

Pastor Don Nelson

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**“KINGDOM GENEROSITY”**  
**Matthew 20:1-16**

☼ The kingdom of God is not just a better version of the kingdom of the world; it is something entirely different.

☞ This is a mind-boggling reality. I am still trying to wrap my head (and heart) around it. The challenge of perceiving and embracing this radically new alternate reality is revealed in our response to God’s generosity.

⇕ The kingdom of the world visualizes religion as a ladder, with God at the top. The goal is to earn divine approval by climbing up to God (whoever or whatever that is).

⬆ We climb the ladder by doing good deeds. With each step up we gain a little more of God’s good will.

Everyone starts on ground level at birth. A few people stay there their whole life.

We climb to the 1<sup>st</sup> rung of the ladder by getting baptized, being confirmed, or joining the church. Many don’t get any higher than this, so their share of divine good will is small. It’s enough to get into heaven, but their “mansion” will probably be on the small side.

We move up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> rung by being regular in morning worship and giving a decent offering (maybe 5% of our annual income).

The 3<sup>rd</sup> rung is for believers who hardly miss a service, attend Sunday school, and put a full 10% of their gross income in the plate.

We can climb to the 4<sup>th</sup> rung by serving on a board, teaching Sunday school or singing in the choir. These folks merit a good portion of God’s good will.

The 5<sup>th</sup> rung is for people who do all those things *and* minister to the homeless, volunteer at the crisis pregnancy center, or march for peace.

There is a 6<sup>th</sup> rung reserved for those who make a career out of faith. This is for pastors, priests and nuns, people who dedicate their lives to God’s service.

At the top is a rung only spiritual giants reach, heroes like Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and missionaries to headhunters. They earn far more of God’s good will than you or I ever could hope for.

⇓ Of course, what goes up can come down. We lose ground when we sin. The worse our sin, the farther we fall. It *might* be possible to regain some rungs; but it is much harder the 2<sup>nd</sup> time around. We’ve forfeited a measure God’s good will, and He will not soon forget it.

≡ The kingdom of the world assumes or hopes that God is impartial in his dealings. Their ideal is that we get neither more nor less of God’s good will than we deserve.

Then Jesus comes along and says the kingdom of God is nothing like a ladder.

Do not misunderstand! Bible study, prayer, worship, commitment to the church, fellowship and service are essential for kingdom living – but not because they change God’s heart toward us (they do

not); rather, they are crucial because they change our hearts and minds toward God.

□ Please turn with me to Matthew 20:1-16.

- {Mt 20:1-2} The landowner is like a landowner with a bumper crop of grapes to harvest, so he goes to the marketplace early in the morning and hires a crew. These workers are determined to get what's coming to them, so they insist on a set wage: no less than one denarius, which is standard for a day in the field. Then they go to work.

- {Mt 20:3-7} The landowner wants more harvesters, so he goes out again at 9 a.m., at noon, at 3, and at five p.m. It is likely that he promises every new worker to pay them **“whatever is right”** (as he does in verse 4).

- {Mt 20:8} At 6:00 p.m. the owner has his foreman **“call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first.”**

- {Mt 20:9} Those who have worked only an hour step forward. They probably expect a single **pondion** (a coin worth **1/12<sup>th</sup> of a denarius**). That would be the **“right”** amount. Much to their surprise and delight, the foreman gives each man an entire denarius!

- {Mt 20:10} Now the other workers anticipate getting time-and-a-half, double-time, or more, proportional to the time and effort they have put in. But the landowner does not do “the fair thing.” Instead, he instructs his foreman to pay every laborer one denarius, regardless of how long they have toiled.

- {Mt 20:11-12} These workers do not go quietly. The Cotton Patch Version puts it like this in verse 12 ~ **“They raised a squawk... ‘These latecomers didn’t put in but one hour, and you’ve done the same by them as you**

**did by us who stood in the hot sun and the scorching wind.”**

- {Mt 20:13-15} The landowner replies, **“Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? .... I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”**

This, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of God is like! Let me share three points of interpretation that can clarify the application of this Scripture.

