

Lessons from a Labor Dispute

Matthew 20:1-16

Part 1: Be Generous

Several years ago I taught a Bible study on the Gospel of Matthew. When we came to today's text, a hardworking farmer named Noel spoke up. He said, "I don't like this story." I asked why. He said, "Because it sounds like communism." That's a fairly typical response to this story. Americans don't like this parable of Jesus. It goes against our work ethic. I mean, the men who worked one hour were paid just as much as the men who worked twelve hours. That's not fair. My farmer friend was right. It sounds like communism! But don't worry. Jesus is not promoting communism. Jesus is just telling a story. And while it's a strange story, it's also a powerful story. So we are going to spend two weeks looking at it from two different angles. First let's review the story.

A landowner goes to the town square early one morning to find workers for his vineyard. This was a common practice in those days. Men would gather in the square and wait to be hired as day laborers. At that time a day's work was twelve hours long, from six in the morning to six at night. Well, at 6:00 AM, the landowner hired several laborers to work

in his vineyard, harvesting the grapes. They agreed on a fair wage and went to work. A few hours later, at 9:00 AM, he went back and hired several more workers. He did the same thing at noon. At 3:00 PM he hired several more workers. Finally, at 5:00 PM, he hired a few more. An hour later, at 6:00 PM, the workday ended. All the workers gathered to be paid. The landowner first paid the workers who had worked only one hour. To their absolute amazement, he paid them a full day's wages. It was an incredible act of generosity. He did the same for those who had only worked three hours and the same for those who had only worked six hours. The workers who worked nine hours were also paid a full day's wage, even though they had worked only three-quarters of the day.

Finally, the workers who had put in a full twelve-hour shift were paid. Seeing that the others had been paid generously, they expected to get *more* than a full day's wage. But the landowner paid them exactly the same as the others—a full day's wage. Well, they began to

grumble and fuss. A labor dispute broke out. They said to the landowner, “This is not fair. We worked for twelve hours in the hot sun, but you have paid us the same amount of money as those who worked far fewer hours. That’s not right!” The landowner told them, “I paid you exactly what I promised. You got a full day’s wage for a full day’s pay. Don’t be upset that I paid the other workers the same amount. It’s my money, and I choose to be generous with it.” And that’s the parable—a parable Jesus tells to encourage us, like the landowner, to be generous.

Generosity is a big deal in the Bible. Over and over again, God calls his people to be generous. God wants us to be generous in every way. Generous with our money. Generous with our time. Generous with our kindness. Generous with our love. Generous with our forgiveness. Generous with our compassion. God calls you and me to be generous people. Why? For at least three simple but important reasons. Please get our your listening guide and we’ll quickly review them together. ***(The listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon.)***

The first reason God wants us to be generous is because ***(1) generosity helps others.*** When this landowner paid those workers a full day’s wage even though they only worked part of the day, he helped them enormously. Day laborers in those days lived on the edge financially. A day without work usually meant a day without food. Therefore, the landowner’s generosity allowed those men to put food on their families’ tables. Children went to bed with full stomachs because of this man’s generosity.

Some time ago I heard a story about a forty-six-year-old man named David. David got really sick, had to have two surgeries, spent three months in the hospital, and missed work for five months. It didn’t take long for David to go through all his vacation days and all his sick time, leaving him with no income. With a wife and two kids to support, that was devastating. David couldn’t pay his bills, Christmas was rapidly approaching, and his family was struggling. Then one day David got a big check in the mail from his company, more than enough to make up his lost income. He called the comptroller and asked why in the world he had been sent all this money. He was told that every single employee in his company, all seventy of them, had donated either cash or vacation time to help David out. He was absolutely overwhelmed by emotion. David said, “I cried. I cried a lot, actually. It was absolutely the greatest gift I’ve ever received. My colleagues’ generosity touched me more than anything else that has ever

happened to me.” You see, when we are generous—with our money, our time, our love, our compassion—when we are generous, it makes a huge impact on people. God wants us to be generous because generosity helps others.

