

# Are You Envious Because I Am Generous?

## The Parable of the Vineyard Workers

Matthew 20:1-16   Jonah 3:10-4:11  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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September 23, 2017

Today's Old Testament Reading, from the Book of Jonah, and our Gospel Reading from Matthew, the Parable of the Vineyard Workers, both present scenarios where people are envious because God is generous to those they think are underserving. If we're honest with ourselves, more often than not we are too. Let's explore why that is often the case. And I want to begin with a thorough look at our Old Testament reading from the Book of Jonah.

**How well do you know the entire story of Jonah?** Most of us, since childhood, remember the part about Jonah running away from God, getting swallowed by a huge fish (the Bible never said it was a whale), and staying there for 3 days before being regurgitated up on a beach. Less familiar is the specific mission that God calls Jonah to in the first place.

God commands Jonah, who is Jewish and from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, to go to the very large and notoriously 'wicked' Gentile city of Nineveh, the capital of the ancient Assyrian Empire in Upper Mesopotamia. By the way, the ruins of this ancient city located along the banks of the Tigris River, are near the modern-day city of Mosul, in northern Iraq. Jonah is to tell the Ninevites to repent and turn to God, otherwise the city will be destroyed. Jonah delivers this message, and much to his surprise the Ninevites do repent from their evil ways and turn to God. God, therefore, spares the city from destruction.

Even less familiar to most of us is what happens next in the story. Instead of being pleased that he is successful in his mission and that the city isn't destroyed, Jonah becomes angry. That's quite odd, because according to the story he delivered probably the shortest and most effective sermon in history. With the economy of just eight words, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be destroyed," a city with a population estimated to be around 120,000 turned from their evil ways. Oh, that sermons today were that effective...and that short!

Instead of celebrating Jonah complains to God, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." What an interesting and problematic response. After God questions whether Jonah has the right to be angry, Jonah heads out of the city and waits to see what would become of it. God continues to be gracious to Jonah, even after his little self-absorbed whiny tantrum, and appoints a plant to grow to provide him shade, saving him from his discomfort. Jonah is very happy about the plant. But in a bit of a twist

that will lead to the lesson that God wishes to teach Jonah, the next morning a worm is appointed by God to attack and kill the bush. When the sun beats down on Jonah he becomes faint and again cries out, "It is better for me to die than to live." God again questions whether it is right for Jonah to be angry, this time about the plant. Jonah replies, "Yes, angry enough to die." (Many of us at this point would just as soon let him have his wish. But not God.)

God questions Jonah's concern for the plant – which Jonah did not grow himself – and then God turns this around and asks why God shouldn't be concerned about the people of Nineveh, whom we are told did not know their right hand from their left. That's where **the story abruptly ends. It's open-ended and we are left hanging, not knowing**

**Jonah's response or his next move.** This effective literary technique, also common in the telling of a parable, which most modern biblical scholars believe this story or Jonah to be, leaves us to question for ourselves what we would do if we were in Jonah's shoes.

Would you or I continue to be angry that God has the right to be gracious, forgiving and merciful to whom God chooses – even to people we despise or think are undeserving – or will we come to see the radical impartiality and grace that God extends to all people? Here's where we are often like Jonah. **We want God to extend that graciousness to us but not to those whom we judge as undeserving.** We cry foul, and get upset that God doesn't play by the rules of fairness. Doesn't justice, especially from a judicial standpoint, demand that people get what they deserve? (That's basically the case made in the Book of Deuteronomy.) And if that's punishment, then so be it.

