

Sermon Series: Set Free
Sermon Title: Generosity
Matthew 20:1-16

by David Hockett
October 22, 2017

The great Reformation scholar Heiko Oberman recalls an occasion when he was visiting churches in China. He was with a group in Nanjing and on a Sunday morning they visited various churches throughout the city.

One of their group, an older Chinese woman, from Los Angeles, chose to visit a church across the river from Nanjing. It was a poor church composed of farmers. Those who were present for the service wanted to hear a word from their sister from the states, so Mrs. Chang brought greetings from her church in Los Angeles. She told how the Lord had added many new people to their church and how they were currently building a large new addition to accommodate the growth. Then after she offered a prayer of blessing for her new friends in Nanjing and she took her seat.

At the close of the worship time, Mrs. Chang was called back to the front of the gathering. The pastor said her words about the growth her church was experiencing had thrilled their hearts. And they wanted her to have the morning offering to help with the new building in Los Angeles. And so, they presented Mrs. Chang with about \$140. Their overflowing joy and gratitude at what God had done for them and was doing in a place far away welled up in generosity and they gave beyond their ability.¹

I was once reminded in a sermon by Dr. Peter Storey that what we believe about the nature of God is critical to how we live and how our life together looks as God's people. If we believe God is demanding and is a God of wrath and judgment then our lives will look a certain way. And we'll treat others accordingly. If we believe God is distant, unmoved by day to day life in the world, only intervening from time to time, we'll express that in a very different way of life. But what if we really take seriously the belief that in Jesus, in his life, and teaching, in his death and resurrection, we see God, encounter God, and through Jesus we are set free to mirror the God in whose image we are made? How might our lives look then?

"Today's story starts during harvest season in first century Palestine. It seems that a vineyard owner discovered that he needs additional workers to harvest his crop. And so, early one morning before the workday began, he made his way to the town square where people, day laborers, would gather. Now these were individuals who didn't have regular work. They didn't

¹ Heiko A. Oberman, "Begging To Give," *The Christian Century* (6-14-03).

own property. They were dependent every morning on somebody giving them employment. So, let's say for the sake of clarity that there were 25 day laborers gathered in the town square before dawn. The vineyard owner went and arbitrarily picked out five laborers, gave them the address of his vineyard and said, "Go, put in a 12 hour day and I will pay you a denarius," a living, daily wage. And so, these favored five set on their way with joy in their hearts. What they had gotten up in the morning hoping for had become theirs and they considered themselves blessed. But, of course, twenty workers remain.

Well, as the story unfolds at 9:00 a.m., three hours later, a quarter of the way into the day's work, the vineyard owner came back to the square, found 20 day laborers still waiting and selected five more. He said, "I will pay you what is appropriate at the end of the day." He came back at 12:00 noon, and at 3:00 in the afternoon and did the same thing. He even returned at 5:00 o'clock, says Jesus, one hour before quitting time, and there to his amazement he still found five day laborers, hoping against hope that somebody would hire them. "Why are you still here?" he asked. And so, likely they reminded him that they could not make work happen. Somebody had to need them and to hire them and so he said, "Well, you also go to my vineyard. I'll pay you what is appropriate."

And so, what this means is that all 25 of those day laborers had gotten at least a portion of what each had gotten up in the morning hoping for. Nobody was going to have to go home empty handed. Nobody was going to have to go home and see their family go to bed hungry.

And then comes the end of the day at 6:00 p.m. and everybody lines up to be paid. It is at this point that the story takes a surprising turn and Jesus really gets everyone's attention. It turns out those who had only worked a single hour came to be paid first and to their amazement they were given a whole denarius, in other words, they were paid a full day's wage. When those hired at 3:00 p.m., 12 noon and 9:00 o'clock came, they too were given a whole denarius - a whole day's wage for a partial day's work. All of them were given more than they had dared hope for. And then, bringing up the rear, came the favored five, those who had been selected first, and they too were paid a denarius, a day's wage.

Well you can imagine what happened. When they saw what they had gotten in comparison to what everybody else had been paid, it was on. They demanded to see the owner of the vineyard, and when he came out they said, "You have not been fair. We have worked all day long, 12 long hours, and some of these people have only worked an hour and you have paid us all exactly the same. We demand to be treated fairly." And with that the owner responds, "Look I have done nothing unjust. You and I agreed before 6:00 a.m. this morning that I would pay you a denarius and I have lived up to my end of the bargain. You were paid a full day's wage. Am I not free to do with what I have as I want or are you envious because I am generous?" "Am I not free to do

with what I have as I choose, or, are you envious because I am generous?" Remember, what we believe about God shapes how we live and here we are confronted by the scandal of grace.

Can you imagine the sense of injustice they must have felt – those who had worked 12 long hours? But you see this story is not a story about fairness. It's rather a glimpse into the heart of an extravagantly generous God and a Kingdom defined by grace and not merit. "Am I not free to do with what I have as I choose, or are you envious because I am generous?"