A second reason God wants us to be generous is that **(2) generosity enriches us**. When we’re generous toward others, it not only helps them; it also helps us. When this landowner was generous to these workers, it made him a better person; it enriched his soul. We see that truth in Proverbs 11:25. It’s printed in your bulletin. Please read with me, “A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed” (NIV). Through the years the happiest people I’ve known are not are rich or lucky. The happiest people I’ve known are generous. People who give generously of their time and energy and money and kindness find joy and vibrancy and fulfillment in living. The opposite is also true. The most miserable people I’ve ever known are stingy and self-absorbed. When people devote all of their time and energy and money to themselves, it shrivels them up inside, makes them small and dry and lifeless. The real secret of human joy is not hoarding everything for ourselves; it’s sharing what we have with others. Generosity, therefore, has a huge positive impact on our own lives. Well, when we are generous, it helps others, and it also enriches us.

A third reason God wants us to be generous is that **(3) generosity pleases God**. In this text Jesus makes a remarkable claim. Jesus says that when people are generous, the kingdom of God gains ground. The Bible is clear that when we are generous, God is pleased.

A few years ago I came across an ancient Jewish legend that I’d like to share with you. In this legend a father and his two sons owned a large farm. When the father died, the two sons agreed that each of them owned an equal share of the farm, including a 50 percent split of the harvest. In time one of the brothers married and had eight children. The other brother remained a bachelor. One day the single brother thought: *My brother has ten mouths to feed, and I have only one. He needs more of the harvest than I do. However, I know him. He is much too fair to renegotiate our agreement. I know what I will do. Late at night, when my brother is asleep, I will sneak over to his barn and put some of my grain into his barn.* And so he did, over and over again for several months. During that same time, the other brother, the one with a wife and eight children, thought: *God has blessed me with a fine family. My children will take care of me when I am old. My brother is not as fortunate. He needs a bigger percentage of the harvest to provide for his old age, but I know him. He is far too fair to renegotiate our*

agreement. I know what I will do. Late at night, when my brother is asleep, I will sneak over to his barn and put some of my grain into his barn. And so he did, over and over again, for several months. Well, one night these two brothers were both carrying a large sack of grain to their brother's barn, as they had done dozens of times before. But it just so happened, that on this night they walked across the field at precisely the same time, and they bumped into each other. When they realized what was going on, they dropped their sacks of grain and embraced each other in love. The legend said that although there was not a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. The rain was God's tears, weeping for joy over the generosity of his children. And that's not the end of the legend. The legend goes on to say that God chose that very spot to build his holy temple. When we are generous, we please God.

Today's parable is a strange story. But in the end it's a simple one. God is generous so God wants us to be generous. And when we are, others are helped, we are enriched, and God is pleased. Imagine that!

LISTENING GUIDE
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Part 1: Be Generous

"I want to give the man 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?"

—Matthew 20:14-15 NIV

"A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed."

—Proverbs 11:25 NIV

1. Generosity _____.

2. Generosity _____.

3. Generosity _____.

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Lessons from a Labor Dispute

Matthew 20:1-16

Part 2: Be Grateful

Let me tell you an old Jewish legend. Don't take it literally, but take it seriously. The legend tells about a poor Jewish farmer who struggled all his life just to survive. Then one night an angel of God came to him and said, "You have found favor in the eyes of God. As a result, God wants to bless you. Therefore, make three requests, and God will grant them. There is only one condition—your neighbor will get a double portion of everything God gives to you."

Well, the next morning the farmer told his wife all about the three wishes. She suggested they put the dream to a test. So they decided on their first wish. Then the poor farmer prayed, "O God, I would like to have a thousand head of cattle, which would break us out of poverty and move us to prosperity."