Point ❶ ~ the landowner represents God, and his vineyard is a word-picture of the kingdom of God.

The apostle Paul uses similar imagery when he writes, {1 Co 3:7, 9} **“neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. For we are God’s co-workers; you are God’s field...”**

❖ Hence, the invitation to work is a call to serve the kingdom of God however the Lord wants us to.

Point ❷ ~ the concept of equal pay for equal work was the cultural norm in the first century as it is now. If it were not, the laborers who started at 6 a.m. would not grumble about equal pay for unequal work.

❖ Why does the landowner give equal pay for unequal work? This question makes sense if (and only if) the denarius is a wage, only if the money is precisely calculated compensation for a specific job.

I believe the denarius *is* a wage for those who demand one. The first workers insist on a particular salary, and they set the amount. We know this

because v 2 says “**He agreed to pay them a denarius**” – not “they agreed to take a denarius.”

As for those who do not barter a set figure, I contend that, from the landowner’s point of view, the money is not a wage at all. This is why:

Point ⑤ ~ the landowner gives each worker one denarius. Not only is this the average daily wage, it is enough to provide for each family’s basic daily needs and a little more besides.

The workers who started work at 5 p.m. have earned only 1 pondion (1/12<sup>th</sup> of a denarius). Those who began at 3 o’clock have earned only 3 pondions, and so on. However, that will not be enough for them. If that is all they get, their families will starve.

❖ If the landowner gave what they deserved, it would be a wage; instead, he gives what they need. The owner {Snodgrass} “**gives them all same wage because without it those hired later would not have enough to live.**” Though they have done some work for him, the money is a gift.

The kingdom of God is not like a ladder. It is like what happens in this parable.

**Q:** What does this mean for us?

☼<sup>1</sup> God’s grace exceeds both our merit and sin.

*Def.* ~ God’s grace consists of infinite mercy (by which He withholds the penalty we deserve) and limitless kindness (by which He gives blessings we have not earned).

It is God’s good will toward unworthy people, demonstrated in the parable by his kindness to the latecomers.

God delights to flood our lives with his grace. Not just when we are morally decent, and not just when we do good things – all the time. God’s grace is a gift that we can never earn, never repay, and never out-sin.

☼<sup>2</sup> God’s grace is always better for us than God’s justice.

*Def.* ~ God’s justice is God’s perfect impartiality. It is the quality by which He gives us precisely what is coming to us.

Many prefer justice over grace. We clamor for fairness. We demand that the Almighty reward people according to their actions.

However, our sin is, without exception, worse than we think. I have never claimed a God besides the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; yet I struggle not to put myself ahead of him. I try to honor my parents; yet I have not always respected them. I have never committed adultery; yet I have lusted in my heart.

It is not good enough to be better than our fallen neighbors (they do not set the standard), or even our worst possible selves; if we insist on scaling a moral or spiritual ladder to God, we must be perfect. But all {Rom 3:23} “**have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” – and {Rom 6:23} “**the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**”

☼<sup>3</sup> God respects our freedom despite the cost.

When we approach God on the basis of his generosity He honors our decision, and gives us far

more blessing than we deserve – even though it cost Christ’s life on the cross to make it happen.

When we approach the Lord on the basis of our merit, He honors that decision, too – and gives us no less (but also no more) than we’ve got coming. He does so, even if it costs us everything.

✪<sup>4</sup> Having received God’s generosity ourselves, we are equipped and expected to share it with others.

We demonstrate God’s liberality with *material* generosity, by helping to meet our neighbors’ physical and financial needs. God blesses us with abundance for the purpose of extending and proving his goodness through us.

And we demonstrate God’s liberality with generosity of *spirit*, by liberally granting forgiveness to those who offend us, by being merciful to the undeserving, and by assuming the best about our neighbors rather than the worst. God blesses us with grace for the purpose of extending and proving his goodness through us.

Forget the ladder! The kingdom of God is like what happens in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.

Let us live in the generosity of our kind and merciful God.