

Is God generous to a fault?

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[0 : 00] Well, please do have your Bibles open, and we're going to read together from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 19, verse 27, through to 20, verse 19.

And you'll find that on page 825 of the Visitor's Bibles. That's page 825. So beginning with chapter 19, verse 27.

Then Peter said in reply, See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have? Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, in the new world, when a son of man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

[1 : 06] But many who are first will be last, and the last first. For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace.

And to them he said, You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right, I will give you. So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour, and the ninth hour, he did the same.

And about the eleventh hour, he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, Why do you stand here idle all day? They said to him, Because no one has hired us.

He said to them, You go into the vineyard too. And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last up to the first.

[2 : 15] And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more.

But each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it, they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day in the scorching heat.

But he replied to one of them, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go.

I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?

So the last will be first, and the first last. And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and a son of man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and it will condemn him to death, and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.

[3 : 33] And he will be raised on the third day. Well, please do have Matthew 19 open in front of you.

We sometimes misunderstand how things work in God's kingdom because we project what happens in our world onto it. We live in a world that, generally speaking, is motivated by reward. You are rewarded in proportion to what you do or how well you perform. For example, a student will study hard in order to get good exam results at the end of the year.

Or a child will behave well in order to get another star on their star chart. Our world is programmed to drive and support this work-for-reward mentality.

And therefore, we find it so incredibly difficult to work with the right motivations as part of God's kingdom now. Because God's kingdom doesn't work on the same principles as the world around us.

[4 : 45] We become people motivated by reward rather than grace. And that can lead to a whole host of problems in the church. So if we want to avoid those problems, which we'll look at as we

study this parable together, then we need to reorientate our thinking to align with Jesus' teaching in this parable.

Now, before we begin, just a word to say that this parable has been massively misunderstood over the years. In fact, just this week, a student jokingly described it as the communist parable to me. Needless to say, Jesus is not concerned with promoting communism. Rather, he's teaching us about what kingdom lives should look like and what is to motivate them.

And that is made clear by the surrounding context. Jesus is clearly warning against having a certain attitude that he perceives is present in Peter. So let's look at the context.

The rich young man has just refused to give up on this life to gain the next. And that really shocks his disciples. So they ask in verse 25 of chapter 19, who then can be saved?

[6 : 05] For they expected this impressive looking man to get into God's kingdom. And Jesus responds, verse 26, With man, it is impossible to enter his kingdom.

But with God, it is possible. In other words, entrance to God's kingdom is not based on human performance or privilege, but purely at God's discretion.

No one is deserving of admittance, but God is overwhelmingly gracious and opens up his kingdom to some nonetheless. But Peter seems to completely overlook the wonder of what Jesus has just said to him.

And instead of being thankful to be welcomed into God's kingdom by his grace, he fixes his eyes on the prospect of reward. But unlike the rich young man, Peter had given everything up.

He had chosen the world to come over this one. And he wanted to make sure that he would be rewarded for that. Verse 27. Peter says, See, we have left everything and followed you.

[7 : 18] Subtext, what the rich man has failed to do, we have done. What then will we have? Now surprisingly, Jesus doesn't tear into Peter for overlooking the grace that he has shown to him, but rather reassures Peter that he won't be disappointed or shortchanged in the world to come.

Verse 29. Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my namesake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

In fact, Peter and the other disciples will have a particular responsibility in the new world to come too. Verse 28. They will sit on twelve thrones judging the tribes of Israel.

The world to come will hugely outweigh what Peter has lost in this life for the sake of God's kingdom. But as well as reassuring Peter that he won't be shortchanged, Jesus also warns him about the unhealthy attitude that seems to be harbouring in him.

Entitlement to reward rather than joy of just being part of Jesus' kingdom. Verse 30 is the shot across the bows. But many who are first shall be last and the last shall be first.

[8 : 46] Don't be obsessed with being first, Peter. Don't be obsessed with reward. You must be motivated to serve out of thankfulness for my grace rather than the prospect of personal reward.

God, that is of this world motivation and not fitting for someone who belongs to the next. So the purpose of this parable is to correct this reward-driven attitude that utterly overlooks God's grace that was beginning to rear its ugly head in Peter and if we're not careful, we'll rear its ugly head in our church too and in our lives.

So keeping that in mind, let's delve into the parable. Our first point for this evening is God's generosity is far more than we expect or deserve.

