

GOD'S STRANGE ECONOMICS

Matthew 20:1-16

Living God's Word—A Walk Through The Bible

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Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, had a total compensation in 2011 of \$378 million; LeBron James makes \$73 million in salary and endorsements; Actress Sandra Bullock made \$51 million this past year; Warren Buffet made about \$37 million each day; \$1.45 million per hour; and just over \$25,694 per minute.

We live in a time when the news is often filled with reports on the high salaries paid to certain corporate executives, sports figures, and movie stars; yet the debate that often goes on is whether any of them are really worth that kind of compensation. What makes one person deserving of so much more than others?

Even in our own lives that debate often goes on. We may wonder why certain jobs pay so much more than others. We may feel that we deserve far more than someone else because we feel we work so much harder than certain people; have been a part of the business longer than others; have been much more loyal and dedicated. An unfortunate thing is how we often allow income levels, along with the amount of one's possessions, to define our worth as people; to define how important people are in society.

In the parable Jesus told in Matthew 20 he said that the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a vineyard hiring laborers to work for him for a certain rate of pay. Yet as the day goes on he continues to hire people to work for the exact same daily wage as those who began working first thing in the morning. Even those who worked only one hour received a full day's wage.

When it was time to be paid for their work, those who worked the longest were upset that they did not receive more money. They didn't think it was fair that those who worked so little should be paid the same wage. In response, however, the owner of the vineyard reminds them that they had agreed to work for this wage; he reminds them that he has the right to pay his workers whatever he wants to.

By asking them, "*Are you envious because I am generous?*" the landowner is reminding the workers that they should be grateful for his generosity; they should be thankful that these other workers are sharing in his wonderful kindness. The truth is that to be envious, to complain about not getting more, to be mad at the other workers, was simply ingratitude.

It is important to note that Jesus did not use this parable to somehow teach us how businesses should operate or how labor negotiations should be conducted. Rather, Jesus is using a very familiar example from everyday life to illustrate what his kingdom, what the Christian life and community is all about. He is showing us that in his kingdom God's economics are much different from the world's economics.

The true message of Christ is that God bestows his love and grace equally upon all. Whether a person has been a Christian all their life; whether they came to faith in Christ in the middle or at the end of their life, the promises of God's love, forgiveness and salvation are the same for all. There is no extra merit, blessing or reward for some people over others. God showers his love and grace equally upon all.

It is pretty obvious that Jesus told this parable in order to counteract a popular belief that existed then and still often exists today, that God should give special rewards and compensation to certain people; the

belief that often exists in the church where certain individuals are convinced that they have worked much harder than others, have given so much more and therefore deserve more favor in God's eyes; deserve more influence and power in church matters.

It is true that over the years some churches, or perhaps some groups within churches, have done everything they can to keep certain people out of their church. They have done this because they are threatened by new ideas and change; they are afraid that in welcoming new people they may lose their own influence and power. Jesus' truth is that some simply want to keep all the blessings and benefits for themselves.

Are you envious because I am so generous? This spiritual issue according to Jesus is whether we have truly experienced, and know, the unbelievable generosity of God; whether we have been touched by Christ's amazing love and grace; whether we are jealous of what God is doing in other people's lives.

In one of my previous churches a man came to see me one day. He wanted let me to know in no uncertain terms that he didn't like and agree with a certain mission project our church was involved with. I reassured him that this was just fine, that everyone needs to decide for themselves what they really want to support.

I also however shared with him my hope that even if he didn't support this particular mission project, that he would in turn generously share his blessings and gifts with other projects; with the general mission of the church. However in response he simply kept telling me about how he disagreed with this mission; he kept avoiding the issue of being generously involved in other giving.

Finally I asked him if he was really against this mission, or if he was simply using it as a way to rationalize and justify a deeper issue—that being that giving was hard for him. In the course of our conversation he opened up that giving and stewardship were things he didn't like hearing about; that he was really envious of the generosity and joy that so many others had in giving. His pattern in life, he admitted, was to find fault with all stewardship and giving opportunities; to use that to rationalize and avoid being generous in any area.

I am reminded of going to a pastors' conference early in my ministry and hearing a very dynamic Christian speaker challenge all of us pastors in attendance that we need to learn to give generously as God has blessed us. He talked about how many pastors think that because they are serving Christ everyday in their work; because they sacrificed to go to four years of graduate school beyond college; because their salaries are often less than those with equivalent responsibilities and education that they can then justify giving less.

Yet he told us, in no uncertain terms, that a life of ministry and preaching God's Word will not be very effective if we aren't willing to be touched by God's amazing generosity; aren't willing to sacrifice and give generously of ourselves for Jesus. He told us that there is no reason why anyone would want to believe our message of faith and giving, if we are not willing to live out that faith and example in our daily lives.

When Kim and I were married 39 years ago we committed our lives and marriage to Christ's mission, and we made a commitment to tithe, to give 10% of our income to Christ and his church, which we continue to seek to do here at Messiah.

God has richly blessed our lives with wonderful families that Kim and I grew up in; with wonderful and amazing churches like Messiah where we have been able to serve; with wonderful Christian friends and church members who are filled with the generosity and joy of Christ. God has also blessed us with wonderful children, spouses and grandchildren.

Realizing the generosity and wonder of God in this congregation we literally believe that we have no choice but to generously, joyfully and sacrificially share our gifts. We have no choice in our lives than to want this love of Christ to be passed on to more and more people. My only regret is that we cannot personally do even more. It is my firm belief that when we are open to receiving God's gifts in our lives, when we are touched by his grace and love, our response then is to give freely out of joy and thankfulness.

Are you envious, says God the landowner, because I am so generous? The Bible, my friends, is very clear about this message. Jesus says in Matthew 7 that "you will know (the true believers) by their fruits." And in using the example in that chapter of a tree bearing fruit he says that only a person planted in the rich soil of God's grace will bear generous and good fruit; you can't expect to pick generous fruit from a tree that is not planted in Christ.

And in 2 Corinthians, chapters 8 & 9, the Apostle Paul says that we need to first give ourselves to the Lord by faith; that our giving and generosity really show the genuineness of what our faith means to us; that it is not just pious words. As Paul says in 2 Cor. 9:7, "*God loves a cheerful giver.*"

Are you envious, says God, because I am so generous? Having three children who all attended college and graduate school I love the story of the daughter who wrote home from college and asked her parents, "Can you lend me \$250 real soon, I have some important things I need to get." Well, the parents knew this wasn't really a request for a loan; there was no pay back planned. Actually they were kind of angry since it wasn't too many weeks before that they had sent her some other money.

Therefore the father wrote to his daughter. "Dear Angie, We received your letter today requesting that we lend you \$250 right away. We are concerned about the money we sent you a few weeks ago and whether you wasted that money away on frivolous things. Your mother and I have decided not to lend you the \$250 at this time. We hope you understand. Love Mom & Dad."

Then at the bottom of the letter there was a PS, written by her father, which said, "Angie, enclosed is a check for \$250 as a gift from your mother and me. We love you lots, Dad."

God is so much like that, dear friends. Even though he has given each one of us countless gifts and blessings; even though we have so often misused them and hoarded them for ourselves; yet he continues to shower his blessings in our lives everyday purely as a gift. This is what his grace is all about. Even though none of us deserve it, he gives his love to us each day in abundance.

Are you envious, says God, because I am so generous? May we all, my friends, never be like these ungrateful and selfish laborers. Let us rather allow the abundance and generosity of Christ's love to touch our hearts and fill us with faith. May we in our lives and in our church, bear fruits of generosity and love in our witness each day for Jesus Christ.