

“THE JUSTICE OF THE LORD OUR GOD”
Psalm 9:7-12, Colossians 3:12-17, Matthew 20:1-16
February 5 & 6, 2022

I want to start today with an amazing account of God’s great provision. It’s the account of George Mueller. “Mueller was born into a German tax collector’s family, and was often in trouble. He learned early to steal and gamble and drink. As a teenager, he learned how to stay in expensive hotels, then sneak out without paying the bill. But at length he was caught and jailed. Prison did him little good, for upon release he continued his crime spree until, on a Saturday night in 1825, he met Jesus Christ. (His decision to follow Jesus changed his life forever.)

“Mueller married and settled down in Bristol, England, growing daily in faith and developing a burden for the homeless children running wild and ragged through the streets. At a public meeting in Bristol on December 9, 1835, he presented a plan for an orphanage. Several contributions came in. Mueller rented Number 6 Wilson Street, and on April 11, 1836, the doors of the orphanage opened. Twenty-six children were immediately taken in. A second house soon opened, then a third.

“From the beginning, Mueller refused to ask for funds or even to speak of the ministry’s financial needs. He believed in praying earnestly and trusting the Lord to provide. And the Lord *did* provide, though sometimes at the last moment. The best-known story involves a morning when the plates and bowls and cups were out on the tables, but there was no food or milk. The children sat waiting for breakfast while Mueller led in prayer for their daily bread. A knock sounded at the door. It was the baker. ‘Mr. Mueller,’ he said, ‘I couldn’t sleep last night. Somehow I felt you didn’t have bread for breakfast, so I got up at 2 A.M. and baked some fresh bread. A second knock sounded. The milkman had broken down right in front of the orphanage, and he wanted to give the children his milk so he could empty his wagon and repair it.

Mueller gave himself to do the work that the Lord had given to him to do, and God provided for him to do it. And George Mueller gladly shared all that God gave to him with his “children.” “Such stories became the norm for Muller’s work. **During the course of his ninety-three years, Mueller**

housed more than ten thousand orphans, ‘prayed in’ millions of dollars, traveled to scores of countries preaching the Gospel, and recorded fifty thousand answers to prayer.¹ AMAZING!!!

Throughout the season of Epiphany this year we’ve been looking at the Parables of Jesus in order to gain greater insight of His teaching for our lives today. We heard about the importance of brotherly love from the Parable of the Prodigal Sons (Luke 15:11-33). We learned the importance of watching ourselves with regard to judgement in the Parable of the Speck and the Log (Matt. 7:1-8). We heard the importance of staying faithful in prayer, especially in difficult times from the Parable of the Unjust Judge and the Widow (Luke 18:1-8). And we have learned how we are all called to live with the Seed of God’s Word in our hearts in the Parable of the Sower, Soils and the Seed (Matt. 13:18-23).

So today I want to continue our learning from Jesus’ Parables as we look at the great abundance of God’s mercy toward us as we learn from the Parable of Workers in the Vineyard. I invite you to listen to this parable of Jesus as it is found in Matthew 20:1-16. (READ Matthew 20:1-16)

I find it interesting to look at the generosity of God. As Jesus describes what the “Kingdom of Heaven” looks like, I can’t help but begin to see some very disturbing inconsistencies with the way that our world works compared with how the Kingdom of God works. And we see that in our Scripture lessons today.

Right away in our Old Testament lesson of Psalm 9 we see that God’s ways are much different than our ways. We heard that “*The Lord is king forever; He has set up His throne for judgment. He rules the world with righteousness; He judges the nations with justice. The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a place of safety in times of trouble. Those who know You, Lord, will trust You; You do not abandon anyone who comes to You*” (9:7-10). So we see that **God delights for us to come to Him and trust in Him and depend upon Him for our whole being. And when we do that, He is not ashamed to take care of us and provide for us and allow us to find safety and rest in His care.** When we are His people, His followers, He delights to provide us with such abundance.

¹ (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 618-619)

And that is exactly what God did through George Mueller. As Mueller trusted in the Lord, he was granted all he needed in order to continue the work of the Lord in the streets of Bristol, England, and all around the world. He made a difference in that society through the ten thousand orphans who benefitted from the orphanages. It's a great example of what God can do through each of us as we hold firmly in our own faith.

And because God has "*chosen [us] for His own*" (Col. 3:12) because of our love for Him, He invites us to live and present ourselves to the world in a way that acknowledges Him. He wants us to live differently than the world, so that the world can see the difference in the way that we live, and be drawn toward God, too. It's called lifestyle evangelism, living for Jesus in every aspect of our lives.

Then, we hear the Apostle Paul calling us to "*clothe [ourselves] with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. [We] must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven [us]. And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity*" (Col. 3:12-14).