Looking at verses one to nine. If we're to combat this unhealthy attitude, we first need to recognize how wonderfully gracious God has been to us.

The parable depicts what I would imagine was a common site in Israel around harvest time. A master of a house has plenty of work to do in his vineyard so goes out early in the morning to hire laborers, verse one.

[10 : 06] And he agrees with them a daily wage of one denarius for their work, a very generous sum for unskilled labor back then. The master wasn't scrimping and trying to get the best deal out the laborers.

He doesn't pay their minimal wage. He shows himself to be extremely generous right from the off. And the same is true of our God, who the master represents in this parable.

And then verse three, the master sees others standing in the marketplace looking for work at the third hour, and he decides to employ them too, and then subsequently does the same thing again and again at the sixth, the ninth, and the eleventh hour.

Each time he goes to the marketplace, he meets people who are standing idly because nobody else has hired them. They strike a deal, they'll work for the master with the promise of a fair wage at the end of the day, verse four.

Now, there is no information in the parable stating why the master of the house kept going back. It could be that there's just plenty of work to do. He could have underestimated the workload, but that isn't important.

[11 : 23] And if God is the one depicted by the master of the house, it would seem foolish to me to draw parallels and read too much into it. God doesn't have to reassess his plans. He never underestimates a task.

He's God. He does everything absolutely perfectly, doesn't he? So we have to be careful not to get distracted by the backstory of the master's psychology. But based on the rest of this parable and the context, my best guess as to why he goes back to employ more workers is simply that he's incredibly generous.

He sees people without work and is moved by compassion to give them work. For in that culture, you couldn't go on the dole.

There weren't social safety nets to stop people from becoming destitute and starving. If you didn't work, you didn't get paid and he couldn't provide for you or your family.

Those waiting around at the eleventh hour couldn't contribute a great deal to the owner's endeavours in such a short frame of time, could they? They would only be able to work for one hour maximum before sunset.

[12 : 36] But the master kindly takes them onto his books anyway. He is incredibly generous and gives abundantly from his massive resources. But the peak of the master's generosity really comes in verses eight and nine.

And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last up to the first.

And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Those who offered very little in terms of work or performance are given exactly what was promised to those who had worked the whole day three.

The master of the house had said in verse four, you go into the vineyard too and whatever is right I will give you. Now I should imagine that the workers who started later on in the day were thus expecting to be paid a percentage of a denarius depending on how long they had worked.

For that is what would seem fair. That is really what they deserve according to this world economy, isn't it? But this vineyard owner is somewhat eccentric.

[13 : 53] He doesn't act as we would if we were in charge. He isn't out to get the best deal for himself but rather driven to give his best to others.

He's by nature a giver and gives abundantly to those who can't offer him anything in return. And so it is with our God.

He doesn't lack anything that he needs to get his money worth out of us. He is the one who is overflowing with abundance and we in comparison have very little if not anything to offer him. If it weren't for his kindness towards us we'd be left in the marketplace without anything, without work, facing destitution. He is a God who loves to give of himself.

And we see the extent of God's generosity in chapter 20 verses 17 to 19.

[14 : 54] Our God is a God who would even send his own son into the world to be mocked, flogged, and crucified for the sake of sinners. He will go to the greatest lengths imaginable to grace undeserving people with the right to become part of his kingdom.

And nobody, no matter how little they bring to the table, will go without. Like Jesus said to his disciples in verse 29, everyone who heeds his call will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life, far more than we expect and far more than we deserve.

God. And is this not the God then that we need to proclaim to the world around us? The world about us thinks him to be a stingy God. But as John Piper writes, he's a hedonist at heart.

He longs to bring people joy and dignity. He's driven by giving blessings to others at great cost to himself. It may sound a bit trite comparing the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords to a kindly relative.

But God is far more like that relative of yours who seems generous to a fault, who constantly is wanting to give you more and more and more at a cost to themselves than he is like Ebenezer

Scrooge rationing out the coal.

[16:19] He's a sacrificial giver. Perhaps our friends and our family will be willing to hear more about that kind of God rather than the false God that we sometimes depict to them who seems bent on sapping us of all life like some kind of spiritual parasite.

That is not the God we worship. He is far more generous than we expect or deserve. Well our second point for today.

God's generosity is outrageous and completely counter-cultural looking at verses 10 to 12. All this talk about God's abundant grace displays to us.

