

## Unsettling Generosity. Matthew 20:1-19

### A Steve Bradbury moment? 19:30, 20:16

*Matthew 19: <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first. 20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard*

Who remembers this?

It is Stephen Bradbury’s 2002 Gold Medal win in the 1000 metre speed skating at the winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

He’s clearly last, but he comes in first.

Now is that how you think about Jesus’ saying that the last will be first, and the first last

The last displacing, taking the place of, those who are first – replacing them

May be the humble replacing the proud, the poor the rich, as Jesus turns the status quo on its head

Or even Gentile Christians replacing the Jewish nation

That is the way I have been used to thinking about it

But not any more

It is better than that

Jesus is talking about the first and the last having the same place, being equal in God’s kingdom, because of God’s generous grace

Not sure about that – or even why its important

Listen to the story Jesus told to explain his saying – the story of the workers in the vineyard

It is told to explain it – notice the for

*Matthew 19: <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first. 20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard*

Jesus is saying that because the Kingdom of Heaven, the rule of God, is like this – like this landowner in his employment practices, the first will be last, and the last first.

But the parable is not only told to explain his saying.

It is also told to challenge our hearts

To challenge us to give up envious comparing and embrace and rejoice in God’s mercy – for ourselves, and for others

### The Unusual in the Usual vv. 1-16

#### Harvest hiring vv. 1-8

*Matthew 20: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the workers on one denarius, he sent them into his vineyard for the day. <sup>3</sup> When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup> He said to them, 'You also go into my vineyard, and I'll give you whatever is right.' So off they went. <sup>5</sup> About noon and about three, he went out again and did the same thing. <sup>6</sup> Then about five he went and found others standing around and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?'*

<sup>7</sup> *"Because no one hired us,' they said to him.*

*"'You also go into my vineyard,' he told them. <sup>8</sup> When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, 'Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first.'*

The first eight verses describe a scenario familiar to Jesus' first hearers.

Its grape harvest time – for 12 hour days like the one described here were only worked in harvest. Grape harvest was a time when the owners of vineyards needed lots of extra hands. We've all been reminded of how labour intensive harvesting is during the pandemic when our farmers were appealing for help to overcome labour shortages, and it was the same then. You needed many hands to bring in the vintage.

And labourers were generally hired by the day. They would congregate in the town square, and those who needed workers would come and hire them. And if no one hired them they would go hungry, for they were also paid by the day.

With a lot of work to do the landowner started early.

And our landowner finds some workers there early and he agrees beforehand v. 2 on their wage for a day's work – one denarius. That was the going rate, reckoned fair pay for a day's work.

But there is a lot of work at harvest, and often some urgency. So as the day progresses he goes back to get more workers – at around 9, midday and 3 in the afternoon. These workers have less negotiating power, because they need the work or face a hungry night – and so just accept the landowner's promise to give them v. 4 whatever is right.

The landowner is plainly trying to get as much of the vintage in as possible, so he is even back there at 5, when there is only about an hour of the working day left. We don't know why these workers are still looking for work at 5 – whether they were late because they had some work of their own to do before coming to the square, or they had been unwell, or just had a bad reputation as workers – we are not told.

But he employs them as well and sends them into the vineyard – and not long after that the light is starting to fade, the day's work comes to an end, and as God's law commands the labourers are paid for their day's work before they are sent home [Deut 24:14-15, Lev. 19:13].

Up until this point Jesus has described events his hearers were familiar with, the usual story, but now Jesus introduces a very unusual element – the extraordinary generosity of this landowner.

### **Shocking generosity v. 9**

*Matthew 20:<sup>9</sup> "When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius.*

He didn't give those hired last one twelfth of the daily rate, pay them in proportion to the time worked. He doesn't give them what their work deserves.

He gives them what they need to live on, to buy food for the next day.

And while we are not told the story assumes that every worker hired after those hired at the beginning of the day also received a denarius. This was a determined generosity.

And as they watched the pay being distributed, the hopes of those working in the vineyard from the start of the day for some kind of bonus, beyond the denarius agreed to, kept rising.

### **Disappointed expectations vv. 10-12**

*Matthew 20:<sup>10</sup> So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: <sup>12</sup> 'These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day's work and the burning heat.'*

So you can imagine their disappointment as each comes to the wages table – and a denarius is pushed across it, no more, no less.

They are so indignant about what they see as being unfair that they grumble openly about their treatment, not fearing that the owner might never employ them again.

And look at their complaint. V. 12

'You made them equal to us.' They worked one twelfth of the time we worked, and they worked under much better conditions – in the cool of the day while we worked through the heat – and you made them equal to us, ensured that they have an outcome for their little work equal to ours

We have some sympathy with those workers, don't we.

