

**What Nerve !? : God's Mercy**  
**Matthew 20:1-16**  
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And we think maybe the worst is over as we crawl out of Matthew 19 as if crawling out of a furnace. We've just gathered together in this chapter, Matthew 19, that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. And if the temperature wasn't hot enough after digesting that, Jesus follows with the proclamation that his disciples can enter eternal life only by giving up that which they cling to: houses, fields, family, you know, the basics. Essentially, everything we strive to obtain, keep, and grow in life.

Had there been an accompanying Eucharist to go with these texts I'm almost positive Jesus would have laced the bread with Habanero peppers. And personally, I'm a little ticked at Matthew; quite naturally I think. Because while Jesus hits us with the Kingdom of God over and over, and we're squirming away like worms on the hot pavement, Matthew never picks us up and takes us to the edge of the brook. Had he been one of the listeners there while Jesus was teaching I imagine him kind of egging Jesus on, "give it to 'em JC...I think they're getting soft".

So, here we are, Matthew 20, the so called 'parable of the workers in the vineyard'. Of course, we don't often read Matthew 20 after Matthew 19 because by the time we've read Matthew 19 we either need a cold shower, a tall drink, or a long slow drive in the country: 'honey, I won't be home for dinner tonight, I read Matthew 19 again'.

Well you get the point I'm trying to make here, that when we do pick up the good book again, and pick up where we left off we don't come waltzing up to the parable of the workers in the vineyard as though on a nice Sunday stroll with the fam. Instead, we're on our knees, no cushion, reading it in the darkest and poorest looking room in the house still kind of wondering what in the name of Jesus we've got ourselves and our loved ones into.

So, here we are, the text for today, our daily bread. It begins: "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard". They agreed on a fair wage for the day and started working. No problem. Hours later he finds others hanging around the marketplace so he hires them. Says he'll give them a fair price for their labour. Again he goes out and hires others at noon, and again at 3 in the afternoon and finally at 5 o'clock nearing the end of the day. No problem. Then evening came rolling along and the owner said to his supervisor, "call the workers in and pay them".

Now, at this stage everyone was alright, the landowner was alright, his vineyard was worked all day long; the labourers were alright, they knew they'd be getting a fair wage, regardless of the time they worked. And I imagine it was a beautiful day to be working in a vineyard... I loved that feeling finishing a hard day's work when I used to work in the farm fields in Louisiana just north of Baton Rouge. The boss would ring the bell at the rear entrance of the farm house, which was

something like a dinner bell, but it would serve to let me know that the day was done, and as I'd take off my gloves, the sweat pouring down my face and neck soaking my t-shirt, I'd wipe my face with any dry part of my t-shirt that was left. I'd stand up straight and stretch out my back, and begin the slow peaceful walk back to the farmhouse carrying what was left of a jug of water.

I always loved that slow walk back to the farmhouse. My muscles were tired but I always felt great. The boss would pay me in cash daily, \$8 an hour. No problem. Well, call me a dreamer, but I want you to imagine with me that it was like that for the workers as they were called in by the supervisor. They were asked to line up in such a way where those who started last would get paid first; and as those who started last collected their pay, no doubt their eyes bugged out of their heads when they saw their wage for the day, a denarius, which was a full days pay; and considering they started at 5 o'clock, not even in the heat of the day, not even working long enough to need their first sips of water, they were quite presumably delighted with the wage they received.

As the workers followed each other forward to the front of the line, excitement must have been brewing, anticipation buzzing, as the workers who received their pay first peeled back to share their jubilation, the guy at the back's already picked out the snake skin boots he's going to buy, he's telling the guy in front of him, 'it's no more sandals for me'.

Verse 10 reads: "So when those came who were hired first, they *expected* to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius". Problem! In the NRSV the sense of expectation is a little more subtle, it reads, "they *thought* they would receive more". Regardless, the wheels were turning in the minds of the first workers as they began expecting pay dirt. Problem!