As soon as he made the wish, he and his wife could hear the sound of animals outside. He walked out of the house and saw a thousand cattle on his farm! He was overcome with thanksgiving and gratitude. His heart was full of joy. For several days he felt like he was walking on air. A few days later, however, the farmer walked up a high hill to scout

out where he would build a new barn. From the hill he looked over at his neighbor's land and couldn't believe what he saw. His neighbor, who had been as poor as he, had two thousand magnificent cattle roaming on his farm. You see, in his joy over receiving his one thousand head of cattle, he had forgotten the angel's word that his neighbor would get a double portion of everything he received. When he compared his thousand cattle with his neighbor's two thousand, his herd seemed so small, and the joy was sucked out of him.

He went home in a foul mood, refused to eat dinner, and went to bed sulking. He could not fall asleep that night; all he could see were his neighbor's two thousand cattle. Deep in the night, however, he remembered that the angel said he could make three wishes. So

he began to forget about his neighbor's cattle and began to think about his second wish. It wasn't hard to decide what to wish for. He and his wife had tried for years to have a child but were unsuccessful. So he prayed a second time, "Gracious God, please give my wife and me

a child.” Within a few months his wife was expecting. For months, this man was ecstatic with joy and gratitude.

Finally, his child was born. The next day was the Sabbath. He went to the synagogue, and when they had the prayers of the people, he stood up and told his good news—that a child, a son, had finally been born into his family. He had hardly sat down when his neighbor stood up and said, “God has been gracious to our little community. Just last night my wife also gave birth—to twin sons. Thanks be to God.”

On hearing that news the farmer went home utterly dejected. Instead of being full of joy, he was filled with jealousy, and it would not go away. So finally, the next day, the farmer made his third request. He said, “Dear God, I ask that you strike me blind in one eye.” The parable ends with the angel of God coming back to the farmer and asking him why he was so full of vengeance. With pent-up rage the farmer said, “I cannot stand to see my neighbor get double what I get. I’ll gladly sacrifice half of my vision for the satisfaction of knowing that my neighbor will never again be able to look upon his two thousand cattle or his two sons.”

The angel was silent for a long time. Finally, with a tear in his eye, the angel said, “O child of God, why have you turned an occasion for thanksgiving into a time of resentment and jealousy? Your third request will not be granted, not because the Lord lacks integrity but because God is full of mercy. And know this, O foolish one, you have brought sadness not only to yourself but to the very heart of God.”

I thought of that story as I read today’s text. This passage from Matthew 20, like that old Jewish parable I just told you, begins with gratitude but ends in resentment. First, we see gratitude. The men who were hired at 6:00 AM to work in the vineyard were so happy to get the job, so grateful to have an opportunity to make money for their families. The same was true with the men hired at 9:00 AM and at noon. They were beginning to think they would not be hired for the day, so when they were, they were grateful. That was even more true for the men hired at 3:00 PM and at 5:00 PM. It looked hopeless by then.

Surely they would go home empty-handed with no food to put on the table. But then, at the last minute, the landowner hired them. They wouldn’t make much, but at least they would make a little, enough to buy bread for their families, and they were grateful for that.

And then, the workday was over and the workers were paid. The men who had only worked one hour were paid a full day's wage. Unbelievable! Their hearts were full of thanksgiving. The same for all the other men who were paid a full day's wage even though they had not worked the full day. Thankfulness and gratitude were overflowing. But then everything changed. When the workers who had worked the full day saw that the others were paid generously, they expected to get more than a day's wage. When they did not, they were filled with resentment. When they compared what they made with what the other workers made, their gratitude changed to resentment, and they began to fuss and complain. It's a sad scene really. These men had much to be grateful for. They were healthy, they had received work, and they had been paid a full day's pay. They had much to be thankful for. But instead, they compared what they got to what the others got, and their gratitude turned to resentment.

