

# Payday *and* the Gracious Master

Matthew 20:1-16

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Pastor Jim Rademaker

Much of the sermon material is adapted from Ken Bailey's *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*

Dan Price, CEO of Seattle-based Gravity Payments, made headlines after announcing plans to raise his employees' base salary to \$70,000 a year. But not everyone at Gravity Payments agreed with his plans to share the wealth. Two of his top employees quit in protest. His brother, a co-owner of Gravity payments, filed suit. Other local companies complained that Price made them look stingy.

For many of us, we've worked with others and at the end of the week we all got the same pay. Seems fair. But what about that coworker who always worked a little slower than everybody else or seemed to take more breaks or was just lazy? He got paid the same as you. How did that make you feel?

An honest day's wage for an honest day's work. Or a just reward for a life well-lived. Our eternal fate is in our own hands. If we live a good life and work hard to do our best, God will reward us in the next life. That's how the young man thought, the rich young ruler. What was his question about the kingdom of heaven? "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" What do I have to do in order to earn my way in, so that when THE Pay Day comes, I'll be sure to receive what I've worked so hard for?

Jesus' answer? "Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Peter later responds, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" What will be our pay for all the hard work we've done? Certainly, if anybody deserves something, it would be us! What will it be?

*Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. What does that mean? Jesus illustrates it with a parable.*

The owner of a vineyard needs workers, so he heads for a special corner of the village market where those without steady work gather each day, hoping for a job, any job, even if it's just for a day. It's a scene that's carried out daily throughout our world today in a number of places. A van or pickup pulls up early in the morning to a spot where those without steady work gather, hoping to get a job for the day and provide for their families. Humbled by their circumstances but desperate for anything they can get. Thankful for whomever would hire them.

And so it is that the vineyard owner appears at the unemployment corner of the market, selects some workers and offers them the standard wage of one denarius for a day's work. The workers accept his proposal and head off to do the best they can in the hope that by the end of the day they will be hired for a second day, or perhaps even longer.

Halfway through the morning the owner goes out again, returning to the market, where he finds other unemployed men who are standing, not sitting. They're alert and eager, ready to go, still hopeful that they will be chosen by someone, anyone. The master makes a second selection, but doesn't quote a pay scale this time. He says only, "What is just, what is right, I will pay you." The men trust him and accept his terms, no doubt rejoicing that they've escaped further public humiliation and that they'll have something for their families at the end of the day.

Clearly, the vineyard owner is respected in the community and trusted by the day laborers. But why is the vineyard owner there? Surely a well-organized vineyard owner would know how much work needed to be completed that day and could figure out how many workers the task required. Why then does he spend the day going out again and again, returning every three hours to the market to hire more workers?

The master's driving motive? It appears he's motivated by *compassion* for those in need. Seeing many eager, unemployed men at the beginning of the day, he selects some of them, hoping, for their sakes, that the others would soon be hired by someone else. Three hours later he decides to check to see what had happened. And so, he goes out again, and arriving at the unemployment corner, he finds many still waiting. And the early morning scene was repeated. He selects a few.

By noon, he's confident that the rest would have found work or gone home. But again, he wants to see for himself. So what does he do? He goes out again, only to find a sad crowd. He hires more men. By 3:00 p.m. his compassion compelled him to go out again and check the unemployment corner in the hope that it would be empty. To the master's amazement and dismay, that wasn't the case. So he hires a few more workers.

Finally, one hour before sundown, the master goes out again and returns to the market, where he finds some deeply depressed workers who've been standing *all day*. The master assumes that surely by this time of the day all the unemployed will have given up and returned home. What's the use of continuing to stand, eagerly awaiting, what by then, is surely a hopeless cause? All that remains for the few left in the market is the humiliation of returning home to an anxious wife and hungry children with the bad news of another day of frustration and disappointment. Why had these last men not given up and left by now?

When asked why they're still standing there, the unemployed have a simple answer: "No one has hired us!" That is, "We're eager to work, willing to work, ready to work, able to work, and we will not give up! We will stand here until the light fades and go home in the dark if we have to."

Notice what the master does. He doesn't say to them, "Here, each of you take a *denarius* and buy some food for your families!" He refuses to humiliate them further with a handout. Instead, he gives them the one thing they so desperately want - a job. There's no promise to pay them anything, and yet they go with him. They had watched him return to the market repeatedly throughout the day and understood instinctively why he was there. No doubt they sensed that he was responding compassionately to their public humiliation and their determination to maintain their self-worth in spite of their humiliation.

By the end of the day five different groups of workers are busily employed. The first group has a "contract." They were promised a specific amount - one denarius each, for a day's work. During the day three other groups were promised an unspecified "justice" in the pay scale. The last group was promised nothing, and no doubt wondered what they might receive.

Suddenly, the first big surprise takes place. Amazingly, an estate manager walks on the stage! If such a person was on the owner's staff, why wasn't he doing the footwork at the market throughout the heat of the day? Why wasn't the manager left to do the managing?

The other surprise has to do with the order of payment. Those who came last are paid first and receive a full day's wage. The order of payment is dictated by the master who must have important reasons for choosing it. He knows this isn't the natural order his "pay master" would select. But consider, what would likely happen if he paid them the normal way. Once the first group was paid the agreed upon denarius they would have left, proud of the fact that they worked for and received a full day's wages.

