

Theme: GOD GIVES GENEROUSLY

- I. He generously takes the initiative bringing us into his kingdom (vv. 1-7)
- II. He generously makes the last first (vv. 8,9,16a)
- III. He generously corrects and rewards the first who become last (vv. 10-15,16b)

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” (James 1:5, NIV).

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³ “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵ So they went.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ 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?’

⁷ “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

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.’

⁹ “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² ‘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.’

¹³ “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

¹⁶ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (NIV 2011)

Laborers for the Lord,

“A businessman needed millions of dollars to clinch an important deal, so he went to church to pray for money. He knelt next to a man who was praying for \$100 to pay an urgent debt. The businessman took out his wallet and pressed \$100 into the other man’s hand. Overjoyed, the man got up and left the church. The businessman then closed his eyes and prayed, “And now, Lord, that I have your undivided attention....”¹

¹ Joke taken from <https://free-funny-jokes.com/funny-business-jokes/>. Access date 9/27/2020

Although it's a joke, what should the businessman expect from God? Sometimes we ask what we get for living God's way like we ask about everything else. What will I get for working from 9 to 5? What will I get for doing that training? What will I get for my college tuition? What's in it for me? God doesn't work that way. GOD GIVES GENEROUSLY.

Peter just heard salvation comes only from God, so he wanted to know what was in it for him. **"We have left everything to follow you!"** He gave everything! Couldn't God at least recognize that? We may be tempted to think Peter foolish since he already had heaven. What else could he want? But Jesus promised Peter and all God's people rewards. GOD GIVES GENEROUSLY. *But* many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. Jesus taught this parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, to explain.

Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven, the way God works, to a certain landowner. He seeks out workers for his vineyard at market early. The landowner negotiates wages with his workers. Both parties agree on a denarius or roughly one day's wage. To make math simple, we'll use \$10 an hour. Their working day was sunup to sundown, so for simple math we'll use 12 hours. At that rate, these men will make \$120. Considering their other option is standing there hoping someone might hire them for a similar sum, they take the good deal.

But the landowner begins to behave...strangely. He *probably* knew at the beginning of the day how much work he needed done. For some reason he goes back at 9 am and hires more workers. This time he promises to give them **"whatever is right."** No amount; just a promise. He does it again at noon. And at three! Had he hired these men early, he could have had them the whole day. Maybe he could have hired fewer workers, too. What he does next is almost absurd. At five pm, roughly an hour before quitting time, he hires even more workers for no other reason than no one had hired them yet! No business asks its employees to report to work at 4:30 on a day they close at 5. And in all likelihood, no one hired them for a reason.

If you're not convinced something's off about this landowner, he instructs his foreman to pay the ones hired last *first*. **"The last will be first."** The guys hired at 5 o'clock worked little. Everybody else hired was more qualified to grab their paycheck first. But his instructions state, **"beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first."** **"The last will be first, and the first will be last."** The ones hired last get a denarius. Again, for simple comparison, that's like working an hour and getting paid \$120. Then the ones hired at 3, noon, 9.

Did you catch it? The ones hired first get paid last. **The first shall be last.** Like a movie director, Jesus sets up a specific scene. The workers get the same denarius they agreed to hours earlier. It's fair; they agreed to it. But try putting yourself in their shoes. You got up early in the morning, pushed and shoved to find work. You worked your tail off in the heat of the day with the sun burning overhead. You did more than your fair share. At the end of the day, you got paid the same \$120 the guy who started the same shift 11 hours later got! How is it fair that he got paid \$120 an hour, while you made a measly \$10 for the *exact same job*. See why they expected more? It's insulting.

They grumble and complain because it isn't not fair. Labor laws agree. And at least they are honest enough to voice their complaint so the landowner can hear them.

The landowner addresses one of the complainers. He calls him, "friend." Probably a lot of us would choose a slightly-less-kind word to address a whiner who moments before told us why everything we did that day was wrong. "Friend." A gentle rebuke, drawing him in. **"I am not being unfair to you, friend."** They agreed on a denarius.

"Take your pay and go." The man literally says, "Take what is yours and go." He admits the money the man worked for, the denarius, rightly belongs to him after a hard day's work. They agreed. So why did he give so much to the others? Not as an insult to this man. **"I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have a right to do what I want with"** what is mine? The

grumbling workers forgot this business had two sides. They thought in terms of what they were owed for their work. But their boss also agreed to the deal. He had no contractual obligation to give them more. Instead, the vineyard owner identifies the real issue: “**Are you envious because I am generous?**” Why was this man willing to give so much to those who worked so little? And what gave the workers hired first such a sense of entitlement to more than they agreed on? That’s the way the world works, but not God.

