

## **“VICES AND VIRTUES: ENVY AND KINDNESS”**

***Matthew 20:1-16***

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When preachers preach on this parable of the workers in the vineyard, we often remark on how **unjust** the labour practice of the vineyard owner seems to be. I know that I've said that in sermons I have preached on this parable in earlier years. But as I've looked at this parable again, I've come to a slightly different conclusion.

It's pointed out that in today's context the vineyard owner might be dragged before the BC Labour Relations Board and charged with unfair labour practices. I mean he paid the workers who toiled in his field all day long exactly the same wage as he paid those who only worked an hour or so. That just doesn't seem right or fair. Maybe if the owner was more thoughtful, he would have paid the workers starting with those who worked the longest first. Then they would have gotten their agreed upon wage and left without a clue that those who worked far less would have been paid the same wage. Ignorance is bliss. But the vineyard owner chose to pay the newest workers first and paid them a full day's wage, just like he paid everyone else afterwards. **And that's when all the problems began.**

It does seem unfair, it doesn't seem right; it seems rather short-sighted and foolish of the vineyard owner at the very least. But here's the problem. The owner agreed with the first workers to pay them the usual daily wage. There's no issue here. The wage was just and agreed to. I checked the BC Labour Relations Code around unfair labour practices and there isn't anything in there about paying workers **more** than they deserve. If the first workers were paid less than they had agreed to work for, if they had been paid less than the usual daily wage, then I could see a problem, but they weren't. **They got exactly what they were supposed to get.** Their union wouldn't have a problem with it. No terms of the condition of employment were altered; they got what they bargained for.

But the workers who came later in the day, those who worked less hours than the first workers, even those who worked only an hour at the very end of the day, who hardly broke a sweat, when they lined up to get paid, instead of a pro-rated portion of the usual daily wage, they got the whole amount! As I said, there

doesn't seem to be a law against generosity. Now, the vineyard owner, if he kept up this sort of practice, would surely be inviting some long-term problems. Word would get around that this owner pays everyone the full daily wage no matter how many hours you work and so the next day when the vineyard owner goes out early in the morning to hire workers, he would find no one around. The workers wouldn't show up until later in the day, after all, why work the whole day in the heat and dirt of the vineyard when you can work half a day or just an hour or two and still get paid the same for a full day!

But let's not worry about a hypothetical future. Let's keep our focus on the parable as told. Again, there isn't a labour relations code issue with paying more than is deserved, as long as those who agreed to work for a set amount are given what they were promised. Being generous to the later workers isn't really an issue of unfairness because everyone got at least what they were promised. **Some just got more. And here's the real issue in the parable. It's not about justice or fairness, the issue in this parable is about envy.**

Envy is the second of our vices in our summer series of sermons on Vices and Virtues. The dictionary describes envy as a feeling of discontent or resentfulness aroused by someone else's possessions, qualities or luck. Scripture speaks of envy in many places, always in the negative. Proverbs says that a heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. The Ten Commandments tell us not to covet, which is directly aimed at envy. There are various passages in scripture which lists envy among the sins of the flesh and in 1 Corinthians we are reminded that love is patient and kind and that it does not envy or boast, and it is not proud.

The parable isn't told because Jesus wants to give advice on how to run a business. This is not a primer on how to hire workers for your vineyard. The parable is told for a different reason and that's clear when you read the first line in the parable, ***"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard."*** Jesus intends to tell us **something about the kingdom of God** through this parable. And it's contextualized by what precedes the telling of the parable. It's always helpful to remember this little phrase told to me by a wise, old minister. **A text without context is merely a pretext.** Just before this parable, Jesus is speaking with a rich young man who wants to know what he must do to have eternal life. He tells Jesus that he keeps

all the laws. Jesus eventually tells him to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow him. At that the rich young man went away grieving for he had many possessions. Jesus remarks to his disciples how difficult it is for those who are rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Peter, in response to Jesus says, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” And it is in response to this question that Jesus tells the parable, bracketing it with the phrase, “the first will be last and the last will be first.”

Peter’s question basically implies that he and the other disciples have made a sacrifice to follow Jesus. They have left everything for his sake. But if entering the kingdom of heaven is so difficult, even for a rich man who claims to have kept all the laws, then what’s left for them? There’s a common thread that ties together the situation of the rich young man and Peter and the other disciples. Both the rich young man and the disciples believe that in order to be saved, to have eternal life, they must do something that heaven, eternal life, is a reward for work well done. The man says he has kept the law, he has been good. The disciples say that they have left everything and followed Jesus. In both cases, it’s about what they have done, **but the kingdom has never been about what we’ve done, but always about what God has done for us.** The kingdom isn’t the reward for good work. The parable isn’t about business, **it’s about grace.**