Now this is not an easy thing to do, because **we live in a world that surrounds us with the message of looking out for your own #1, and treating others with little to no respect, and paying back evil for evil. And even Christians are sucked into this same mindset.** But Paul calls us to live differently so that we might be a living witness to the difference in the ways of the Lord our God. We have so many examples of how God displays His goodness and generosity to us at the most unexpected time, and in the most outstanding ways. We are invited to learn from the Lord, through Paul's writings, to let our lives be more conformed to the ways of God than to the ways of the earth.

And so we have this astounding parable of Jesus about the generosity of God that flies right in the face of what we think is just and right. This counter-cultural teaching of Jesus makes us turn our heads to the side and wonder really what God is like. Though surely some will want to distort the message and twist it for their own purposes, we are to learn how we can be as generous as God is.

Jesus describes what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like by telling us about a business owner who decides to hire people to work for his company. His company happens to be a vineyard. So the business owner goes to the local job center (which happens to be the market place of his town) to hire workers. He contracts a good price with the ones he hires and they decide to work for him, and off they go into his vineyard, doing the work that needs to be done to produce a good harvest. If the parable had ended there, it would have just been a good story about a man doing business. But it doesn't stop there.

The business owner decides to go back to the job center to hire more folks to work in his company, and he agrees upon paying them a certain amount of money (the one day's wage). They go off into the fields to do the work they've been contracted out to do. Again, not such a bad story. Only the business owner doesn't stop there. His need for workers is enough that he keeps going back to the job center to employ more and more workers. They decide upon a certain price for the work and the workers go off into the fields to work. **This business owner hires people at 6:00, 9:00, 12:00, and 3:00 to go to work in his company, agreeing to pay them a fair wage.**

It's a common practice that goes on, even today. The problem with this parable comes in when the business owner returns once more to the job center at 5:00 in the afternoon, only to find even more people who have not gone out to work. *"Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?" he asked them. "No one hired us," they answered. "Well, then, you go and work in the vineyard," he told them"* (Matt 20:6-7). **Out of compassion and love for those who were not hired, this businessman puts them to work in his vineyard.**

Even then, it's not such a bad story - a man sees a need, and then meets that need through employment. The employment gives each one of the workers respect, honor, dignity and purpose, as well as lifting up their self-esteem. Employment gives a person a reason to get up in the morning. It gives people a sense of purpose for their life. And employment leaves the person feeling better about themselves. This business owner saw the need to make a difference in these peoples' lives and invited them to become valuable, with a reason to live.

But the difficulty of this parable comes as we see what happened after the day's work was completed. The business owner calls everyone in to get paid for their work, and he starts by paying the ones who were hired at the end of the day. And he pays each person the agreed amount, to everyone who worked for him that day. Still not a bad story. The business owner is a good guy doing what is right, not only for his own company, but for the people he hires out.

However, when the ones who were hired early in the morning come to get paid, having seen what the ones who were hired at the end of the day got, they felt that they had been cheated when the business owner provided them with their agreed amount. **The problem came in that the business owner had only one contract to hire the people to work, and that contract stated that each person would get paid “a silver coin” or one day's wage.** THEN we begin to see the rub that was caused.

Though each person had agreed upon their wages before they started working for the businessman, the ones who were hired first thought that because they had begun early in the day, certainly their contract should reflect their time and energy in the company. The agreed amount suddenly wasn't enough when they began comparing their wages with the wages of those who were hired later in the day. Though their contract clearly stated that they would work for the “one silver coin,” they suddenly began to feel mistreated when everyone else got the same wage. And you can probably visualize the headlines of the local new paper challenging the “injustice,” “VINEYARD OWNER CHEATS EMPLOYEES!” What a story journalists today would make of it today. You've probably heard of some yourself.

It's one of our human characteristics that always gets us into trouble - envy. We're always basing our worth compared with what the next guy gets, and we're never happy, it seems, with what we get. So we grouch and complain that it's never enough.

Now from the business owner's perspective, he was meeting a need for the work to be done in his vineyard while at the same time giving those who needed work the opportunity to work. Everyone who worked for him wanted to work, but some just got hired later than others did. But we often look

beyond the generosity of a person to the “injustice” that that same gesture is toward another person.

The business owner looked at the ones who hadn’t been hired by the end of the day, and he decided to provide them and their families with the essentials for that day by paying them the full day’s wage. He loved them and had compassion on them and was generous with them. They didn’t deserve to be paid that much, but the business owner, out of his compassion for the state of the late-day-workers, gave them what they needed. And I’ll bet that those hired last would be the first ones to go to the vineyard the next day because they knew where they could find work to supply their families with what was needed for life. They appreciated what the businessman had done for them, and they were delighted in his compassion.

