

Scripture: Matthew 20:1–16

Title: The One Who Pays Generously / translated by Doyun Kwak

1.

The Mediterranean coast provides a great environment for growing grapes. Spain, France, Italy, and Palestine all border the Mediterranean, so vineyards are common throughout these regions. Some time ago, I was listening to the radio and heard a story about a group of travelers who went around visiting vineyards and olive farms in the Mediterranean region. They were sommeliers, food magazine writers, and food designers. They traveled together through the countryside of Spain, France, and Italy, visiting vineyards and olive farms and sharing meals with the people who lived there. They said that most of the farm owners were incredibly generous. Many of them offered the travelers food and a place to stay at no charge. They even brought out traditional foods that they had prepared and stored themselves and shared them with their guests from Korea. Some slaughtered sheep, rabbits, and chickens to prepare meals for their guests. The travelers were deeply moved by their hospitality. They even said that the jamón they had at a farm in Spain was the best pork they had ever tasted. As I listened, I thought, maybe people in the countryside are generous wherever you go. Perhaps when the farm is doing well and there is plenty to go around, people naturally become more generous too. After all, there is an old saying that generosity comes from a full barn. The owner of the vineyard in today's passage is also described as an exceptionally generous man. You would think that such a generous owner would have workers who were happy and grateful. And yet, among the day laborers he hires, there are some who are anything but happy. This parable Jesus tells about the kingdom of heaven places two very different hearts side by side: a generous vineyard owner and workers who are deeply unhappy with his generosity.

2.

The hills surrounding the Sea of Galilee have fertile soil and a Mediterranean climate, making them ideal for growing grapes and olives. Because of the Mediterranean climate, summers bring little rain and plenty of sunshine. There is also just enough wind, and the fall remains dry and cool. These conditions make the region especially well suited for growing grapes and olives. For that reason, wealthy landowners owned large vineyards throughout the region. When harvest season came, the grapes had to be harvested within a very short period of time, so vineyard owners needed many workers. That is the setting behind the parable Jesus tells us today. Early in the morning, the owner of the vineyard goes out to the marketplace. The Greek word for this marketplace is *agora*. The agora was a large open space in the center of a city or town. Markets were held there, and political speeches were given there. It was the center of the town's political and economic life. The vineyard owner goes to the agora and hires day laborers to work

for him. When he hires them, he promises to pay them a proper wage. In fact, “a fair wage” would be an accurate translation. He promises to pay them fairly for their work. But even after hiring workers early in the morning, for some reason the owner goes back to the agora at nine. There he finds people standing around with nothing to do. The owner sees their situation and feels sorry for them, so he invites them to come and work in his vineyard. Then he goes out again at noon, at three in the afternoon, and even at five. Each time, he finds people still standing around and brings them into his vineyard to work. The workday ends at six. So the workers hired at nine worked nine hours. Those hired at noon worked six hours. Those hired at three worked three hours. And those hired at five worked only one hour.

3.

But have you ever wondered why so many people were standing around in the marketplace with nothing to do? If we want to understand this parable more deeply, we need to ask that question. In Jesus’ time, many people in Galilee were tenant farmers. Most of the land was owned by a small number of wealthy landowners. Life for tenant farmers was extremely difficult. At the time, they had to give somewhere between 35 and 40 percent of their harvest to the landowner as rent. On top of that, they had to pay taxes to Rome as well as religious taxes. By the time everything had been paid, there was almost nothing left for them. And if there was a bad harvest and they could not make those payments, they could fall into servitude or be forced to survive as day laborers, like the workers we see in today’s passage. Some tried to make a living by fishing on the Sea of Galilee, but their lives were just as difficult. Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, collected all kinds of taxes from the people to finance massive city construction projects. Fishermen were taxed according to the size of their nets and boats, even before they had caught a single fish. And even when they did catch fish, they were forced to sell their catch at extremely low prices. The fish were then salted and sold overseas to bring in money from abroad. For the ordinary people of Galilee, life was incredibly difficult. Many of them were living right on the edge, struggling just to make it through each day. The day laborers standing around in the agora were poor people who had lost their own land. Most of these men were responsible for supporting their families. If they went home empty-handed, their entire family would go hungry that day. That was how desperate their situation was. But as they themselves say in the parable, no one had hired them. So they had no choice but to remain there, standing around and waiting for work.

