this romantic relationship.

I thought you would change this thing in my life that I hate; that you would remove this thorn in my flesh. I thought you would change my feelings or remove this temptation.

Friends, we really have a choice when our expectations have been disappointed. The choice is either fight or flight. We can turn our backs on God and become bitter saying, Well, God, I guess you are not very generous; you're not open-handed; you're not the God that Jesus described, the open-handed generous God. At least, you're not that God for me. That's where some of you have been. You've turned your back on God because of disappointed expectations. God didn't do what you hoped he would do, or give you what you prayed he would give you. So you've decided to take your life back from God and to do life on your own without him.

That's where I've been. I came to know Jesus when I was 16 and expected a lot of wonderful blessings to flow in my life. But I suffered setbacks one after the other and I got disappointed and turned my back against God and even tried to fight him by indulging myself in vices and then to spite him by getting involved in cults and false religions. What happened after that? I got more disappointed and bitter and thought of ending my life. But God is so generous. In my sorry predicament, he was the first one to reach out to me and healed me and restored me.

We can flee to God or we can fight. You can say, "God, you are so generous that I'm even going to take my disappointed expectation and release that to you – what I hoped for, what I wanted, what I prayed desperately for – I'm even going to give you trust that you will meet me in my disappointment. I think of what the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10: "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

God is a generous King – so generous that even when your prayers are not answered the way you hoped they would be, his grace is still sufficient to meet your needs, whatever life brings.

Let’s pray.