

Generosity At Its Best

I preach this morning in the name of God, the Father, the + Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So today is the 16th Sunday after Pentecost and we continue in our celebration of the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit in our lives. And this God, in and through the work of His Spirit, is constantly leading, constantly drawing us, and constantly leading us to grow in our relationship with Jesus.

Now we're in a stewardship month called "Open My Eyes, Lord." During the entire month of September, we are praying that God would open our eyes to see Him, to view that everything in our lives - from the very breath that we breathe to our very lives themselves - all of it is a gift from God to us.

Now, today I want to talk to you about what it looks like to live a life in the kingdom of God. Life in the kingdom of God is generosity at its best where you *don't* get what you *do* deserve and you *do* get what you *don't* deserve. Now, on the contrary, life in the kingdom of this world operates very differently - it's an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Life in the kingdom of this world is "you get what you deserve coming" and you will not do anything else until you receive it. That's life in the kingdom of this world, but life in the kingdom of God is life that experiences the goodness and the generosity of our Creator.

I once heard a story of a little boy whose name was Jimmy. Little Jimmy went to Sunday morning worship with his mother one day and it came to the time in the service to give his tithes and his offerings back to the Lord, and he did not want to give up his money. That was his allowance money! He worked for it, he earned it, he cleaned his room, he got it and it was his. He didn't want to let it go.

So his mother said, "Jimmy, you don't want the money. Just trust me, you don't want the money. Put it in the offering plate - it's tainted." He said, "What? What

do you mean my money is tainted?" She said, "Don't argue with me, just put it in the offering plate." And so Jimmy put his money reluctantly in the offering plate. Once the ushers passed by, he looked back to his mother and said, "Mom, what do you mean my money is tainted? Is it dirty or something?" She said, "No, no, no, Jimmy, your money is not dirty. It just *tain't* yours, it *tain't* mine, it's all God's."

Life in the kingdom of God is generosity at its best where you *don't* get what you *do* deserve and what you *do* get is what you *don't* deserve - Matthew, chapter 20, verse 1, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 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.'"

Our lesson this morning is a parable and, as a reminder, a parable is a lesson with a point. Jesus tells us this parable by using an illustration, for he begins in verse 1, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them each a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard." 6:00 am: risers come and they come to get work. He hires them and they all agree that they will get a denarius, which is plenty of money - more than enough money for a day's worth of work, not only for yourself, but for your entire family. 9:00 am: he goes back out again, sees others in the marketplace and he notices that they're idle. And he says, "You also go and work in my kingdom." But this time he doesn't say what he's going to pay them, he says, "I will pay you whatever is right." Now we have a dynamic of trust in the relationship for those who are hired at 9:00 am and noon and 3:00 pm and so on.

The first group agreed to work for a denarius and that was the amount of money that one should have been paid for the day's work. He comes back at noon and finds still others standing around, but this time he asks them a question, verse 6, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" And their response? Verse 7, "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered."

It wasn't these men who were being held responsible for a lack of responsibility to earn their wages. They weren't lazy. They weren't trying to use the government to get for themselves what they wanted. No, they simply found themselves stuck in the oppression from the Romans. In this time, in Jesus' social gathering, he was finding in the marketplace and on the street corners small farmers whose land was taken away from them because of the incurment of the taxes that they owed the Romans. They incurred taxes that they could not pay and, in that day, the social standing was that you would lose your farmland. They're not lazy; it's not that they don't know how to work. It's simply that the oppression has held them down to where they're looking for work. And so he finds these people, he calls these people.

And you see, that's the beauty of our parable - when God calls, God calls. It doesn't matter if it comes at 6:00 am in the morning, doesn't matter if it comes at 9:00 am or noon or 3:00 pm or 5:00 pm or one hour before sunset - when God calls, God calls. God's call comes at different times in our lives, but it's never too late to respond to His call. The landowner finds workers who are willing to work and he searches for hearts that are completely his.

This happened for me when I was 22 years old, 2004, when I was leaving the University of North Texas, coming back home to Lancaster, Ohio, to live with my brother. And in this season of my life, I was burned out. I did not want to do anything with music. And at that time, in that season, music was my god, it was my idol. I made it what I wanted it to be for me and I made it my god. Music was what I did, but unfortunately I had to learn the hard lesson in my life that

everything that God had given to me, even the ability to play percussion and drums, was not for my own glory, but only for the glory of God. He gave it to me not so that I can build my own kingdom, but rather so that I could utilize the gift to serve others.

I didn't understand that and I would not have understood that unless God had to strip it out of my life completely and that's what happened. At one time, I was practicing 8-10 hours a day. At this time of my life, I didn't want to touch an instrument again. And I was lost, but the Lord taught me a lesson. He's a jealous God and he will share his glory with no other.