I would venture to guess that basically all people, including and especially children, have a very good intuitive sense of what is fair and what is not, of knowing the rules and when we or someone else breaks them or cheats. **All in all, a strong sense of fairness is a wonderful gift to possess, which many of us continue to nurture into a sense of social justice, especially as it relates to issues of equality and human rights.**

It is out of this same violated sense of fairness that we should also be offended by today's **Parable of the Vineyard Workers.** Jesus presents a radical reversal of cultural understandings as it relates to what we think is an issue of equitable worker compensation. Does not our own Protestant work ethic also demand that those who work the longest hours in the same job should get paid the most? Upon further investigation, however, **this parable is not addressing the issue of "equal pay for the equal amount of work." Nor, as it has been misinterpreted, is it a case of people being idle by choice, but rather by circumstance.** Instead, the parable displays a very common theme in the Gospel of Matthew concerning the realm of God, "the first shall be last and last shall be first" – a reversal of fortunes.

The workers who were hired at 5 p.m. and labored for only 1 hour receive an entire day's wage, one denarius – the amount of money needed daily to simply survive. The landowner was seen by these folks as extremely generous. But when it came time to pay the workers who had labored since 6 a.m., the entire 12 hours, they too were given just one denarius. Naturally they complain. But let's put ourselves in their shoes. Even though they previously agreed to work the entire day for one denarius, is it wrong to anticipate and expect getting a bonus or a little extra than the persons who worked for only one hour? Isn't this, at least on some level, unfair? What about the work ethic, the merit system, the principle of justice?

This is when we learn that in the realm of God, God's economy doesn't run on the same set of standards as the world's. **We learn the grace of God is not based on the merit system, where we get what we earn. If it did, then it wouldn't be grace.** But at some level, we must admit that offends us. **We wonder if grace does not undermine the whole reason**

**for being good in the first place**, of observing standards, of keeping rules, of living justly and with good ethics. **Shouldn't our reward be greater for being better people?** This is often taught by those who adhere to what is known as the prosperity gospel. In other words, don't all these stars in our crown count for something?

Note that the offensive character of grace also affects the relationships between those who work all day and the laborers who came late. We find a parallel to this in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son, where the obedient older son is angry and envious of the Father's welcome upon the return of the rebellious younger son. Likewise, the first workers become envious of the generosity shown the others. To which the landowner states, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (v. 15). **Again, like Jonah, these grumblers are not really against grace; they're simply against equal grace shown to others who they feel haven't worked hard or long enough to earn it.**

We learn a valuable lesson here about divine grace. **Grace is the great equalizer that strips away our presumed privilege and entitlement in the eyes of God, who** puts all recipients on an even playing field. That's hard to stomach when we have burdened ourselves with a merit system, wanting to see some extra reward, bonus or blessing for all our labors and hard work. We don't like it when God is gracious to those we deem undeserving. For many of us that includes those who are racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobia or anti-Semitic. Some of us might also include those who display bigoted characteristics of nationalism and fundamentalism. And yet others might add those who came to this country without proper documentation, or their children who didn't necessarily come by choice. The grace of God no longer seems so sweet and sentimental, or so amazing.

**This parable leads most of us to relate primarily with those all-day workers – those who claim seniority, privilege or entitlement, and feel a bit cheated. However, and here's the real twist, what if all of us were to see ourselves not as the all-day laborers, but as the eleventh-hour workers, those who came at the very end of the day? In that case, we are the ones who receive much more than what seems fair. God's apparently 'unfair' graciousness is then seen for what it truly is: God gracious generosity to all.** We also learn, then, that a position of **humility** is essential to recognizing God's generous grace.

In the realm or kin-dom of God, which I define (in part) as the way we are to live and be in relationship with all creation in the here and now, **the merit system is tossed out. There are no stars for our crown! We serve God and others not for reward, recognition or prestige, but out of a grateful response to God's love and goodness to us. By definition, grace isn't about fairness or our worthiness, but solely about God's loving kindness.**

So if and when you and I become envious because others also receive God's gracious generosity, take a step back and redirect that response to one of **gratitude**. After all, that undeserved, generous and radical grace of God has been extended to each of us – to you and me.

Reflect this week upon how God has been gracious and generous to you. Reflect upon how *all* people are beloved by God! I wonder if Jonah or those all-day workers ever came to understand this.

Amen.

Resources:

*Feasting on the Gospels*

Jill Duffield, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 9-18-17