

Envy, Evil Eyes, and The Scandal of Grace

Matthew 20:1-16

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

Or are you **envious** because I am generous?” *Matthew 20:15*

Have you ever heard of the *evil eye*? I associated it with obscure superstitions of no great consequence. Something, perhaps, a fortuneteller might cast your way. Much to my surprise, as I prepared to write this, I stumbled on an “evil eye” hidden in plain sight. The Greek words translated as “envious” in Matthew 20:15 are *ophthalmos poneros*. Literally, “eye evil.”

Why might “evil eye” show up in a parable of Jesus (and in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, per Matthew 6:23)? Judaism had a version (*ayin hara*) of this tradition. One of its chief triggers was envy. So, consider again this parable. “Are you *envious*” raises two possibilities of origin. Is it envy of the wage paid to those who worked less but got the same as you did? Or is it envy of the landowner’s generosity? The intriguing question becomes: which of those two would be worse? That depends on what you see the parable revealing about God’s coming sovereign realm.

If Jesus told this parable to describe the sovereignty of God’s reign in terms of justice – yikes! Injustice and unfairness are writ large in its inequitable treatment of laborers who toiled for 12 hours versus those who worked for one. I mean, who’d want to show up on time the next day? Neither corporate interests nor union organizers would dare envy such an unjust system.

But please note the parable’s opening that gives a clue as to its core focus: “for the kingdom of heaven is like a *landowner*.” This story of God’s sovereign realm and with it the very nature of God focuses on this character who is a landowner. Or better put, it focuses on the **character** of the landowner, which is not hidden at all but on full display at story’s end: generosity. Or to use a more theological word: grace. “Am I not allowed to do what I choose?” the landowner asks.

This is where the scandal of grace stands in sharp relief. Namely, God’s grace is out of our hands. God’s grace is in God’s hands. Now that is all well and good when we are its recipients. But what happens when God’s grace falls on those who only show up at the 11th hour, as in the parable? Or when God’s grace falls on those who . . . and you fill in the blank of “undeserving.”

*“Am I not allowed to do what I choose . . . Or are you **envious** because I am generous?”*

What say you?

For Reflection and Action:

How might one of the groups in this story told it from their viewpoint?

Why and for whom might the parable’s grace scandalize today; in church; in community?

When have you experienced grace in any of the ways it was in this story;

how has that shaped your trust in God?