

Jesus the Contrarian: THE VINEYARD WORKERS

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This is a crazy story! Who would pay someone a full day's wage for a one-hour shift? Why didn't the owner pay more to the people who did more work? Imagine living with the anxiety of not knowing if you could feed your family for the day. The laborers who got the job early knew they would receive a day's wage, but their gratitude turned to greed when the johnny-come-latelies arrived. Yet, the punch line in this story is, *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"* This story is about grace.

Grace is the hardest concept for the self-righteous to swallow. We prefer earning God's favor by our virtue while refusing it to those beneath us. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a crazy story, too. The father should have punished his wayward boy. It is easy to side with the older brother and think the dad is clueless. However, the father sees things in a different way: *"And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"*

Jesus is a contrarian. He is also generous. His generosity goes to those who need it. The longer I have been a Christian, the more I tend to be like a self-righteous Pharisee. After all, I am WORKING long hours in God's vineyard. How dare those slackers show up at the last moment and get the same wages. Contrary to human wisdom, Jesus is generous with grace. I do not deserve His grace, either. Furthermore, God is in control. Not me. The great reversal comes in verse 16: *"So the last will be first, and the first last."* Jesus will receive us no matter when—just as He told one of the criminals crucified with Him. However, those who wait until the last moment must live with anxiety and fear until then.

APPLICATION: After looking at Jesus' contrarian parable of the vineyard workers, this week's readings focus on God's grace. Three questions:

1.) How would you explain "grace"? This is conceptual. 2.) How have you experienced grace? This is personal.

3.) How have you expressed grace? This is practical. Respond to 2 Corinthians 9:6-15.

This is often the pattern of J' ministry:

1) J had a conversation/miracle. 2) The D's asked Q's. 3) Jesus told a story

4) The D's didn't understand it. J was inaugurating the KOG. The KOG is upside down, counter-intuitive, backward. I thought about naming this sermon series, "Jesus the Confusing" bc He was always confusing people, but that didn't sound right, so I went with my heart – He was a CONTRARIAN. He was the one, different colored fish swimming in the opposite direction. Before reading Mt 20:1-16, there's a story of a rich, young, ruler who asked Jesus what he must do to go to heaven (19:16-30). He said he'd kept all the commandments but wanted to know what else he must do. Jesus never told anyone else what he told this man - sell all your possessions. That was too much for the young man to swallow and he went away sad. Jesus seemed sad, too. He commented, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go to heaven." Jesus went against orthodox opinion. The disciples asked, "Who can be saved, then?" Jesus said, "What's impossible with man is possible with

God.” He explained heaven has a wonderful return on investment, but ends the story with this line, “*But many who are first will be last, and the last first.*” (19:30) Jesus told stories to illustrate truth.

Matthew 20:1-16 (p. 980)

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Only Luke tells the parable of the Prodigal Son where the oldest son worked to get his fair share of his inheritance but resented his younger undeserving brother. That parable and this story make the same point – instead of joy at including others, there is jealousy & greed. Both are contrarian stories – they go against how we normally operate.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like – Jesus is not teaching about economic theory. Jesus favorite topic was the kingdom of heaven (“God”). His second favorite topic was about money, wealth, and riches. He often tied the two together.

a master of a house – the Lord is the master of the house. *who went out early in the morning* = 6:00 a.m.

to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. A business deal is struck. A denarius = a day’s wage. If a man gets a denarius for the day, he can put food on the table. No denarius = no food.

And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So, they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ They were hired at noon, 3, and 5 p.m. The story doesn’t say “he had a need for more workers” but that he saw others who were standing idle. They are not

working. They will not get a denarius. The emphasis is the master, not the workers. He takes the initiative. They are all, idle.”