They grumbled against the landowner. I love this word, 'grumble'. Discontentment expressed in muttering doesn't quite capture it, but rather, 'grumbling' carries with it more of the sense of slow rolling thunder on the horizon. It is distant, passive, not directly threatening, but most certainly intense. I don't know about you, but when I grumble, I stew up a kind of self-justified concoction of bitterness using a standard base of expectation. But it's just there stewing. I'm not ready to serve up a bowlful to the object of my grumbings, but they know I'm stewing because they can smell it wafting in their direction, they can hear it bubbling inside me, if they come close they may get a little splash.

The landowner got a little splash, "These men 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 the landowner said, "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius"?

Suddenly Matthew 20 has us right back in the furnace, grumbling. Grumbling, mind you, and not enraged. Which begs the question, why were the first workers not enraged? Why was the storm cloud only on the horizon, why was it not throwing hail and blasts of wind on the vineyard.

I would have been enraged. I would have been enraged if the Mexicans I worked with in the farm fields north of Baton Rouge... Did I leave that part out? The part about the Mexicans working for the same boss on the same fields as me, working twelve hours a day while I only worked 8? Did I leave out that these same Mexicans made four and a half dollars an hour to my \$8.

Well, I would have been enraged if my boss, Mr Perkins, rang the bell for me to come in at the end of the day, and said, I think I'm going to cut you back to \$4.5/hour. It's not right to pay you differently than those Mexicans out there. Well, perhaps in reality I would have been too afraid of my boss to be enraged, or perhaps I would have realized that he had a solid point, perhaps I only would have grumbled, just like the first workers in the vineyard, with a fierce grip on my expectations, all the way to another farm.

Now, I hear you, I hear what you are saying, it's not the same story, that if Mr. Perkins cut my wages it would be tearing up a prior agreement that we had, while in the 'parable of the workers in the vineyard' the agreement with the first workers was already in place, a denarius for a days work, and that agreement was carried out by the landowner. So you might say, there is a fundamental difference in the financial negotiations between the stories.

But my friends, it is the same story: It is the story of our expectations placed on God, of our expectations placed over God. It is the story of making Gods justice subject to us. But good news, that's not the whole story.

Equal pay for unequal work is as unjust now as it was in Palestinian antiquity, or unequal pay for equal work adds up to the same thing; it's not right. I don't need to belabour the issue, no pun intended.

The parable is utterly offensive. Other than those who started the day late, everyone in the parable is offended, the landowner, the first workers, everyone who hears the parable is offended; when the parable plays itself out in our lives in some shape or form we are offended.

We are offended when we walk out of the grocery store checking over our receipt to find that the cashier didn't ring in our 50 cent coupon for Cheerios or Bran Buds; we go back, we walk back in firmly, convincingly, back into the store, eyebrows furrowed...grumbling at the inconvenience, now we have to get back in line, which is twice as long as it was when we got in it to begin with. We look to see if there is anybody working in the Customer service checkout. Nobody is in the Customer service checkout, because nobody ever is in the Customer service checkout.

We finally make it to the cashier so we can collect the 50 cents we are owed. She gives it graciously, with a carefree smile, and that makes us madder than a Baptist in a brothel, because she doesn't appear to be sorry, she doesn't appear to pity us for the inconvenience of it all. Hey, it's my 50 cents. I have a right to be a little upset. I have a right to be offended that you're not as bothered about this as I am. It's your fault. I'll take the two silver coins you owe me. I don't even

want the bloody coins. I just want you to know that you've inconvenienced me. I have a right to be offended. I have a right to be offended here; where's the manager.

The manager comes, small moustache, clip on tie, hair parted in the middle. We say, "Why is there nobody working in the customer service checkout area" "Oh, Karen is on lunch break", he says. We shake our heads, muttering, grumbling, stewing: "I expect more from your store". He says, "Have we been unfair to you in any way? Would you like to make a formal complaint?" We walk out, we'll take our business elsewhere, we'll take our labour elsewhere. We expected more.

Well, the truth is we wanted our 50 cents and we got it, So what did we expect?