It doesn't matter when God calls, what matters is how you respond, verse 8, "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'"

When God calls, God calls. For some, it comes early in the morning - you have been baptized as an infant; you have been catechized and confirmed in the church; you have known no other way of life than ministry in the church, of bringing your family into the church. You have been called early in the morning and you continue your discipling days living out your faith in Jesus and to your vocational call that God has led you. But for others, it came at 9:00 am, later in life, or maybe noon or 3:00 pm or maybe 5:00 pm, one hour before sunset. And you look back and you say, "How is God so gracious in that person's life? I have done all of this. Look at all the good things that I have done, Lord!" And what happens in our life is we start to take the shovel of God's mercy for our own

life: "Lord, we need your mercy. Oh, Jesus, I have messed it up again. Lord, cover me today, forgive me of my sins."

I take a big shovel for myself, I'm scooping up God's mercy, but when it comes to the neighbor, we'll take a spoonful, a little teaspoon, a little bit of mercy there. "Lord, you don't understand how that person hurt me" - just a little bit of mercy there. "They need to get back what they have coming. You don't know how they treated my family. You don't know how they spoke to my husband or my wife. You don't know what they did to me" - a little bit of mercy there.

[Switching perspectives] "Oh, but Lord, in my life, I need your mercy. Lord, I'm going to get this shovel out. Lord, I need your mercy. I'm shoveling the mercies of God. Lord, I've messed it up. I'm a sinner. Jesus, I need you, forgive me of my sin. Lord, be merciful to me."

[Switching perspectives] Someone sins against you - put the shovel away. "A little bit for you because you still have some things coming. You've offended me, you get the teaspoon of God's mercy, just a little bit."

[Switching perspectives] "Oh, but Lord, I'm back to you again in confession. Lord, I'm here on Sunday morning, I'm at church. I'm doing what I've always done. Lord, I've been faithful to you, I'm even serving in the Children's Area. Lord, I'm being faithful. Lord, I need your mercy."

You get the point? It's easy to receive, it's harder to give. But you see, one of the truths that we're learning in our lesson this morning is that God's kingdom breaks into your life so that God's grace may break out into someone else's.

The whole reason that God is generous to you is not so that you can hold it for yourself, but so that when you come to that person face-to-face who has harmed you, who has offended you, who has spoken ill against you, instead of taking the little teaspoon of God's mercy, you can say, "I know you don't

deserve it, but God has been merciful to me, God has been good to me." This is the only proper response: "I'm going to take the shovel and even though you don't come to me and tell me you have hurt me, I'm going to dump the shovel of God's mercy upon your life because I'm experiencing the goodness of God. I'm experiencing the God who called me from the darkness; I'm experiencing the goodness of God who, at one point in my life I was dead, but now, by the glorious nature of His love, has made me alive again. And you don't have to come to me, my shovel's already out and I'm shoveling God's mercy, God's goodness, God's benevolent heart." God's kingdom breaks into your heart today, so that it can break out. Pick up the shovel and say, "God is good, he's merciful!"

But some get downright angry, verse 11, "When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'"

"This isn't fair! Lord, we've done all this for you and this is what we get? This isn't fair." Well, you know what? The kingdom of God isn't fair and you don't want it to be. Because if it were, none of us would be here this morning. None of us, but here we are. We're alive, God is good, he's merciful. No matter when God calls, for some of you God the Holy Spirit is calling even now to a deeper place of faith, a deeper place of trust in Jesus, a deeper place of realizing that God has been merciful to you. He has been a good Father to you. He has not left you. He hasn't forsaken you. Even in your darkness, even in your pain, even in your discouragement, even in your depression, even in your alcoholism, God hasn't left you. He's been good to you. He's with you, He is for you. And today He says, "You are my child. I am the benevolent Creator who has created all of the earth for the glory and praise and the renown of Jesus' name."

So the question is today, how will you steward what God has given to you, even the very merciful presence of Jesus? Will you shovel it out for yourself and

teaspoon it to others? Or will you say, "Lord, I don't deserve anything, but I'm alive. I don't deserve to be here, but I am. I don't deserve the wife that God has blessed me to receive, but He's given me her. I don't receive these things because I've earned them. Lord, I don't earn anything."

And the response from God is, "I want to." Verse 14, "I want to give to the man who was hired last the same as I gave to you." Here's the truth, don't miss this today. The same God who was generous to the first group of people who were hired is the same God who is generous even now to you. He doesn't have to, He wants to. And He says to you today, "I want to bless you. I want to pour out my Holy Spirit upon you. I want you to thrive. I want you to be a recipient of my mercy."

And when you experience that, the goodness of God, the generosity of God, the love of God, you will understand "the first will be last and the last will be first."

Amen