Let me give you a surefire formula for misery. Be like these day laborers and compare what you have to what others have. Do that, and you'll be miserable for sure. Because no matter how many good things we have in our life, somebody else always has it better. Someone else has a better job, makes more money, owns a nicer house, has a more attractive spouse or smarter children, is in better health, has a higher IQ, is more popular, or. . . . So, if we want to be miserable, all we have to do is compare what we have with those who have it better, and I guarantee you, we will be unhappy all of our life.

On the other hand, if you want a surefire formula for being happy, then I'll give it to you. If we want to be happy, we simply need to be grateful for what we have. Instead of bellyaching that others have it better, we need to look around, see all the wonderful gifts in our life, and be thankful.

A few months ago, I met a sixty-five-year-old pastor who was just about to retire. He told me his story, a story I found extremely interesting. He graduated from seminary when he was about twenty-five years old and was appointed to a small rural church with a small salary. However, he and his wife loved the people, and the people loved them, and overall it was a wonderful pastoral experience. Well, this went on for twenty years. He served several other churches, all fairly small, with small salaries, but he enjoyed his work and was grateful to be a pastor. However, when he was about forty-five years old, he began to pay attention to the back section of his denominational journal at least in his denomination, they list all the salaries in the conference, from the largest to the smallest, from one to 450. He noticed that his salary

about number 235, which was a little below the midpoint. So he began to look at who was above him. And the more he looked, the worse he felt. He saw one man who was above him and thought: I've been in ministry longer than he has. Why is he in a better church? He saw another name and thought: I'm a better preacher than he is. Why do I make less money? This went on for about five years. Every year when the new journal came out, he turned to the back section, compared where he was on the salary scale, and became more and more bitter.

By the time he was fifty, all the gratitude and joy he had known earlier in his ministry were gone. He had become a jealous, bitter, joyless, resentful man.

One night, when his wife and children were gone on a trip, he had a profound spiritual experience. For the first time in several years, he looked in the mirror and saw what he had become. And he didn't like what he saw. That night, on his living room floor, he got on his knees before God and confessed his bitterness and resentment and begged God to forgive him. At that point he went to his desk, got his denominational journal, tore out the salary section, and burned it in the wood-burning stove in his living room. Then he made a promise to God that he would once again be grateful for his appointment, his family, and all the other good things in his life.

And he made good on that promise. From that day on, for the next fifteen years, this pastor began every day of his life by thanking God for his life, for his family, for his friends, for the privilege of serving as a pastor. And that gratitude saved his life. He told me that the past fifteen years, even with the struggles (and he's had plenty of them) had been the best years of his life. Why? Because he decided to quit complaining about what he didn't have, and he began to be grateful for what he did have. He chose to be a person of gratitude, and it made all the difference. His gratitude saved him from a life of bitterness and resentment and gave him instead a life of joy and meaning. He lived out Jesus' call to be grateful, and it blessed him richly.

Well, I need to wrap up. I debated all week long on how to conclude today's sermon. Some of you know that I used to teach preaching at a seminary. One of the things I told my students was to work hard on the conclusion. The conclusion is the most important part of the sermon. At the conclusion you want to pull it all together and drive home your point. Well, I wrote a conclusion to today's sermon, but in the end I decided not to use it. Instead, I want you to

conclude today's sermon. In your order of worship, you will find an insert. At the top of the page we've printed 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NIV) which says, "Give thanks in all circumstances." Please take that insert in your hand. ***(Insert can be found below)***. In just a moment we are going to sing a song called "Give Thanks." Right after that, for our morning prayer, we are going to sit quietly for a moment. During that time I encourage you to write down on that piece of paper what you are grateful for. Pencils are in the pew rack if you need one. You certainly don't have to write anything down, but I hope you will. I hope you will write down the good things in your life, and maybe even some things that are not so good but which are teaching you to be a better person. And then, a little later in the service, at Communion, if you are willing, I want you to place that sheet at the communion rail, as an act of thanksgiving and gratitude to God. Please stand now and let's sing "Give Thanks."

"Give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18 NIV)

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____
- 5. _____
- 6. _____
- 7. _____