Well it's great isn't it? But it can make us squirm a bit. In fact it made the labourers who had worked the whole day through absolutely furious.

Verse 10 Now when those hired first came they thought they would receive more but each of them also received a denarius and on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house saying these last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day in the scorching heat.

[17:40] The labourers who worked the whole day go from excited and expectant to fury in no time. They see the generosity being displayed to those who they deemed undeserving and thus expect that they are going to receive an even greater reward.

They're already thinking about picking up steak from the market on the way home rather than the green salad they're so used to but then their hopes come crashing down in an instant. It just seems so unfair.

Why is it that somebody else gets exactly the same as me though they contributed so little in comparison? This kind of behaviour from the eccentric vineyard owner seems unjust, does it not? It seems like God is generous to a fault but that's perhaps because we are so unfamiliar with grace. Grace is scandalous to us and that's because we so rarely see it in our world. It is utterly countercultural. the closest I think we get to it is our birth dates.

[18:55] When you think about it, it's very odd and very kind that people would give us presents at a great cost to themselves for something that we contributed very little towards, your own birth.

But even then, I was chatting to a friend of mine this week and he's told me that his brother only gets him presents because he expects a present in return. And I'm sure we all know people like that.

Most displays of kindness seem to have strings attached to them in this life. Even philanthropists often ask to get something out of their generosity, maybe a plaque being erected so that people know just how generous they have been.

You sometimes see that in old churches too, don't you? This pew was kindly donated by Mrs. McTavish. That plaque may have been put up without Mrs.

McTavish knowing, but sometimes people in church, like everybody else in church, know exactly how much they contribute, don't they? Because they enjoy the recognition. I'm certainly prone to think that way.

[20:05] We're not used to people being generous without expecting anything in return. But aren't we glad that is how God's kingdom works? But otherwise, there is no way any of us here would get in.

Without God's kind discretion, his outrageous grace, we would be left destitute like the workers would have been if the master hadn't hired them. And yes, from our perspective, we can see some people seem more deserving of reward than others.

Some seem to be absolute saints dedicating their lives to the advance of the gospel, whereas some seem to get in by the skin of their teeth at the eleventh hour. But in God's economy, all are hired and all get the full day's wages.

Nobody is left with regrets in God's kingdom. And thus, I think we should marvel at God's grace towards us rather than grasping at reward for ourselves.

In the new world that Jesus talks about in chapter 19, verse 28, we certainly won't be caught up with this kind of worldly behaviour that we are now, but we will be fully redeemed, have fully redeemed bodies and minds.

[21:20] We will long to serve God out of thankful hearts, rather than out of personal gain. We'll be motivated by God's grace that he's displayed to us in Christ, dying for us, rather than out of personal reward.

In fact, I'd wager that what we picture reward to be like in the new world is totally false. It won't look like having people honouring you, giving you a foot rub as you sit back in your impressive throne. Neither will it look like material blessings that you've missed out on now. I think it will look like us serving. But isn't that what thrills the most godly people you know?

The chance to serve God and his people because God has shown such kindness to them. So surely in our fully redeemed ourselves, that will be the thing that we long for, will it not?

And if that's the case, then let's try to bring that future thinking into the here and now. Wouldn't church be so much more enjoyable and so much more welcoming for the outsider if people didn't scratch and fight trying to get more privileges than the person sitting next to them and striving to be seen?

[22 : 36] I imagine all of us here can recognize that we are all prone to grasping for honor or reward for ourselves in some shape or form, even if we do it covertly.

We can make church a place where we demand our rights based on our past performance and loyalty and discredit people who don't match up. Grace can easily fly out of the picture in a church. But if we behave like that, we've really missed the point of this parable. And we're displaying behaviors that are more akin to the world around us rather than God's church.

Rather than focusing on what rewards we feel we deserve, let's be people who marvel at God's outrageous grace that has been shown to us.

For without it, both those we deem less deserving and those we deem more deserving are all without hope and left in the marketplace destitute.

[23 : 41] That leads us on to our final point. God's generosity is often overlooked by those who feel entitled to it. Verses 13 to 16.

The master of the house is more than happy to deal with the laborer's complaints against him. Verse 13. The master replies, Friends, I am doing you no wrong.

Did you not agree with me for denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to the last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

Or do you begrudge my generosity? The master has done no wrong. Although it may seem unjust to us from our perspective in our reward-driven world, not to give the laborers who work longer and harder more, the master has done no wrong at all.