4.

For workers, perhaps the happiest moments are when the workday is over and when they see their paycheck deposited into their bank account. I remember when I was younger and occasionally worked manual labor jobs. The happiest moment was always when I received my pay at the end of the day. As the sun begins to set and six o'clock arrives, the vineyard owner gathers the workers together to pay them. He begins with those who were hired last, the ones who came at five o'clock. Each of them receives one denarius, just as the owner had promised. One denarius was a full day's wage, so for someone who had worked only one hour, this was incredibly generous. When the workers who had arrived at nine in the morning saw that the five o'clock workers received one denarius, they must have started expecting more. If someone who worked only one hour received one denarius, they probably thought, "Then maybe we will get nine denarii." They must have thought they had gotten incredibly lucky. But contrary to their expectations, they also received one denarius. And they became very angry. Whatever gratitude they had felt toward the owner for giving them the opportunity to work disappeared. Now all they could think about was how unfairly and unjustly they were being treated. But let me ask you. If you had been one of the workers who started at nine o'clock, wouldn't you have felt the same way?

At this point, we need to remember that this is a parable about the kingdom of God. And this parable shows us that fairness in the kingdom of God is different from the kind of fairness we usually think about. To us, fairness means receiving according to how much we have worked. But in the kingdom of God, things do not work that way. God's way of counting is different from ours. We tend to think that people should be treated differently depending on how long they worked, how much work they did, and the quality of that work. In a capitalist society, we usually consider that fair. We even think that people in certain specialized professions should be paid differently, even if they work the same number of hours. But in this parable, the kingdom of God does not measure things by how long someone worked or how hard the work was. Instead, the owner responds to how desperate each person's situation is. Those who are more desperate are shown greater generosity. And perhaps that still does not make sense to us. There is a saying attributed to Rob Bell: "The essence of grace and mercy is that they are not fair." Were we chosen by God and saved because we deserved it? No. We were accepted because God forgave us and welcomed us. Our acceptance by God is grace, and it is a gift. It was not given to us because we deserved it or because we worked hard enough to earn it. And yet, this is where we often begin to feel uncomfortable. We become uncomfortable when it seems that the same grace and the same gift are being given to someone we think does not deserve them. "Does that person really deserve that kind of grace?" That was what lay underneath the anger of these workers. But what right do we have to become jealous or angry when people in desperate need receive the gift of grace?

5.

As I said at the beginning, this parable focuses on the contrast between a generous owner and workers who are unhappy with his generosity. The passage refers to those dissatisfied workers as the ones who were first, and those who came later as the ones who were last. Jesus ends the parable by saying that the last will be first, and the first will be last. So who are the first, and who are the last? Just before this parable, at the end of Matthew 19, we find a conversation between Peter and Jesus. Peter tells Jesus that he and the other disciples have left everything behind to follow him. Jesus tells them that there will be a fitting reward for them. And at the end of that conversation, Jesus says the same thing: "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." Just before Peter says this, Jesus has been speaking with the rich young man. In this context, the ones who are first are people like the rich young man, people who have lived comfortably in this world and have already received their reward. The ones who are last, on the other hand, are those who have become poor because of Jesus and who are suffering because of Jesus. Jesus comforts them by saying that in the kingdom of God, the first and the last will be reversed.

Are any of you struggling with the feeling, "Why am I always the one who comes in last?" Have you ever imagined how discouraged those workers must have felt when the owner finally noticed them at five o'clock and called them to work? By then, they must have been thinking, "I guess today is another lost day." Perhaps they were not as physically strong as the other workers. Maybe they were not the kind of workers who stood out. After all, they had been passed over all day at the labor market. And perhaps this was not the first time. Their sense of failure and discouragement may have been building for a long time. It may have seemed as though no one understood how desperate they were. So imagine how they must have felt when the owner of the vineyard finally called them and gave them work. And then imagine how deeply they must have been moved when, after working for only one hour, they received a full day's wage. The sense of inferiority and failure they had been carrying was washed away by the generosity of the owner. There may be people among us who have been struggling for a long time because of prayers that still seem unanswered. Some of you may have been discouraged for a long time because of financial difficulties or health problems. Some of you may be immigrants who are still struggling with unresolved immigration status. And some of you may be asking, "Why am I the one who has to go through this? Why does it always feel like I am the one left behind?" For anyone carrying that kind of heart today, I hope this passage brings you comfort. Our Lord is especially gracious toward those who are desperate. What you have done, how much you have accomplished, or what qualifications you have are not what matter most to him. He sees how desperate you are, and his mercy and love reach you there. Our Lord never turns away from those who feel as though they have been pushed to the very edge. Do not doubt the goodness and loving kindness of the Lord. Our Lord is generous. Someone I know