We expected convenience, the line up was too long, and for some reason we had to wait at the back of it; Karen was on lunch, what bologna! What else did we expect? We expected to get our discount for Cheerios. We got that but boy was that an inconvenience. We expected the cashier to grumble with us, to hear and understand our grumbings, and certainly we expected the manager to make things right, but you just can't trust a man with a clip on tie.

Maybe this isn't a familiar setting to you. Maybe for you it happens at the auto shop, maybe for you it happens in the lawyer's office, or in your own house; maybe for you it happens in a traffic jam, or on the street corner: you're waving down a cab, he sees you, he's slowing down, it's yours, no, he sees the pretty blonde a half block up. He stops there. That was my cab! We expect justice to rain at our command, we want equality and fairness in this world, sure, but we expect the kind of equality and fairness that works for us, in other words, we demand equality and fairness when our turn comes in the line up. We tell ourselves, we shouldn't be inconvenienced by justice; justice should align to our expectations.

It says two scoops! I paid for two scoops of raisins in my raisin bran and there is no way the scoop they are using is the same size as the one on the box, by golly! Because our expectations are right; because our expectations replace god. And as trivial as these metaphors are, they are the way we humans judge what is right and just and fair in the world.

But good news that's not the whole story.

In verse 14, the landowner, continuing his response to the grumbling workers, says, "I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you". And then he says, "Are you envious because I am generous". Here Jesus reveals just what kind of landowner this is: the kind whose generosity busts through all of our expectations like a sacred wrecking ball. For here we come to know more clearly what the kingdom of heaven is like: the kingdom of heaven is like a generous landowner who hires workers for his vineyard all day long. His generosity is boundless, but because his boundless generosity moves beyond the bounds of our judgements, seeping through our hard setting criteria for justice, we feel threatened by his love. His generosity is abundant; it is teeming, but we only receive the abundance of his generosity when we aren't expecting it, when we are just satisfied to be working for him; and when we begin to expect it, we get only what

comes to us, only what is fair for those of us whose expectations have replaced our appreciation for the landowner who has sought us out, offering us labour in his glorious vineyard.

He hires us, he pays us in his currency, and this is good news. His generosity is neither something to be envious of, nor to be expected, but is merely something to be known and remembered about our God, that our God is the kind of God whose love and justice and mercy is in abundance and is given freely to those of us who work for him, without expectation of reward, who work merely because we desire to work for him, because we trust that his justice manifests in uncontainable mercy and grace, because we appreciate that he has sought us out and called us into his vineyard, that he has called us to be his workers.

Around this time last year, an elderly couple living in Nova Scotia won \$11.2 million dollars in the Lotto 6/49. \$11.2 million! They were retired, living comfortably already, and so you could imagine how far \$11.2 million could go to make those golden years quite literally golden years. No more Nova Scotian winters, that's the first thing I'd make sure of.

But the couple, Allan and Violet Large, in their late 70's, decided they would hand the fortune over to friends, family, the local fire department, churches and cemeteries, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and a couple hospitals where Violet was undergoing cancer treatment. All of it. They gave away every penny.

Now, if I'm the child of a parent who just won \$11.2 mill, the first thing I am doing is dividing by two. \$5.6 for my sister, \$5.6 for me. I've already picked out my snake skin boots when my turn comes in line. But the couple was only giving out a days worth of wages to those who might have expected more. Their boundless generosity defied expectation, emulating a God who gives away love and mercy freely without concern for people's expectations. Upon giving it all away, Violet Large told the papers, "what you've never had, you never miss".

The kingdom of God Jesus calls us towards in the 'parable of the workers in the vineyard' is the kind of kingdom where mercy and grace are given with this sort of reckless abandon, as though mercy and grace are not something he owns and keeps, measuring out allotments with fine tuned scales, but rather something that flows through him to us, when we work his land, and do so willingly without expectation of reward.

So, there we are in the Gospel of Matthew, there we are in the marketplace, there we are on the city streets, there we are squirming away like worms on the hot pavement longing to be picked up and placed by the edge of the cool brook when suddenly the mercy of God comes upon us, when we least expect it.