

GOD'S TOPSY-TURVY KINGDOM

Scripture Reading: Matthew 20:1-16, NIV

Once again, Jesus reveals his genius for irritating me. I read this parable and I don't like this landowner. The way he treats these workers calls into question my reactions, my feelings, my perceptions, my values, my way of dealing with people, my sense of fairness. How long would you work in an office, even if you were paid generously, in which the boss paid people who came in at 5:00 p.m. and worked one hour, the same amount of money he paid you for starting at 6:00 a.m.? How long could you stand being in that environment? How long would it take, for you to be stressed by the idea of this person who has been shopping all day, comes in at 5:00 and gets paid the same wage for the same kind of work? You and I would think that that boss was eccentric, weird, etc., and we would not like him.

To appreciate what's happening in this parable, however, you have to see it in its context, which goes back to the 19th chapter with the encounter with the Rich Young Ruler. This young man comes into the presence of Jesus, he has a great deal of wealth, he wants to know what he must do to be saved, and Jesus tells him to sell it all and give it to the poor and follow him.

As the man leaves, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "You know, it's harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." The disciples were so astonished at this statement that they responded, "Then nobody can be saved!" Jesus looked at them and said, "Ah, with men this might be impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Very humbly, Peter says, "Well, we have left everything to follow you. What then shall we have in the kingdom of heaven?" In other words, "Jesus, we are not like the Rich Young Ruler. We are not holding onto our possessions. We've given them all away, we've followed you. Now, what's the payoff? What will we have?" Not, what will we be, what will we experience? But "What will we have in the kingdom of heaven?"

Jesus' initial response sounds a bit disappointing, "You will sit on 12 thrones and rule. You will receive a hundred times over what you have been denied in this life." He goes on to tell the parable in our Scripture Reading. What is he trying to say in the parable?

Let me call your attention to what I said in the beginning. You have to read Jesus' parables very personally. They have to speak to you and to me. You cannot identify with the heroes in the parables; you're supposed to identify with the villains. Because we don't, we already condemn ourselves. The other thing you need to remember is that these parables have a power when you read them carefully and attentively that is almost beyond description. New Testament scholar James Breech has written a book on the parables of Jesus—*The Silence of Jesus*. He spent 10 years researching all the thousands of parables from the Orient, including the ones from the Jewish tradition and the New Testament. He categorizes and classifies all of these parables. After he's finished, there are 12 parables that he cannot classify. They stand unique and they're all parables of Jesus. Many New Testament students believe that what is happening in the parables is a revealing of the essence of Jesus' teaching and theology in a way that perhaps nothing else does. The parables are clearly I back to Jesus' earliest teachings.

In the parable the people who start work at 6:00 in the morning are promised a wage (a verbal

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agreement was binding in that culture). During the day the owner wanders off the property and goes back to town to the marketplace. He sees men standing around doing nothing. The story doesn't tell us why he went back to the marketplace, but you would think it isn't because he feels the need to hire additional workers. No one could be such a bad planner that he has to go back every two hours to get more people. When he sees laborers standing around doing nothing, he says to the first group at 9:00 a.m., "You go work in my vineyard and I promise I'll pay you a fair wage." He never gives them an amount. At 6:00 in the morning, he says the workers will get a day's wage, or a denarius—a fair wage, even generous. He tells the workers hired at 9:00 a.m., at noon and at 3:00 p.m. that they'll get a fair wage. At 5:00 p.m. he just says, "You go to work on my property." He doesn't make a promise about a fair wage, but they go.

If you put this in the context of the Rich Young Ruler and Peter, a few things strike you: Peter is saying to Jesus, "We are the original 12. We are the earliest of the disciples. We left everything. What will we have? I'm assuming that at the end of this movement there will be something a little special." Jesus starts out by saying, "You'll sit on the 12 thrones. Anyone who forsakes this life will receive a hundredfold and eternal life." But in the context of the parable it has a little different flavor.

In a very subtle way, Jesus is trying desperately to get Peter and the other disciples off the rice Christianity syndrome—the idea that whatever I lose now, I will gain a hundred times over in the future, so it's a good deal. He's doing that partly because the traditional Jewish notion was that you were rewarded according to the work you put forth, which is a good capitalistic notion. If you put in 12-hour days and build a good business, you deserve it. If you work 2 hours a day and your business fails, you deserve that, too.

There was a Jewish parable similar to the one we're discussing. A king had many laborers but one was so outstanding he accomplished as much in 2 hours as the people who worked 12 hours. The king said to him, "You only have to work 2 hours a day." The other workers objected but the king said, "I'm sorry, but he does as much in 2 hours as you do in 12; therefore, that's all he's going to have to work."

Jesus' point is the obverse of that. He doesn't pay people for 2 hours of work because the 2 hours is equal to 12. He pays people for 1 hour's work and that's all it's worth, but it's equal to the pay he gives for 12.

According to this parable, when the end of the day comes, the owner tells his assistants to line up the laborers according to the last being first, and then work back. Notice how this first and last theme keeps recurring in the parable as well as in his conversation with Peter. He doesn't try to hide the fact that he's paying the 5:00 p.m. people the same as the 6:00 a.m. workers. He pays the 5:00 p.m. people first and he announces it so that everybody in the line can hear. At first the people who have been working from earlier in the day assume that they will be paid proportionately more because they started earlier. In other words, "If this guy is giving out that much of a bonus to a 5:00 p.m. worker, can you imagine what he's going to give to those of us who started earlier in the day?"