once told me about something that happened in his life. He had applied for permanent residency and was waiting for it to be approved. During that time, he lost his authorization to work and ended up being unable to work for more than six months. You can imagine how desperate he must have felt. Then one day, a Muslim professor came to see him. The professor said, "I heard you're having a hard time. Here, use this to help you get by," and handed him a check. Isn't that amazing? God can even move the hearts of people who do not believe as we do. Then on another occasion, a severe hailstorm hit the area, and cars throughout the neighborhood suffered hail damage. So many people had been affected that the insurance company issued checks based on the average amount of damage. He was able to save some money on the repairs, which left him with several thousand dollars for living expenses. That money helped him get through the next few months. It was as though heaven had opened and mercy had poured down. As I listened to his story, I thought of the owner of the vineyard. God truly is generous. He does not ignore the prayers of desperate people. He does not ignore the prayers of those who feel they have come in last. Isn't that true?

6. Caring for One Another

As I emphasized in last week's sermon, heaven is a place filled with things that are worthy of eternal life. Heaven is an eternal community overflowing with mercy and love. Why is that? Because our God, the Lord of the kingdom of heaven, is full of mercy and love. And so we need to live on this earth as citizens of heaven. We need to treat others with the same generous and gracious heart as our Father in heaven. We need to put into practice what Paul teaches us in Romans: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." Romans 12:15 In today's parable, the vineyard owner understood the hearts of those who were called at noon, at three, and at five. He saw the difficult situation they were in, felt compassion for them, and cared for them. He was someone who knew how to weep with those who weep. The workers who were called at nine, on the other hand, could not rejoice with those who had been called at five. They could not understand how desperate their neighbors were, and they could not rejoice with them over what they had received. There is a saying, "Comparison is a cancer, and worry is a poison." Comparison can work like a cancer in our hearts. When we forget how much mercy we ourselves have received and how graciously we ourselves have been chosen, and begin comparing ourselves with others, our lives become miserable. Think of the prophet Jonah in the Old Testament. When the people of Nineveh repented, Jonah became very upset. He sat under the blazing sun and protested against God. Then God provided a vine to give him shade, and Jonah seemed to feel better. But when God took the vine away, Jonah openly poured out his anger and hurt before God. Jonah looks very much like the workers in today's passage who were called first. Or perhaps what we see in them is something we can also find in ourselves: our own

narrow and ungenerous hearts. Rejoicing with those who rejoice is not easy. One thing we need to overcome as children of God is the tendency to be ungenerous toward others. When we are able to rejoice with our neighbors in their joy and grieve with them in their sorrow, little by little, we begin to live more like citizens of the kingdom of God. And through people like this, the kingdom of God gradually expands here on earth. So if any of you are struggling with a sense of failure because you feel as though you are always coming in last, do not lose heart. Our Lord knows your sighs, and he will not turn away from your desperation. And if we have received that kind of compassion ourselves, then we also need to look around us and see who has been left out and who is discouraged because they feel as though they have come in last. We need to notice them and care for them. That is how those who once felt like they were last should live after experiencing the generosity of the vineyard owner.

Small Group Discussion

1. Are you struggling with the feeling that you are always coming in last?

What are you wrestling with these days that is bringing you a sense of discouragement or failure? Share it with your small group.

2. The Lord calls us to rejoice with those who rejoice and grieve with those who grieve, because that is what life in the kingdom of heaven looks like.

Take some time to reflect on your life recently. Have there been times when you found it difficult to rejoice in someone else's joy, or when you noticed yourself becoming ungenerous toward others? Share those experiences with your group.