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Introduction

As we read through today's parable, it's easy to imagine the scene taking place on the streets of a developing country, where workers rise early in the morning to seek employment. Their very livelihood and often the care of their family is dependent upon the decisions of others. Those of us more accustomed to Western culture may find it harder to immediately associate the story with our own cultural experiences. Are there comparisons that could be made to your culture that would provide a new window to explore the experience of the workers in this story? Personally as I read the text I reflect upon the experience of those within my own community who find themselves on state benefits, dependent on money from the government to be able to live their lives. The protestations of the workers who have been there from the early morning, echo the almost daily stories I hear calling for less money and support to be given to those in need. The strong rhetoric of what is 'deserved' or 'earned' or 'fair' seems to mirror the calls of the early workers in the vineyard.

Try to think of your own example (or feel free to use mine) as you are reading through the text to provide a new lens with which to read the story.

Text

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.

He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

"About nine in the morning 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 noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing.

About five in the afternoon 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.'

"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 five in the afternoon 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 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.'

"But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?

Take your pay and go. I want to give the one 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? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Comment

What do we think we deserve? Are there things in life that we feel we have earned? What would happen if those were taken away? Or others had lucked upon achieving what you had worked so hard for. How often do we find ourselves frustrated by those who seem able to turn up achieve what the rest of us have worked so hard to attain?

This story follows directly on from the end of Matthew 19, where Jesus has declared that in his kingdom 'many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first'. Building on this theme, we come to the story of the labourers in the vineyard comes forwards.

This week we are going to look a little more at those workers employed towards the end of the day. Jesus's story would have made sense within the context of what was happening in Israel during the first century. In order to be able to pay their taxes to the Romans, many workers were being forced to give up their lands and become day

labourers like those in this story. These workers were therefore dependent upon the wealthy landowners for employment. You have to wonder how it must have felt for those who had watched group after group of workers be picked up from the marketplace, as they were continually deemed unsuitable or undesirable. By the time he takes his final trip to the market, the landowner is out looking for those who everyone else has tried to ignore. Their joy at being chosen at all at this late stage in the day would have certainly been something, but then to be paid the same as those more desirable workers chosen at the start of the day, that would have been almost unfathomable. In different stages and circumstances in our lives, we have probably all found ourselves in the position of both the labourers who are struggling to accept what seems unfair, and those who have been surprised by undeserved grace and generosity. In this story once again the scandalous nature of the kingdom of God turns our understanding of what is fair and just on its head.

There are many lenses through which this text can be read, and Jesus himself offered no explanation to the parable. Building on previous explorations of the vision of the kingdom of God as described by Jesus, this passage challenges us to look at how our own communities contrast and at times challenge the vision that is being put forward.

A couple of years ago I was doing a session with a group of young people from fairly affluent backgrounds in the United States, the group was primarily white and mostly privately educated. In order to look at the situation faced by various people across the United States, each person was given a persona to take on, and most of them were asked to imagine themselves in the position of someone from a different position in terms of religion, gender, sexuality, immigration status, physical ability and so on. A range of questions were then asked and after each question people were given the opportunity to take a step forward if they felt their character could avail of various opportunities, or to move backwards if circumstances in life blocked them from such options. Those with the great opportunities (or privileges) in the lives of their characters were quite some distance ahead from those right at the back. As the conversation flowed afterwards, some of the young people felt incredibly challenged by their experience, but for others they couldn't break out of the idea that anyone could be up there at the front had they just tried hard enough. For me there was a deep lesson that came out of this group, the challenge that we all face in recognizing our own positions of privilege, be it in a local or a global context. The reality is that we all exist within structures that rank us and try to give us wealth or position accordingly. For me the challenge of this text is how we recognise and sit with that challenge.

It can seem very unfair this idea of a God who levels the playing field, where reward is not based upon how long you've worked or the hard work that you've put in. But there's also something incredibly beautiful in this story, of a God who gives according to need not performance, recognizing the need of all the labourers was in fact the same.

There's an interesting lesson coming out of this story when you reflect back to the end of Matthew Chapter 19. Jesus has laid out that his Kingdom doesn't follow the rules that we are accustomed to, the wealthy and those with positions of power and prestige are not necessarily of the upmost importance in his Kingdom. Whereas those who are not currently viewed with such importance or prestige may in fact be at the fore in this new Kingdom. It would be understandable to expect that the disciples may have heard this as a vindication of their personal sacrifice, and that the disciples themselves may be the favoured few in this new kingdom. This story appears to continue on from the previous teaching as a challenge to any preconception that the disciples may have had, that their position in this new Kingdom may equate to positions of wealth and privilege within it. Or that because they had journeyed with Jesus from the beginning that they were necessarily of greater importance than those who would follow. In this passage Jesus seems to continually challenge our understanding of our place and our desire to earn position; it's no longer about doing, but about receiving. The pressures off!

This passage presents some pretty huge questions that can be a deep challenge to us, how do we respond to situations that feel unfair? How do we recognise our own privilege and our own starting point? How difficult is it to relate to the ideas of the kingdom of God when they are so vastly different from what we experience in our daily lives? Are there ways in which we can bring some of that kingdom into the ways in which we live with others? How would our lives look different if we demonstrated the the grace shown by the landowner in this passage differ from how we now live? How can we engage with those who haven't made the same decisions or had the same starting point as us.

Response

This week's big challenge sounds like a simple one, show undeserved grace to someone you come across this week. It may not end up being as simple as you think, but try to live out the call of this passage in the week ahead, and seek to meet the needs of someone, whether they deserve it or not. Perhaps you could volunteer at the local homeless shelter, or reflecting back to my example you could become involved with groups that work with those searching for employment.

Also take some time to reflect on the questions that come out of the reading this week?

- How can we recognise our own privilege?
- How can we meet with those who haven't had the start starting point or opportunities as our own?
- How can we show the grace that is the marker of the kingdom in this passage?

Prayer

Oh Father of the upside-down kingdom
Who sees us beyond the worth and value of others
Teach us to recognise our own positions of privilege and power, to know that there is no favoured few or select group,
As we seek to demonstrate your grace to all whom we come across, may we commit to living out YOUR kingdom values, even when they conflict with what we see around us
For your grace and mercy bring transformation
Amen