When they come up to get their money, they're all paid the same. The 6:00 a.m. workers finally start to complain and grumble. When they grumble they are clearly making a negative statement about the owner. "These last worked only 1 hour and you've made them equal to us." Notice the word equal. The workers don't say, "You paid them the same amount of money." Money is not the issue here. The issue

is that they are made *equal* to the other laborers. The owner responds by saying, "I haven't done anything unfair or dishonest. I paid you exactly what I promised to pay you." The current translations say, "Friend, I have done you no wrong," but in the Greek the word used for friend is a more distant, formal term. He becomes very professional at this point and says, "Didn't you agree for a denarius?" In other words, judge for yourself whether I've been fair. They can't respond because this is exactly what the agreement was. So he says, "Take your money and go. I am free to give whatever I want to give to whomever I want to give it. It's up to me. It's none of your business what I do."

This issue of pay is an issue of self-worth and personal dignity for the workers. It's not so much a question of justice as a question of self-worth. They feel less worthy than the 1-hour workers because they had to work 12 hours to get the same amount of money. They have tended to compare their value as workers with the people who worked only 1 hour. They're saying to themselves, "If I have to work 12 hours to get this kind of money out of this man, and this other guy only has to work 1, he's 12 times better than I am." They are living life in terms of comparisons between themselves and other people. They are evaluating their worth on the basis of how they compare. *Nobody* focuses on the generosity of the owner. *Nobody* is grateful that these men who might not be able to feed their families if they don't find some work during the day have been given enough money to pay their bills. Nobody praises the owner. People complain because they have been treated this way in relationship to others.

Some years ago I used to watch a program called *The Millionaire*. In that program, somebody would give \$1 million anonymously every week to another individual. The show was based on what happened in the lives of people who inherit \$1 million. I suggest to you that if we announced today that for the next 4 weeks, one person a week would get \$1 million, and there were no rational criteria for the award, everybody who did not get that \$1 million would be very unhappy. By nature we would not focus on generosity, we would not focus on the good fortune of another. Instead, we would focus on our being gyped. Fundamentally, all of us live in a psychological condition of envy. We don't like to think that other people can get something for nothing. We like to think that the more you have, the more you are. What these workers have done is taken this act of generosity by the owner to exercise envy. This is a problem they have; it's not a problem the owner has. They've taken this occasion of generosity to nurture, to embellish, to feed their own acquisitive instincts. That's why he says, "Do you begrudge my generosity?" In my Bible it has an extra note, "Or is your eye evil because I am good?" In other words, "It's because I am good that you are thinking evil, not because I am evil. You are taking a good action as a pretext for having evil feelings about me."

Like Peter, the Rich Young Ruler lived in envy. Peter was willing to trade earthly treasures for heavenly treasures as long as he could see how it could be a bargain for him. Betrayed by his statement that the disciples had left everything (in contradistinction to the Rich Young Ruler who wouldn't), he asks, "What will we have because we followed you?" Both Peter and the Rich Young Ruler lived in envy, in an acquisitive frame of mind and disposition. In telling this parable, Jesus is saying to his disciples that those who start early with me, those who bear the burdens in the heat of the day have no advantage over the people who come later. Those who have left all and followed me have no advantage over those who don't leave all but do follow me.

The only difference between the workers at 6:00 in the morning and the workers at 5:00 in the evening is that one has had the *privilege* of working longer in my service. I would argue that the throne reference is not a reference to domination or to power, but a reference to service. The disciples will

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continue the tradition of service in heaven. They will have unique roles to play in relationship to the kingdom of heaven, but they will not be given bonuses. The bonus is in the service; the reward is the same: "All who inherit my kingdom inherit my throne" (Revelation 21:7).

It seems to me that if Jesus' followers needed to hear this in the first century, we need to hear it in the twentieth century 20 times more intensely. Every day the culture in which we live primes our envy, our acquisitive instinct through advertising.

Traveling on a plane recently, I picked up the U.S. Air catalog and I saw about five things I would love to have. It would be neat to own them And none of them is that expensive. Playing with my own reactions, I conceded that I didn't need any of the items; they'd just be nice to have. Part of the reason I'd like them is because not everybody has them. (If everyone has it, then it becomes a necessity.) If only a few people own them, it's special. Every time I go through this, I struggle with envy. Marketers will tell you that the reason to buy a Mercedes Benz is because there's a certain status attached to it. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with it being a superior vehicle. Jesus knew how human beings desire superiority.

This is one of the critical reasons for the Old and New Testament teachings on stewardship. This is what Jesus was trying to communicate to the Rich Young Ruler, Peter and the disciples. There has got to be some way to stifle and strangle the acquisitive instinct to which we all succumb. It is an insatiable desire. This propensity to acquire is like a dragon that won't stop swallowing. You never have enough to stop envying what someone else has. If you had the world, you'd start reaching for the stars and the universe, which is precisely what Lucifer did. This is one of the critical things that feed the problem of sin.

You will always feel resentful, frustrated and incomplete. You'll never have enough; you will never be satisfied. Just as the laborers in the vineyard, you will always feel cheated if someone gets a large reward or has special talents.

Sometimes we may make facetious comments such as, "Where was I when God handed out brains? or looks? or money?" What you're really saying is, "I was there. Where was God?" You feel God cheated you, just like the laborers felt the owner had cheated them.

What does Christ say in response? "I am holding nothing back. I am giving freely. I am generous. I want you not to be consumed with envy because these people have been the beneficiaries of my generosity. I want you to feel generous as I do. I want you to rejoice in their prosperity. I want you to be glad that this has happened to them."

When Jesus finished talking to Peter in Matt. 19:30, he said, "Many that are first will be last, and the last first." At the end of the parable in verse 16, Matthew turns it around and quotes Jesus as saying, "So the last will be first and the first last."

Sources: Ken Bailey, *Poet And Peasant*
James Breech, *The Silence Of Jesus*
John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables*
Interpreter's Bible, Volume on Matthew