

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

GOD GOES ALL OUT

Matthew 20:1-16

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. 5When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' 7They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' 8When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' 9When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12saying, '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.' 13But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14Take what belongs to you and

go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.
15Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?
Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16So the last will be
first, and the first will be last.

DIAGNOSIS: Grudging

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Better*

The “firsts” see themselves as better than the “lasts” for they have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. Anyone who has ever stood in line knows the feeling. First come, first served. Place has its privileges. And we shoot daggers at anyone who cuts in line. Those in front deserve some extra reward and payback for their pain and suffering. And so if the landowner is going to be generous and give the “lasts” a full day’s wage, he better give the “firsts” twelve times as much. Proportionate response. The carrot and the stick. Rewards and penalties in proportion to your labors. That’s one way of being “fair” in any economic system. The quid pro quo (the tit for tat) way. This mentality affects many a Christian congregation as the old-timers eye the new-comers. The “firsts” are “better” and deserve more attention and to get their way more often because they’ve been there longer. And their eyes and tongues shoot daggers if they don’t.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Burdened*

But why should working for God ever be “work”? Isn’t a useful day’s work its own reward? Why should we even need quid pro quo, the carrots and the sticks? Read Genesis 3. Never was work “work” until Adam and Eve rebelled. Paradise was ruined. And we’ve been sweating it ever since. Rebelling against God’s free gift of promise (sin) makes work “work.” Hence the need for the carrots and sticks, rewards and penalties in proportion to our

labors. Apparently no economic system can work effectively without it. Salvation by industriousness. It's reflected in the Larry Kudlow creed ("I believe that free market capitalism is the best path to prosperity") and Newt Gingrich's motto ("The constitution guarantees equal opportunity, not equal benefits and equal pay"), the feminists' mantra ("Equal pay for equal work") and the Liberals' cry ("Progressive taxes. The rich should pay their fair share"). Proportionate response. Fairness.

Fairness sounds great, but it can be deadly. For due to sin "fairness" gets distorted and it hurts us in the end. There is greed, corruption, envy. Bad owners and bad politicians create economic problems and then pick the pockets of those who have been responsible. It's criminal, yet legal. Even constitutional. Two trillion dollars sit idle on the corporate sidelines while millions of willing workers go unemployed. We pay people not to work and enterprising idlers scam the system. Unions tromp on non-union labor and non-union labor undercuts the unions. Twenty-first century greed, corruption, and envy are contemporary expressions of the ancient "evil eye." Note how the "firsts," who bear the burden of the day, end up with the "evil eye" of envy even though they ARE treated fairly and receive exactly what was promised-a full day's wage. This is what sin does to us. Sin makes even those who have their fair share and enough envious and jealous and makes them want to grab for more and begrudge God's grace. And we are held accountable for that. For that's the other side of quid pro quo. With faults, mistakes, and missteps come penalties. "The global markets are punishing us," says CNBC. "There's no free lunch." It's the law of the economy. God's economy. Quid pro quo is just another name for our old nemesis, lex talonis, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Proportionate response. Martin Luther puts it crisply as he cites Matthew 20: "The weight and heat of the day... [is] the burden of the Law." God's Law. Which speaks of nothing

but “fairness” and a well-deserved death to those who defy God—including those societies and economic systems that defy God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Goners*

Economic turmoil betrays a lack of trust in the goodness and generosity of God in Christ. To grumpy begrudging distrusters God says, “Go! Take what belongs to you and go. Be gone! Dismissed! You’re fired!” They may have done the work and put in a full day’s labor and have a pot of gold gained fairly, but still they are expelled from the vineyard, which is life itself, due to their distrust and evil envy. God wants nothing more to do with begrudging grumps. Who does! How’s that for a quid pro quo?

PROGNOSIS: Graced

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God Goes All Out*

God’s appalling generosity will never sell in the corporate board room. Pull this stunt just once as an employer, and no one will show up for work on time the next day. Do this as a country, and capital will flow to other nations. But it is music to the ears of anyone who is weary of the burden to perform and the onus of falling short and failing. The onus is not on us. It’s on God himself in Christ. Note how this landowner goes all out. He “goes out” himself (and does not send an underling instead). He goes out “often,” even at “the eleventh hour.” He leaves no one behind in any line. On the cross, God “goes all out” in the person of the Christ, to bear the full heat and burden of the law, the pressure to perform faithfully and obediently right down to the very last jot and tittle. And amazingly, this odd God chooses to offer that work and accomplishment equally to everyone: the firsts and the lasts. God is more than just and fair. God “goes all out” and is awesomely generous. God is gracious in the very one who tells this story—Jesus, the Christ.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Employed and Deployed*

And that's good news for us. For those who hear of and believe in God's amazing generosity in Christ are called and tasked to become an alternative community "in" the world and "for" the world but not "of" the world. The onus of the Law gives way to Christ calling us his own. And begrudging gives way to befriending. And the evil eye of envy gives way to the caring heart of love and a watchful eye for opportunities to help and serve. And being "fair" means making sure that everyone has a full denarius, enough bread for each and every day, and thanking God for it. Our economics and politics become that of the Lord's Prayer. The problem in the world today is not God's supply, but rather our distribution of it. There is no such thing as "unemployment" in the kingdom of God. God wants us in God's employ even when others don't. God hires us on. And we are employed and deployed. All of us have a job to do, a work and a task called "ministry," embedded in our everyday occupations and vocations. And as we do that work, we trust God will provide. And who cares who is first and who is last as long as we are clinging to Christ's coattails and present in God's presence? God's grace is sufficient and more than enough for everyone.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Comers*

The "go" given to those who are receptive to God's grace is MUCH different from the "go" given to those who are begrudging. For it is much more like a "come." "Come INTO the vineyard." "Come,...inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34). And in Bible talk, "vineyard" is code for "the beloved": the "qahal" (Hebrew), the "ekklesia" (Greek), those people "called out" (English) of idolness and idleness into God's presence to work productively and to feast joyfully upon God's provision and protection (Isaiah 5). Our weekly gathering at worship equips us and energizes us for the

mission work at hand. And our weekly going is a sending out to "Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Remember the poor." It's not a dismissal (as in "Fired!"). Instead, it's a "misso" (as in "Fired up!"). A mission. It's God's provision and command to go into the world to do the work of global mission. Tirelessly. Tenderly. Tenaciously. But let's not call it "work?" Call it "fruit." Good fruit. God's fruit. Fruit of the Spirit. For to be useful in God's service is its own reward. Paradise itself. God's Opus One. Creation restored, as God intended.