Unfortunately, from the early-day-workers’ perspective, even though they had agreed to getting a full day’s pay for a full day’s work, it just didn’t seem right that the others should be paid the same as they were. Instead of being happy with their pay for their day’s work, they groused about the unfairness of the whole situation. And I’m willing to bet that those who were grumbling that day, didn’t show up for work until later in the day after that. Their attitude could easily change from “Wow, I’m working and meeting the needs of my family,” to “Why do I have to work so hard to get the full day’s wage?”

And sadly, we see that sentiment all throughout our society today. People begin to decide that they can make more money from the government by not working and living on welfare, than to get out there and do their very best and be happy with the income they are receiving. They don’t want to work, but yet they demand the same amount as those who are grinding it out day after day.

So many go from being the first ones in line to the last ones in line, all because of their attitude about the work they have, to meet the needs of their families. While at the same time, there are those who “*no one has hired*” who are rejoicing in the generosity of one who gives them a chance and meets their need. What joy is theirs’ because this business owner didn’t give up on them, nor treat them with disrespect, but rather treated them with the respect they needed to lift them up and give them hope once

more so that they could continue to be productive elements in their society!

But our society today calls that unfair and unjust because the ones hired first did a majority of the work that day. Certainly they should be compensated for their work! AND THEY WERE! It's just that the businessman was generous with that day's workers, and met the needs of the ones hired last just as much as the ones hired first. Yet the mindset of our world is that the ones who work the longest get the most pay. The ones with the more glamorous jobs get the bigger salaries. The ones in the spotlight get the greatest payback. The mindset is that they deserve more because they are "better people."

Let me explain it this way: "The weekend following September 11, 2001, syndicated columnist and former presidential speechwriter Peggy Noonan drove to Lower Manhattan to witness the relief effort taking place at Ground Zero [where the Twin Towers used to stand]. She found herself focusing on the convoy of trucks filled with rescue workers coming off their 12-hour shifts. The men in the trucks were construction and electrical workers, police, emergency medical workers, and firemen. It was a procession of the not-so-rich-and-famous.

"Nonetheless, these New Yorkers were celebrities in a human drama more significant than any Broadway act. Noonan joined the growing crowd of onlookers cheering the workers with shouts of 'God bless you!' and 'We love you!' They clapped and blew kisses.

"Noonan writes: I looked around me at all of us who were cheering and saw who we were. Investment bankers! Orthodontists! Magazine editors! In my group, a lawyer, a columnist, and a writer. We had been the kings and queens of the city, respected professionals in a city that respects its professional class. And this night we were nobody. We were so useless, all we could do was applaud the somebodies, the workers who, unlike us, had not been applauded much in their lives...I was so moved and, oddly I guess, grateful, because they'd always been the people who ran the place, who kept it going; they'd just never been given their due.

"This reversal Peggy Noonan witnessed is nothing less than a foreshadowing of what Jesus

talked about. A day is coming when the first shall be last and the last shall be first.”²

You see, in God’s eyes, it’s not the powerful, nor the intelligent, nor the prominent, nor the famous, nor the rich and wealthy that are the most important. They may be the ones who are at the front of the line, but they are not more important than anyone else. **In God’s eyes we are ALL important to Him enough that He cares for all who will turn to Him and follow His commands.** All who receive the Lord’s invitation to come be with Him are rewarded with all that they need for that day. And God delights to be generous to those whom we often deem NOT WORTHY to “deserve it” as much as those we often deem worthy to “deserve it.” And that’s the tussle we have with this parable, because God’s love and compassion for us is so different than the love and compassion that we have for one another.

You see, those who seek the Lord God Almighty become precious to Him, and He delights to shower His abundance with them so that they might receive great joy in His provision. Those who are lost and hopeless, those who are useless in the eyes of others, those who are different and for some reason have little to no purpose in the eyes of the world, there is hope for real life when you turn to the Lord Jesus Christ for His love to you. To those who are willing to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, God gives them all the joy of eternal life, and He freely shares all His love and compassion on you. That’s God’s justice for us, and it all comes through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let’s pray...

Father, thank You for Your great love for each one of us. Thank You for Your unconditional love and forgiveness to all who will turn to You. Give us the courage not to judge one another and compare ourselves against one another, making superficial differences influence the way that we treat each other. Help us to rejoice in all of our blessings and to look at how we might reflect Your great love for all people to those around us so that we might give them value, and hope, and purpose and life, too. Open our eyes so that we might see how we might be as generous with others, as You have been with us. Grant us Your compassion for all people, for we pray this in the name of Your Son, our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. AMEN.

² (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publications, 2003] pg. 312 & 313)