He has kept the contract, he has paid exactly what he promised to the laborer who worked the whole day through, bearing the scorching heat, and that was a princely sum. The laborer may feel entitled to more because he perceives that he's more deserving than others, but he isn't.

[25 : 02] People tend to receive God's scandalous grace themselves with no problem at all, I find, just like you would gratefully receive a bonus at work or a freebie of any kind.

But when it's offered to others, we feel that takes the shine of what we have received ourselves. God's grace is not like any other commodity in this world.

It doesn't depreciate in value the wider it is circulated. God's grace is priceless, however many people receive it. I remember when I was a young boy, and I used to collect Premier League sticker albums.

One day, I got a shiny in a pack of stickers that nobody else in school had. Suddenly, everybody wanted to trade all that they had for it, and young Andrew Ritson became the centre and focus of the playground trading ring.

I loved it. Everyone was coming to me with absurd offers for this one little card that I had. Well, you can imagine how miffed I was the following week when two of my friends, not just one, two of my friends got the same sticker in packs of cards that they had bought.

[26 : 25] mine no longer felt quite so special. And I was looking for the next rare sticker so that I could be in the better position again, so I could be at the heart of things again, so people could be coming to me with their deals.

God's grace is not like that sticker. It never depreciates in value depending on who has it or how many people have it.

We can end up thinking that way about it if we're not careful. We're so obsessed with standing out, having more than the person next to us, and we can often overlook the staggering gift that we ourselves have received.

Like the early workers forgetting the generous wage the master has given them. We do the same. And that's something at this point in Matthew's gospel that the disciples still haven't understood

about God's grace.

And we know that because this grasping behavior lingers after Jesus teaches this parable. James and John weakly approach Jesus in verse 20, quite pathetically shielded by their mother, not content with the facts they had been graciously made a part of God's kingdom when they were utterly undeserving.

[27 : 43] They asked Jesus to be just that little bit higher up than everyone else. They completely overlooked a master's rebuke to the unthankful laborers who grasped for more than what is owed them in verses 13 and 14.

And we are constantly in the danger of doing the same. The world constantly indoctrinates us to strive for more than others and to be motivated by reward.

We can't allow that worldly thinking to take root in our church. If we want to avoid becoming puffed up, entitled, and thankless Christians, we must dwell on what we have in Christ and what we would be without him.

That's where the workers who started the day went wrong, isn't it? if they thought about where they would be without the master's kindness, impoverished, still waiting in the square, hungry families at home, they would have served him with real joy, wouldn't they?

If that was their mindset, then the heat of the day and the arduous work that they endured would have been eclipsed by their sense of thankfulness just to have work at all, to be brought into the vineyard. And therefore, they would have been overjoyed that other people facing destitution just like them were also given a wage, food in their bellies, rather than despising them.

[29 : 13] Likewise, we have nothing without our master's kindness to us. He has opened up his kingdom to us and bid us welcome. He has given us dignity and purpose and saved us from ultimate destitution.

hell. If we focus on that truth rather than what we perceive we have done for his kingdom, then we will serve him with joy rather than in search for further reward.

After all, all the things we do manage to do for his kingdom all come as a gift from him ultimately, don't they? I couldn't stand up here and preach to you this evening if God hadn't gifted me with a mouth that worked or people who have invested in me and mentored me.

Likewise, the person who gives generously to the church financially could not do so unless the Lord had been very kind to them financially. We contribute absolutely nothing to God's kingdom and the work in it.

Everything we do, from the big to the small, is a result of God's abounding grace to us. Only when we recognize that can we rejoice when someone else who we think isn't as equipped as us starts leading Bible studies alongside us.

[30 : 40] Only then will we rejoice when other people are greatly appreciated in church like we are, though we perceive them to be less worthy of that praise.

Only then will we rejoice when somebody does the same thing as us in church, but far better than we normally would. Jesus would have us be a church that isn't constantly looking over our shoulders, constantly ranking the people sat next to us to see who's the most deserving, who's the least deserving.

Jesus would have us be a church who recognizes that none of us are deserving of his amazing grace and that all we have is a gracious gift from him, even the breath in our lungs.

Jesus would have us be a church that serves our master with joy and thankfulness rather than with a sense of entitlement. So let's be a church who follows Jesus' lead, who came to serve and not be served.