And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Every worker got a day's wage. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' Everyone's happy – right? Have you ever heard this axiom: *“Lower your expectations – raise your commitments?”* They had unrealistic expectations. They had a business agreement. They knew and agreed upon the rules of engagement. But they shifted into comparison thinking. Greed took over. They expected more. And they began to say, *“This is unfair.”*

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Jesus is a contrarian. This story contradicts conventional wisdom. 2 points about this story:

1.) This story is a contrast between **“Works” v “Grace.”** I fear you are not a Christian if you don't understand this parable. This simple question reveals if you understand grace: *“How do you feel about death-bed conversions?”* I've heard people say variations of this, *“It's not fair. I had to go to church and listen to boring sermons all my life – and these people just pray some prayer at the end of their life and go to heaven? I've had to suffer through church all my life. It's not fair.”* The person is saying *“I DESERVE to go to heaven, but they don't because I've worked hard to earn God's grace!”* NOBODY deserves to go to heaven. If we're not okay with that, we don't understand grace. They focus on how hard they've worked. Unless the owner gives us a denarius, we won't get paid. No one is righteous. No one can save themselves. Without a generous owner, there's no pay day for anybody.

Those who wait for the last moment must spend their entire lives perplexed about if they go to heaven. That creates anxiety. Furthermore, not only do I not have that anxiety, but I have so many other benefits of following Jesus: a purpose/meaning in life; a group of people I can be with (the church), a script for life (the Bible); a place to serve; someone to talk about (Jesus); the presence of the Jesus in my life (the Holy Spirit); and a place to give my money. Yesterday (“Trunk or Treat”) was a great example of the joy of generosity.

We should rejoice/be glad when anyone, ever comes to Christ. Maybe there is a reward system in heaven – but if so, it won't lead to pride, ego, envy, or comparison.

2.) **Grace creates generous not grumpy people.** When we understand grace, we become grateful. *Or do you begrudge my generosity?’* Generosity is not a character trait. Talk to a toddler and most likely their favorite word is “NO!” and their second favorite word is “MINE.” We have to be taught to share our toys. We have to be taught to be generous. Stingy is normal and natural. We are born into the kingdom of grab. We have to be born again into the kingdom of give.

My mom taught me manners: “Harrison’s residence, Tommy Speaking.” “Yes Ma’am. No Sir.” “Please/Thank you.” You don’t cash the check or spend the money until you write a “thank you note” for the gift. Elbows aren’t on the table when you eat. You open doors for people. You show respect. But someone has to teach us.

(Show the Contrarian booklet we’re sending out). There are many ways to show generosity – including the use of money. This parable is about money, but it’s also making a bigger point – about grace. The two are tied together. Grace creates generosity – generosity generates grace. *I often hear you and others at Asbury, urging members to be participants and not observers. Yet, I have some health issues I hide well, and I’ve considered that as an obstacle when I think of volunteering. Two weeks ago, during the Sunday service, the “Woe is me” attitude was on my mind when a woman I assume was about 15 years my senior, caught my eye. Her shoulders sloped, her gait revealed a limp, and it was obvious she struggled a good bit as she walked past me, very slowly, carrying her box of Asbury supplies to who knows what location in the church. I looked upward, ashamed, but smiling at the good Lord’s sense of humor, and whispered, “Got it. Loud and clear.” I knew He was asking me why she could serve, and I couldn’t? Here she was, barely able to walk as I sat in my comfy pew. It was a reminder that we can all find a place at Asbury. This week I answered His call. My husband and I are looking for a spot that will work for us to serve at Asbury. It reminds me of the hymn I’ve sung since childhood: “Give of your best to the Master; Give of the strength of your youth; Throw your soul’s fresh, glowing ardor. Into the battle for truth. Jesus has set the example, Dauntless was He, young and brave; Give Him your loyal devotion; Give Him the best that you have.*

Refrain: *Give of your best to the Master; Give of the strength of your youth; Clad in salvation’s full armor, Join in the battle for truth.*

Give of your best to the Master; Give Him first place in your heart; Give Him first place in your service; Consecrate every part. Give, and to you will be given; God His beloved Son gave; Gratefully seeking to serve Him, Give Him the best that you have. Give of your best to the Master; Naught else is worthy His love; He gave Himself for your ransom, Gave up His glory above. Laid down His life without murmur, You from sin’s ruin to save; Give Him your heart’s adoration; Give Him the best that you have.”