And this is what is at the heart of envy, a lack of grace, of kindness. Grace isn’t a calculation, but envy is always calculating, always comparing. Jesus makes it clear that the kingdom of Heaven isn’t something which we work for or deserve; rather it is a gift of God’s grace. That’s what’s happening in the parable, grace. The vineyard owner extends grace, generosity, and kindness to those who have come later in the day. Everyone gets what’s promised, with no regards to the work they’ve done, but only because the owner chooses to be generous, to be kind. In the kingdom of Heaven there is no difference between the first and the last, the rich and the poor, those who think they deserve and those who know they’re not. **If you get in, it’s because the owner let you in, not because you worked your way in.**

Envy is blind to its own gifts. Instead of recognizing what we do have, when we are blinded by envy, we only see what we don’t have. Envy blinds us to what the goodness of God has done for us. The first workers in the vineyard forget that they were paid what they were promised; they only see that others got more

than they deserved. The first workers would have been perfectly content with the identical wage, if the others got less. How many of us grumble about the inclusive generosity of God's grace and kindness, offered to so many people who haven't worked as long as us, as hard as us, who haven't been as faithful as us, who don't keep the law like us, whose lives are messy and messed up, forgetting all about the fact that we are also recipients of God's kindness, mercy and grace?

**Envy is blind to its own gifts.**

There's a folk tale about two merchants that owned shops across the street from each other. Over the years they developed an unhealthy rivalry and dislike for each other. Each judged the day successful not on the basis of total sales, but on whether he made more than the other. Upon the completion of a sale, each would look across the street and mock the other. One day God decided to put an end to this nasty rivalry and sent an angel to visit one of the merchants. You can have anything you want in the entire world, the angel said. It can be riches, wisdom, a long life, and many children. Just know that whatever you ask, your competitor will get twice as much. If you ask for a million dollars, he will get 2 million dollars. So, what is your wish? The merchant thought for a while before he answered, "Make me blind in one eye."

**Envy makes us all blind.** Envy robs us of a sense of gratitude and joy for the life we do have. Even if another person has done nothing to us directly, our envy of them can grow in us a sense of resentment of them. Envy does rot our bones, it eats away at us.

The corresponding virtue to the vice of envy is kindness, or perhaps we would call it grace. If envy robs us of joy and happiness, kindness and grace restores those gifts. Kindness is rooted in a sense of one's own blessing, it's about opening our eyes and seeing the life God has gifted to us. It's about seeing our own gifts as clearly as we see the gifts of others. Kindness comes from a place of confidence, from a place of assurance.

There's another story in the bible about the mother of James and John, two of the disciples of Jesus. She came to Jesus and asked him, when you come into your kingdom, could you let one of my sons sit at your right hand and the other one at your left? Of course, when word of this got out, the other disciples were furious, probably because they didn't think of it first, and because if Jesus

had said yes, James and John would have gotten something they would not. But Jesus says, listen, who sits on my right and my left isn't mine to determine, but let me tell you something. You know that with others the people who are great lord it over others, but it will not be so with you. If you wish to be great, you must be a servant and who wishes to be first must be a slave to all. **For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.**

We don't solve our issue with envy by trying harder. We put envy behind us when we allow God to take our grasping, possessing hearts and replace them with grateful, thankful hearts. Look, this sermon isn't about saying to those who have little, just be satisfied with what you've got and it's not about condoning a socio-economic system that has led to the widest gaps between the wealthy and the middle class since before the Great Depression. I'm convinced that the increasing stratification of our economic classes is not sustainable. We need to find ways to be more equitable with the resources entrusted into our care. If there are authentic issues of justice to be pursued, we must do so. If the wealth of a few is made on the backs of those who are oppressed and exploited, that must be called out. What I'm saying is that we need to be motivated by justice, by a common sense of our human dignity, not by our envy.

We live in times where it seems that kindness is more necessary than ever before. I know that people have the capacity to be kind; I've seen so many examples. Dr. Bonnie Henry's mantra in this time of pandemic, be calm, be kind, be safe, has struck a chord with many of us and many have indeed found ways to be kind in these stress-filled times. When you're tempted to feel a certain way about what someone else has or received, take a moment to consider why you feel the way you do. If you feel a sliver of envy rising up, remember to open your eyes to the gifts you have received. And remember the sheer magnitude of that gift, of that grace. "What then will we have?" is Peter's question to Jesus. We've left everything to follow you. What then will we have? Jesus' reply is that when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, 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 fields, 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 will be first. Jesus assures Peter that his love for him and the rest of the disciples is not to be doubted, but he also goes further, the first will be last and the last will be first. God's grace means that what Jesus

did, what allows Peter and the disciples to be confident of their future, he did, not only for those workers who began their work early in the morning, **but also for those who came at closing.** Our God is a God who revels in his generosity. Our God is one who gives each of us so much in his Son Jesus Christ, that we can no longer talk about what he offers as reward for our work, but only as a gift of grace. The God we worship, the Jesus we follow, is a God whose grace is unlimited and whose generosity is unmatched. And it extends to everyone. **That's not something we should envy, it's something we should imitate.**

Thanks be to God, Amen.