It seems they have been treated unfairly, that it is not a case of equal pay for equal work – something rightly dear to us.

And it is easy to see why we insist on equal pay for equal work.

To not reward work equally is to devalue the labours of some, and encourage laziness in others

In fact the owner's actions could be criticised for not being in his own interests

Surely he wants to encourage and reward effort, not demotivate hard workers by not rewarding their labour.

Behind their comparison based complaining is the thought that in paying the other workers the owner is rewarding effort, giving people what they have earned,

that the only way he can relate to his workers is by making sure people get what they deserve, neither more nor less

And as they have worked harder, they should get more than the others

But that is not what the owner is doing. HE is not relating to those other workers on the basis of reward for effort.

What he is doing is generously addressing need, giving people what they need, not what they deserve

And the owner now defends his undeserved generosity in the face of their complaints

### **The defence of generosity vv. 13-15**

*Matthew 20: <sup>13</sup> "He replied to one of them, 'Friend, I'm doing you no wrong. Didn't you agree with me on a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take what's yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you.*

*<sup>15</sup> Don't I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I'm generous?'*

Firstly he says I haven't wronged you. You agreed a denarius for a day of work was fair, and that is what you have received. You have received what you earned. There is no basis for complaining that you have been treated unfairly.

The owners generosity has not made them poorer. He hasn't taken what was theirs to give to these others. He has given them theirs

In being generous the only person who is poorer is himself, the owner.

And that is his second point. I am doing what I want with what is mine v. 14. *I want to give this last man the same as I gave you.* And hasn't he got a right to do that? <sup>15</sup> *Don't I have the right to do what I want with what is mine?*

I know that sometimes in our society we do put limits on what people can do with their private property – you know, you can't paint a heritage listed building purple, or leave all your money to your cat where you have dependent children

But generally speaking we still think people have a right to do what they want with what is theirs.

If they want to spend their money on collecting garden gnomes – they can

Or give to promote the playing of bagpipes – they can

The owner is saying he is not accountable to them to use his money in ways they want. He is free to use it as he wills, and he is choosing to be generous, to give to others what they need.

How could they fault that?

And so, thirdly, he calls them to look at their own hearts.

Literally he says "Is your eye evil because I am good"

The trouble is the way they are looking at things

Looking only at what they think their rights are, determined to maintain their superiority, their being more deserving – than the others, and clothing that self pre-occupation in the language of fairness

They are Jealous of the good done to those last, resentful of others becoming their equals – even where it means no loss to them at all.

Has, the owner asks, his generosity exposed their stinginess, their meanness of heart

It's a powerful defence, and Jesus concludes

**The Kingdom: Where the last are first and the first last v. 16**

*Matthew 20: <sup>16</sup> "So the last will be first, and the first last."*

In God's Kingdom, where He rules – He makes the last first, and the first last – by making them equal.

Giving to all the same reward – what all need, eternal life. Everyone, Jesus said, everyone who leaves ...

*Matthew 19: <sup>28</sup> Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, in 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. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields because of my name will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life.*

And He does this because He is generous to the undeserving,

And He is generous to the undeserving because He chooses to be

He wills to be gracious, to freely give what is His to give and only He can give

For that life depends on Him, and Him alone

Remember last week – what good thing must I do to have eternal life? The rich young man asked

And Jesus showed that eternal life is impossible for people to obtain by their own efforts. He made that clear, saying

'with people it, entering the kingdom, obtaining eternal life, is impossible, but not with God. With God all things are possible' 19:26

What is impossible for us, He gives, freely, generously – because HE is gracious

And because it depends on His grace He gives equally to all who will repent and believe the gospel.

Grace makes the first last and the last first by making them equal in the Kingdom in the end, equal heirs of eternal life.

But hasn't Jesus used the language of rewards in the gospel, of reward for work – praying in secret, or giving a cup of cold water to a disciple? e.g. Matt. 6:4, 6; 10:41-42; 19:27-29; 25:21,23. Even here Jesus talks of the disciples having thrones

Yes, but those rewards are all of grace. They are completely disproportionate to the work done.

Why should we think a cup of cold water would earn, deserve, an eternal reward

Or the disciples stumbling following merit a throne

They are part and parcel of the gift of eternal life, which the Lord gives equally to all who repent and believe, whether they have followed for a long or short period, have had an easy or a hard life.

Because membership of the Kingdom, participation in the life of the age to come, depends on God's generous grace than all are equal, the first are last and the last first.

And are you happy with that?

### **Can you live with that?**

Of course, you say.

Let's see.

