

## **“Is This Any Way to Run a Business?”**

**Matthew 20:1-16**

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My second job introduced me to a time clock. When I was sixteen, I went to work during the summer at a lumber company in my hometown. I clocked in at seven every morning and out at five each evening. I quickly discovered it was best not to arrive late or leave early. Time clocks do not cover for you.

The only time I was called into the boss' office and reprimanded was over a time clock issue. I was not late nor did I leave early, but I had a friend that asked me to punch his time card one morning because he was running late. I only did that once, trust me.

Time is a crucial part of the parable that is our text this morning. A landowner went to the marketplace at six o'clock one morning to hire workers to harvest grapes in his vineyard. After negotiating the day's wages, the landowner sent the workers to the vineyard.

At nine o'clock, the landowner returned to the marketplace and hired more workers. He did this again at noon, three and five o'clock.

At the end of the day, he instructed the steward to pay all the workers, beginning with those that were hired at five o'clock. To everyone's surprise, especially those that worked the longest, all the laborers were paid equally. When those that had worked the longest complained, the landowner asked if they were paid the negotiated wage. When they agreed, he scolded them for being upset with his generosity.

Can you imagine what an efficiency expert would say about this parable? Is this anyway to run a business? What would this do for company morale? How would this affect productivity and impact cash flow?

I can hear a consultant saying, “Jesus, you are a superb teacher and marvelous miracle worker, but you don't know a thing about running a business. Stick to preaching and healing and leave the business world alone.”

Was Jesus naive? Is this a parable about how to run a business? I don't think it is as much as it is a story about grace that uses a business analogy. Let me share with you the lessons about the Kingdom of God that this parable teaches me.

**Grace looks at people's needs and supplies them.** Why did the owner return to the marketplace throughout the day? Was he thinking about harvesting his grapes or the plight of the workers that were not fortunate enough to be hired for the day?

I do not deny that the time for harvesting grapes was brief and had to be completed before the rainy season, but I don't think this was his primary motivation. Look at the conversation he had at five o'clock with the unemployed workers.

“About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard’ ” Matthew 20:6-7.

What do you read into this dialogue? I hear the words of a landowner that knew how important work was for day laborers. Without work, these men had to go home with no food to feed their families before going to bed or after rising the next morning. I believe this broke his heart and moved him with compassion. He hired them, all of them, for one hour and paid them what they would need to provide for their families.

What a wonderful example of grace this is. Grace looks at people's needs and supplies them, throwing caution and sometimes common sense to the wind in order to do whatever is necessary to help them.

**Grace is extravagantly generous.** There is nothing stingy about it as this story reveals. The landowner paid all the workers the same wages, which was far more than expected or

required. Why? He knew all of them needed a full day's wage to feed their families. To him, that was all that mattered.

Dr. John Claypool says that the world is here out of profound generosity. "Nothing in Genesis implies that God created the world or us because something was missing in His life. Instead, out of His fullness He created and sustains what He created. He gives for the joy of giving and the enhancement of the recipients."

We are created in His image. So what does this mean? Among many things, it indicates that we are most like Him when we are giving and sharing with others. Compassion and generosity run deep in our veins.

**However, everyone is not generous nor appreciates those that are. This parable teaches us that grace upsets many people.** It certainly did that day.

When those that toiled all day saw that everyone received the same wages, what was their reaction? They grumbled and complained against the master.

"These men who were hired last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work in the heat of the day" Matthew 20:12. They had a point, didn't they?

What was the response of the owner? "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man 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? Are you envious because I am generous?" Matthew 20:13-15.

This parable is loaded with questions and I can think of several others. Why did the owner have his steward pay the late workers first? Wouldn't it have been smarter to pay those that worked all day first and send them on their way? Chances are they would not have known that everyone was paid equally. Did he want those that had worked all day to know what everyone made? It seems that way to me. But why?

Perhaps there were two reasons. He wanted to teach them a lesson about being compassionate and generous and probably did.

Could it be he also wanted to see their reaction? What could they have said that would have pleased him? Instead of grumbling about receiving the same wages as those that worked less, I think he would have been thrilled to hear them rejoice over the fact that everyone was going to be able to go home with food for his family. Everyone's needs were going to be met.

Many scholars believe that Jesus told this parable to answer the question Peter posed in the previous chapter, 19:27. "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Sounds like Peter was expecting a greater reward than those that had sacrificed less. That strikes home, doesn't it?

Do you recall the reaction of the brother of the Prodigal Son after he saw the gracious response of his father to his wayward brother? He was so angry over the rejoicing and celebrating that he even refused to go into the party and welcome his brother home. "All these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf!" Luke 15:29-30. Where's the grace in the older brother's words and actions? It's not there and how it must have disappointed his father and brother.

I noticed it early in my ministry. Pure grace makes most people angry. That is, unless they are the recipients!

The more I study this parable, the more I believe it is about grace. It is about seeing beyond me to others. It is about being sensitive to needs, not eager for rewards. It is about being generous, not selfish. It is about rejoicing when others are helped, not complaining because they deserved less. It is about being like God in whose image we have been created. It is about finding abundant and eternal life. It's pretty important, isn't it?