Jesus explains the parable: “**The last will be first, and the first will be last.**” So what? What’s in it for me? Why listen to a single word left in this sermon? The answer to all those questions: GOD GIVES GENEROUSLY.

The landowner shows the way God works. From the outset the landowner goes to people without work. He offers an honest and honest pay. He takes the initiative. They didn’t seek him out. He found them. He called them. Our generous God works that way, too. He found us before we knew we should look for him. He called us to work as members of his kingdom. He went out regardless of the time of day or season of our lives, whether we were a few hours old or we had crossed 100 years. He generously came to find us. He gave us his undeserved love. And he still wanted to give more.

Maybe we see the landowner’s generosity most clearly in the way he made the last first. They worked very little, but at the end of the day got the same pay. Similarly, GOD GIVES GENEROUSLY to those considered unimportant by most. God doesn’t play favorites. He lifts up those who humble themselves. Those who were called to work last undoubtedly understood just how generous this man was. In the family of believers, those who have strayed and wandered and become acutely aware of just how sinful they are see themselves last. But not God. God makes them first.

It’s a lot harder to see how GOD GIVES GENEROUSLY by making the first last. They worked the hardest! They kept the ship afloat when the others abandoned it. They kept the church doors open and running. They worked hard for God! Couldn’t God give them a little extra for their efforts? Review the facts. The first laborers worked in the same vineyard as the rest. The landowner gave the first workers the same denarius. He still rewarded their labor. He still gave generously. And he lovingly corrected a bad attitude. **The last will be first, and he first will be last.**

If you try to work tit-for-tat with God, you’re barking up the wrong tree. The world operates on that basis; God does not. In the world, you get what you work for. In the kingdom of God, GOD GIVES GENEROUSLY. He sought you first. He made you his child. If that isn’t enough, he gives you more. You didn’t earn your place in his family. So why do we compare ourselves to our fellow believers and think we are more or less deserving of God’s generosity than another? If you have been a member of this church from day one and you or your family helped build it, praise God! He generously allowed you to do important work for his kingdom. If you still aren’t convinced you belong in God’s family because you haven’t done him any good, praise God! He GIVES GENEROUSLY.

You and I could never work our way into God’s kingdom. But God found us and GAVE GENEROUSLY. He gave us Jesus. All God’s people come into his kingdom the same way. God’s family is not a meritocracy where the most deserving get in and the undeserving are left out. *None of us*, not a single one, *deserved* God’s generosity. We were all helpless beggars standing out in the cold, starving freezing, dying. In love God found us. He sent Son Jesus to earn a reward for us. Jesus made himself last, so God put you first. Jesus made God the top priority. He did all the hard work. He bore the burden of the cross and the heat of God’s wrath. He didn’t complain he deserved better. He never once sinned. He deserved all the good we get. Jesus went uncomplaining forth, like a lamb to the slaughter. Because he wanted to give generously to you. Because he wanted to give you his denarius, his wealth. He wants you in his heaven. He wants you in his family. He wants to be generous to you. So he gave it all—life, suffering, death—his gift to you.

That’s how God brought you into his kingdom. God keeps you in his kingdom through the same gracious generosity that joins you to Jesus. Through the proclamation of Jesus crucified for you. You

don't get brownie points with God for spending ten hours a week working at church or reading your Bible 30 minutes a day, for winning 100 new souls for Christ or financing a new church program. Jesus is the only way we get to God.

Pastor, it sounds like you're saying the work we do for God doesn't matter! That's not true. In the parable, all the workers worked for God. The work is its own reward, but GOD also GIVES GENEROUSLY. You can never give God anything that he won't pay you back—in this life and the next. God will suffer to have an outstanding debt with absolutely no one. He owes you nothing; he gives you everything. Isn't that why working for God is so important? We don't clean church because it lets us sin a couple extra times. That would be playing with fire. We clean church because it glorifies God and shows the world our priorities. We don't tell friends about Jesus to hear God bragging about what good little children we are. We tell friends about Jesus because the same God who has been generous to us wants to be generous to them, too. We don't love our neighbor because it will earn God's love. We love our neighbor because God already loves us more! We don't give to the poor or give offerings to the church because God will make us rich. We give because God has given us the riches of heaven in Christ.

So what do you get for following God? Nothing. And everything. GOD GAVE GENEROUSLY to you in Jesus. When we understand how generous he is, giving to people who deserve nothing from him, then we understand what Jesus means. **“The last will be first, and the first will be last.”** GOD GIVES GENEROUSLY to first and last alike. If we think God owes us something, we show we understand very little how generous God is. When we understand how generous God has been, we humble ourselves, consider ourselves last, and finally find true JOY: Jesus first, then others. Yourself last. And God, who GIVES GENEROUSLY, will make you first. Amen.

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:16, NIV).