Do you really think it right that the thief on the cross, who trusted Jesus as he was dying, should be equal to the beloved apostle, who served the Lord, and suffered, for decades.

Do you think the person who perhaps has wronged you – that rebellious child who caused you so much grief, that immoral spouse who caused so much hurt – should be equal with you if they repent and believe, even if it was in the week, or the day, of their death

You who year after year may have both endured their sin and faithfully prayed for them

What of the person who may have killed your father, and repented while in goal, as was the case with the killer of Nigel Lee's father. Nigel Lee was the theological professor in Queensland, and you can read of that murder and conversion in 1994 in the banner of truth magazine – link in the transcript

<https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2012/the-sovereignty-of-god-in-the-salvation-of-my-fathers-slayer-2/?msclid=e2272529b70611ecbeb84dc014022630>

Would you think that killer should be equal to Nigel's father, who was a believer, or to you, who have lived a faithful and law-abiding life?

Or what about the believer who seems to have had life easy.

Good parents, good health, good family, good employment – who doesn't seem to have been as tested as you with sickness, or a hard start to life, or uncertain work that has meant at times you struggled to put enough food on the table

The believer who may not even be aware of your struggles, and what it has cost you to believe

Does it seem unfair, with their very different life, that they should be equal to you

Made equal not because of equal work, but God's gracious generosity, of His own free will.

Or what about that flaky believer, who has lived an inconsistent life, let the team down

But who in the end was trusting the Lord Jesus

Does it seem unfair, with their very different life, their weak faith, that they should be equal to you

Who have lived faithfully and consistently, a self denying life of service

Made equal not because of equal work, but God's gracious generosity, of His own free will.

If you are a believer

Are you ever tempted to grumble about that

About unequal lives receiving equal outcomes, the first being last, the last first

Maybe it is not the equal outcome that troubles you, but the differences now between your life and that of other believers, that God's treatment of you and them seems so unequal, their life easy, yours hard

How can we rejoice in God's gracious generosity, and not have a meanness in our soul that resents God's generosity to others, not meet God's kindness with the cry of 'unfair'

Not get caught up in comparing God's treatment of us with the way HE seems to deal with others

Not resent the easiness of some believers' lives when we seem to bear the 'the burden of the day's work and the burning heat?'

Because it is always a temptation, isn't it

To compare God's treatment of us, with His treatment of others

A comparison that can give way to grumbling - the thought we have been hard done by God; to resentment, even a bitterness that makes you critical of other believers, wanting to avoid them

That's if you are a believer

Maybe you are not a believer in Jesus and you find this whole equality thing offensive

You think God should treat people differently

Those who try hard to be good – should receive good, and those who try harder, should receive more good

And those who don't care, live selfish lives – should receive bad

Perhaps you think God's way undermines morality, devalues your efforts

If you are thinking that, or a believer struggling with envious comparing, as we are all tempted to from time to time

Three things to remember

Firstly, we all rely on God's crazy generosity

**We all rely on God's crazy generosity vv. 17-19, 28 [Eph. 2:1-10]**

*Matthew 20: <sup>17</sup> While going up to Jerusalem, Jesus took the twelve disciples aside privately and said to them on the way, <sup>18</sup> "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death. <sup>19</sup> They will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked, flogged, and crucified, and on the third day he will be raised."*

*<sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

The first hearers of this parable would probably have been grateful for the generosity – for many of them were day labourers, and knew what it was to go hungry when they didn't get work.

But they would also have thought it unreal – a crazy generosity, that was harming the owner in not distinguishing the hard workers from others and rewarding them more, a costly generosity making him uncompetitive and unsustainable.

There is a cost to being generous

And there is a cost to God's generosity that makes the first last and the last first

We are reminded of that here. V. 17

The verses after this story go on to speak of our Lord's coming death in Jerusalem, a death which he will speak later in this chapter as a ransom for many.

The cost to God of being gracious to sinners, of giving them life where they deserve death, is the death of His Son

That's a crazy generosity – that will suffer that cost to be generous to those undeserving of his love and kindness, people, like us, who have rebelled against His just rule, failed to give thanks for His good gifts, rejected His good commands

And that cost to God to give us eternal life is a reminder that when it comes to entering the kingdom it is none and all.

None of us are like the last workers

Getting the good they deserve, because they have earned it.

If we were to get what we deserve, we would get death, exclusion from the Kingdom, and none of us could complain about that

For we would only be receiving what was just, God giving to us according to our works

Not yet a believer and are offended by that generosity

You have not yet reckoned with your sin and what it deserves

It is not a matter of the good you do balancing out the bad. You owe your Creator perfect love and trust, perfect obedience. You can't put God in your debt by doing good, for you already owe Him that. In fact for your disobedience you own Him your life, and there is nothing you can do to make up that debt.

