

The Good and Beautiful God: God is Generous

May 22, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 20:1-15

20:1 *"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^[a] 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?'

Author James Bryan Smith recalls an interesting phenomenon when he was a junior in college. Word had spread about a "fire and brimstone" preacher who was gathering quite an audience. Students were gathering by the hundreds to hear her – not because they were moved by her messages but so they could mock her. At precisely 10:50 every

weekday morning she would stand up on a park bench in the middle of the campus and start her rebuke of the crowd. She was referred to as “the little lady prophet.” She was a short, plain-looking woman in an old-fashioned off-white dress—looking as if she had just emerged from an 1890s photo. She would strut up to the bench, stood up on it, turned her back to the crowd, presumably to offer up a prayer, and then turned around and let the students have a piece of her mind. She would give them an accounting of all the sins they were committing and then shout the phrase, building in crescendo, “...and you are all going to be thrown into...” and then all the students would chorus in, “...THE LAKE OF FIRE!” Unhindered by the jeers of the crowd, the little old lady prophet would provide another list of the students sins, which then would also end with, “and you are all going to be thrown into (cue the chorus) THE LAKE OF FIRE!”

James Bryan Smith said he watched in wonder as this surreal drama unfolded. He wrote:

As a Christian I believe that every single sin she named is a sin. Contrary to the other students around me, who cavalierly mocked her and her message, I knew that part of what she was saying was true. The little prophet lady had a clear narrative: God is mad at you because of your sin, and your sin is going to cause you to burn forever in hell. But she never mentioned God’s love. There was no reference to God’s grace. Jesus’ name was never uttered the entire half-hour. She spoke against sin, but only in regard to the punishment it incurs, not the damage it causes to one’s soul. In addition to an incomplete narrative, she added nothing that might help a person change, other than guilt and fear, which are not effective, lasting motivations.¹

What the little lady prophet was doing was part of a common false narrative about God. The false narrative goes something like this: “Love and forgiveness are commodities that are exchanged for performance. God’s love, acceptance and forgiveness must be merited by right living. What God most wants is for us not to sin and instead to do good. This narrative is rooted, as all false narratives are, in a half-truth. True, God does not want us to sin, and God does want us to do well. But that is only because sin harms us, and acts of goodness are healing both to us and to the recipients of our goodness.”²

Many people carry a false narrative like that with them because they have been conditioned to do so. Perhaps their parents conditioned them that way, making them believe that they could gain parental approval only by not doing the wrong thing and only doing the right thing. Our culture conditions us that way. When so many people we meet every day treat us on the basis of how we look, act and perform, it is difficult not to project that onto God. We might reason out that the all-seeing, all-knowing God is

¹ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, pp. 75-77.

² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

aware of every bad thing we have ever thought or done. And from that false narrative, we would also reason that God has every reason to withhold his love based on our actions (or inactions, as the case may be). People who live out of that false narrative have a very negative view of God, who only begrudgingly offers His love and care, and only to those who work hard to deserve it.

Perhaps that is why the parable that Jesus told about the generous landowner hits us as so unfair and unreasonable.

A parable of generosity. This is a story Jesus' hearers would have been familiar with. There was a lot of unemployment in Jesus' day, perhaps as many as eighteen thousand men out of work in and around Jerusalem. Each day men would go to the fields looking for work. If they failed to get hired, they went to the marketplace and chatted with one another, hoping to still get a chance to work.

In Jesus' parable a vineyard owner hires a group of men early in the morning, around 6 a.m. These early workers agreed to work for a standard day's wages. Seeing there is much work to be done and not enough time to do it, the owner hires another group, who start around 9 a.m. He does the same at noon, 3 p.m. and finally at 5 p.m. At the end of the day the owner pays the workers. Some have worked twelve or thirteen hours, others have worked for only five or six, and the very last group has only labored for one or two hours. Here comes the shocking part: they are all paid the same amount of money—a standard day's wage! This is stunning and seems highly unfair, so those who worked all day begin to complain. The owner replies, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?" The owner concludes with another cutting question: "Are you envious because I am generous?"³

"*Webster's New American Dictionary* defines *generous* as 'free in giving or sharing, abundant, ample, bountiful.' ...Generosity then flows from either a sense of abundance or a feeling of compassion. God is moved by both. God is generous because he lives in a condition of abundance—his provision can never be exhausted—and God is moved by compassion because he sees our need."⁴

"Our God...is constantly generous. Everything we have is a gift. We were made without any effort on our part. We breathe undeserved air. The sun gratuitously rises and warms our planet and, along with the unmerited rain, nourishes the land, yielding delicious fruits and grains. It is all...the unearned provision of a lavish and loving God. We have never been and never will be in a place where we can turn to God and say, 'You owe me.

³ Ibid., pp. 82-83.

⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

I deserve this.' We do not deserve anything we have been given. We have earned nothing. Yet God continues to give. That is because God is not interested in what we can do for God. God is interested in something much more important than our good works."⁵

What is that God wants from us? God wants our love, our unforced, freely given, and fully devoted love. God wants you to know him and to love him.

Kathleen Norris tells a simple story of discovering God in the face of a child. She writes:

One morning...I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking he would respond with absolute delight. It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven. And as I watched that baby play with any adult who would allow it, I felt ...awestruck... because I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he made and called good, along with the rest of creation... I suspect that only God, and well-loved infants, can see this way.⁶

Can you imagine a God who looks at you with delight, no matter if you are young or old, whether or not you like your looks, no matter how you are feeling at any given time? 1 John 4:10-11 reads, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another."

"What we think about God—what we think God is like—will determine the relationship we have with God. If we think of God as harsh and demanding, we will probably cower in fear and keep our distance from God. If we think of God as a vague and impersonal force in the universe, we will probably have a vague and impersonal relationship with this god. That's why it's crucial that we have the right thoughts about God. It will determine everything we do. If we have low or false views of God, we are actually committing a form of idolatry, worshipping a false god."

If on the other hand, the more we get to know the real God, the more we will fall in love with Him. Our God is a good and beautiful God, loving and trustworthy, self-sacrificial and forgiving, powerful and caring, and out for our good. Our God is a generous God.

⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 86-87.

Ibid., pp. 88-89.