Each group, in turn, would have been amazed at receiving the same wage and would have left, delighted beyond words. In short, such an order of payment would have left everyone pleased and there would have been no angry shouting around the steward's pay table. Why cause unnecessary trouble? Obviously, the master wants those who had worked all day to observe the grace that he extends to the others.

When the eleventh-hour workers opened their pay envelope, what do you suppose they found? A shiny denarius! Wow! One hour's work, and a full day's wage! Enough to buy groceries and pay the bills and take care of their families! Who would have imagined! What a boss! They didn't deserve it. They didn't earn it. There had been no deal. There wasn't even any promise of their being paid anything. The boss could have paid them nothing. Or he could have paid a twelfth of a denarius. That would have been fair. But they get a whole denarius. He wasn't being fair. He was being ridiculously gracious.

The word starts to trickle back in line. "He's paying a denarius an hour!" The twelve-hour workers at the end of the line are giddy and rubbing their hands together. At this rate, they're going to get twelve denarii, the equivalent of twelve days work for one day. What a deal!

But we can sense the rising tension in this group as they observe what happens next. They notice that the next group, the "three hour workers" received the same. One denarius, no more. The same for the "six hour workers", and sure enough, for the "nine hour workers". What was this! And their astonishment and agitation and anxiety starts to grow and finally, turns to anger. They're angry with the master!

"Hay, this isn't fair!" And their worst fears, come to pass. When they're finally paid, sure enough, all they get is one stinking denarius, the same as those who only worked one hour! They're furious! How unfair! We should get more! Who was this master? What a jerk! Who wants to work for someone like that!

Yet theirs isn't the cry of the *underpaid*. No one is underpaid in this parable, are they? The problem isn't the pay. Their problem is grace. They can't stand the grace of the master. How dare he! Fairness is what they were looking for, not grace. And what really bothers them, comes out. "Why, you have made them equal to us" they shout angrily!

"These last-minute workers, whom no one else would hire, you have made *equal to us*. We worked all day and endured its scorching heat and wind! They didn't. It's not fair!" We *earned* ours. They didn't. We're better than them and should get paid more!"

The master addresses the angry workers' spokesman. His reply can be paraphrased: You have no complaint! Justice is served! I have given you what I agreed to pay you. You are free to do what you like with what is yours! And I am free to do what I like with what is mine, aren't I? I *chose* to pay these men a living wage. You'll be able to go home to your wives and children and proudly announce that you found work and have a full day's pay. I want these other men to be able to walk in the doors of their homes with the same joy in their hearts, and the same money in their pockets. I want their children and wives to be as proud of them as yours are of you.

So, you worked through the heat of the day, did you? That's great. And what do you think *I* was doing during the heat of the day? Enjoying a siesta? I was on the road to and from the market - trying to demonstrate compassion to others who, like you, are in need of employment. I could have sent my manager to do this. I didn't! I went myself, to demonstrate solidarity with the men, and help alleviate their suffering. Why are you jealous of them and angry at me? You must understand that I am not only *just* - I am also *merciful* and *compassionate*, because mercy and compassion are a part of justice!

Why should you be irritated by my grace? It appears that you don't care whether or not they can preserve their self-worth or feed their families. You want to take more for yourselves. I have chosen to give more of myself. You want to be richer at the end of the day. I have chosen to be poorer at the end of the day. Don't try to control me! Take your just wage and go!

And finally, at the end of Jesus' response to Peter about what he and the other disciples will get for all that they've done in giving up everything and following Jesus, He repeats what He said earlier about what the kingdom of heaven is like. "The last will be first, and the first last," which reflects what's just happened in the story.

How did all the workers provide for their families? The gracious master went out to get them. He approached them and gave each of them a job. And he graciously goes back again and again to hire others, as He goes out again and again to find His lost sheep.

If it weren't for the master's seeking them out and choosing them, they would still be sitting on the corner, unemployed. And no matter how much they worked, whether they were first or last, he provided for all of them. They were all treated as equals. None better than the other. None more worthy than the other. All in need, all provided for. All taken care of. Why? It wasn't based on them, what they did or didn't do. It had nothing to do with them and everything to do with their good and gracious master.

Notice any parallels for us today? Is God fair to us? Is that what you really want from Him? If you want God to be fair, to deal with you according to your works, your achievements, your accomplishments and all the things you do, then you'll be damned. That's fair. The wages of our sin is death. Eternal death. If God were only fair and paid you your due wages, where would you be? More important than fair, God is gracious. The wages of our sin is death. But the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our lord.

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. While we were still ungodly, He justified us. Jesus labored the full twelve hours under the heat of the day. He kept God's law of love perfectly His entire life. And at the close of the day, He put the denarius of eternal life He earned into your pocket. The gift of God, eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Our Lord, who worked a full day's shift, to the end, when at the end of His shift said, "It is finished." My shift is over. The work You sent me to do is accomplished. I've accomplished your will. I've come down into the field of this world to work and do the will of him who sent me.

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)*

The last shall be first and the first shall be last. It's not about your doing, but about His doing for you. What a master you have! So, Peter, yes, you've given up a lot in following me, and it will be well with you in My kingdom,

but your focus is all wrong. It's not about your goodness. It's about My goodness. It's not about your doing. It's about My doing for you.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph 2)*

And following Jesus' parable are these words. *"And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."*

By grace, for you!