In fact your thinking that you could bargain with him, pay him off by the occasional good work, or that He should be satisfied with your imperfect goodness, is sin in itself.

All our righteousness, says Isaiah, are like filthy rags,

God owes none of us life

No-one who is saved get what we deserve

And all get in on the same basis

Repentance and faith in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins

All get in by being forgiven, being spared what we deserve

No believer can complain we have been unfairly treated, for we have all been treated with mercy.



That's our starting point – being recipients of God's generous kindness, that comes from His freely choosing to love us

That is what Paul writes in Ephesians 2. All of us

*Ephesians 2: And you were dead in your trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient. <sup>3</sup> We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also. <sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! <sup>6</sup> He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift— <sup>9</sup> not from works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.*

This is the way we understand our lives if we believe the gospel, whatever our experiences, by whatever path God leads us to eternal life

Every believer is loved greatly, has received a rich mercy

Every believer is the recipient of God's crazy generosity, of that gracious kindness that makes us equal heirs of eternal life, that will raise us up and seat us with Christ in the heavenlies

And that gracious kindness does not falter – for it depends on God, not our performance

The Christian life is Grace at the beginning

Grace in the middle

Grace to the end

*Grace forever - <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*

### **God's generosity to others does not rob us**

Knowing that, we have to remember that God's generosity to others, His different treatment of them in this life, the different journey by which He brings them to the same destination as us, does not rob or wrong us.

In Christ we are no less loved because God's love, His determination to conform other believers to the image of His Son, works out differently in their lives to ours.

Our comparisons of our lives with other believers can so easily be based on the same wrong thinking as the first labourers, that God's treatment is reward for effort, giving people what they have earned - and I have tried harder, been more regular at church, more prayerful, given more – and so my life should be better. It is unfair of God to heal that person, or their child, and not me and mine; unfair to give them a compliant child, when mine is so much trouble. Unfair

But all God's dealings with each believer are based on generous grace, the grace we all rely on, and giving them what they need, not what they deserve

Are based On a rich and generous mercy

On a love which is determined to bring all believers to the same goal – eternal life

And in Christ we are all loved with the same love

Each of us can say with Paul, if we believe the gospel Paul preached, can say of Jesus – the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me

And knowing that we must then remember God knows best of all how to love us, how to bring us to that equal goal – eternal life

**God has a right to do what He wants with what is His v. 15**

*Matthew 20: <sup>15</sup> Don't I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I'm generous?*

Our God is sovereign. He rules all things and people

He has the right to deal with us, His creatures, as He will

And He should be trusted to do what HE will with what is His, with us – for He loves us, is faithful, and He is wise

Envious comparing is not just distrust of His love

it is saying God has no right to deal with me as He does, as He chooses to,

Grumbling that He is treating you unfairly, is like the clay saying to the potter you have no right to make me like this [Is. 45:9-10], you don't know what you are doing

But believers know that the God who moulds and shapes our lives is good

That He is Generous, gracious, in giving His Son for us

And we know also in that giving that His is a wisdom that far exceeds ours, working our salvation through a way we would never choose or could imagine – exalting through the humiliation of the cross, saving from death through death, letting sin do its worst to do the best – vindicate His rule in exalting His Son as Lord over all, and the Saviour of all who turn to Him

**Rejoicing in Generosity**

*<sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields because of my name will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first. <sup>20</sup> "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.*

God's generous grace that makes the first last and the last first

Is a generosity not be grumbled about, but rejoiced in

We should Rejoice when we see its work in others – saving those we may not like, would never choose, people who may have treated us badly

Rejoice thinking, that is the grace that saves me

And seeing again How good is God, how gracious, how generous in mercy

And knowing that the gracious God treats us not according to what we deserve, but according to what we need, seeing how rich we have been made by His grace, becoming heirs of eternal life

We should be more than thankful

We should be people who love grace, and want to show that same generous grace to others

To treat others not according to what they deserve, but according to their need

So when we meet poverty – not sit back and say – they are getting what they deserve for their wrong choices, but offer what help we can to lift them out of that poverty

When we meet Chaotic lives, we shouldn't criticise – but graciously offer time, or a listening ear, or the patience that keeps them in relationship

And when we meet ignorance of God, seen in promoting ways of living that are harmful, we shouldn't get all defensive and angry, but give them what they need, the truth of the generous, gracious God in the gospel of His Son

The grace that rescued us from our sinful ignorance

*<sup>4</sup>But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, <sup>5</sup>made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!<sup>6</sup>*

The grace that makes the first last, and the last first.