Jesus "...uses this simple story to introduce a new kingdom, one that is radically different from the kingdom of this world. And it poses a question that gives us pause: Is not God free? (Matt. 20:15). Theoretically, since we are not the workers who feel slighted we might agree that God's move here is more than fair -- God gives us all the same thing, not what we deserve, or what we've worked for. God is being merciful, not fair, and this is what mercy looks like. God is truly love, and wills that all may be saved. But how does God's freedom work then? God's freedom is part of the hidden nature, or mystery, of God -- something that we don't hear much about today. We've domesticated God down to the point of genial predictability, a power that wouldn't do anything a nice person like me wouldn't do."(Grindal) But God is quantitatively and qualitatively not like us. Remember I said, how we live, the kind of Church we will be, the kind of disciple we will be, is shaped in large part by what we believe about God. We see the world in terms of justice, of fairness, or at least how we want to define justice and fairness, which usually means that it's defined in a manner that benefits us. And so, we operate in the world like those laborers who had worked all day long, who came early and stayed late, who were the most productive, the most diligent. Like them we believe that we are entitled to more, our lives merit our fair share, all the while forgetting that the fact that we were hired at all was not something we earned but was itself a gift of generosity, a gift of grace.

John Claypool argues that, "There is a vast difference between looking at life in terms of fairness and looking at life through the lens of kingdom generosity. It might be well to go back to the very beginning of creation and ask the question, "How did any of us come to be here in the first place?"²

Paul Tillich said he was launched on his religious journey when somebody said to him in his teenage years, "Why something, Paul, and not nothing?" In other words, why did creation ever get called out of nothing and into being? Why are we even here? Why am I breathing? Have I somehow merited this? Scripture gives a very specific answer to that question. Creation is a gift, a result of the overflow and abundance of love that comes from God. "God created not to get something for God's self but to give something of God's self.

² John Claypool, *Life Isn't Fair. Thank God.* 2000.

In other words, bottomless generosity is the source out of which all creation comes, and because of generosity, the truth is none of us, if we look deeply into our lives, can claim that we have earned this existence of ours by our own efforts. Much less have we earned the gift and freedom of salvation. Each one of us was given life and relationship with God as a gift. If we look honestly enough, life itself is windfall, it is coming into the possession of something that is not ours by deserving, but something that has been given to us. If we will stay in touch with that primal grace, that prevenient grace that marks the beginning of all of our lives, then the truth is we have reasons to be grateful no matter what our particular circumstances.³ We have reasons to be grateful, and therefore generous, whether we have been working long in the vineyard or have only recently been invited, we have reason to be grateful and generous because all of life is a gift rooted in the freedom of grace.

“Am I not free...or are you envious because I am generous?” What we believe about God will shape how we live. I think Jesus is trying to remind us that God is God and we are not. That this is God’s vineyard, and we don’t get to control or manipulate God for our own benefit or agenda. God does not play favorites, none of us has earned or can earn God’s love and grace. Life and salvation are a gift because God is abundantly generous and not because we are deserving. And if we can just allow the truth that life is a gift, a windfall, to penetrate our hearts and minds, then we are free to be generous with our lives exactly as God has been generous with God’s life. The problem is so many of us live as if we are deserving of who we are and what we have and therefore we are not free. We remain captive to the things, the position, the titles, that we believe secure our identity and our worth. All the while we miss the freedom of laboring in the Lord’s vineyard.

I recall the day she came and sat down in my office. The Sunday before she had asked if she could drop by, that there was something she needed to tell me. I knew she and her family had been struggling. Her husband had lost his job. There was a serious illness in the family. Life had become very hard for them. They were on the edge of losing it all. With tears in her eyes she handed me an envelope and asked me to open it. Inside there was about \$40 dollars. She proceeded to explain how they were struggling to meet their financial obligations and that the \$40 represented their weekly tithe based on her very limited income. There was a time, she explained, when they were able to give much more and support the ministries of the church in a larger way. But with the illness and loss of employment they were no longer able to give at the same level and she was concerned that I might think they were no longer committed. She described the goodness and faithfulness of God and their gratitude for the gift of their lives, and their children, even in the midst of really hard circumstances and she wanted me to know that they would continue to give that \$40 each and every week and when they could, they would catch up on their tithe by giving even more. The freedom to be generous.

³ Ibid.

It's all grace – every breath, every heartbeat, every sunrise, every invitation to the vineyard – it is all grace. What if this truth were to truly shape how we live?

This morning's parable reminds us that one of the ways we live into the freedom that Christ gives is by mirroring God's extravagant generosity. And so, I want to invite you to experience that freedom in a greater measure by joining me in entering into covenant with God around how you will practice generosity in the coming year. There are blue cards in your bulletin. I want to invite you to fill it out, bring it forward, and place it in one of the baskets here near the stage, kneel in prayer if you like. This is not a contract. This is a moment of prayer and renewal between you and God in which we have the opportunity to say, "God this offering of my financial gifts is an expression of my gratitude to you and my overwhelming desire to be free and to live generously."

And so, remembering and giving thanks for all the ways God has generously welcomed and sustained us, whether we arrived early to the vineyard or late, I invite you to come and offer to God your prayers, your service, your gifts, your heart and life for the coming year. Come and experience that perfect freedom that is ours when we give our lives away to Christ our Lord.