

A generous boss: Matthew 20:1-16

Can't the landowner see how unfair this is?

by [In-Yong Lee](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

One of my friends once complained about the “unfairness” of her parents-in-law. Her husband was a first son who was competent in his work and conscientious in his care of his old parents. The point of discontent had to do with the parents’ favoring of the younger son, who was lazy and irresponsible, and who did nothing to deserve the extra favor bestowed on him. When my friend and her husband gave anything valuable to the parents, it inevitably ended up in the other son’s hands. While I was listening to my friend, I realized something that she did not understand. This was the parents’ way of loving. It was not that they loved the first less; they were proud of the son who took good care of himself. But they were concerned about the one who didn’t, and so gave him extra attention.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard presents us with a similar situation. The set-up is strange. We don’t know, for example, why the landowner goes out to the marketplace five times a day, including just one hour before the pay time. We don’t know why he brings in all the workers he can find, and doesn’t stop to choose those who seem healthier or more motivated. And he does this work himself, when he could send his manager. There is more confusion at the end of the day, when he gives the same wage to every worker, regardless of whether a worker began at six in the morning, at noon, or even at five in the afternoon. What’s he doing? Can’t he see how unfair this is? What kind of landowner is he?

It turns out that he knows exactly what he’s doing when he tells the manager to give the workers their pay “beginning with the last and then going to the first.” He could have eased the situation by paying the workers in the order in which they’d arrived: those hired first would have left the vineyard with what they’d received and not been upset by what happened next. But this is a central point in the story. The first-comers are made to see the last ones receive one denarius. Why? What are the first workers supposed to acknowledge and the rest of us understand?

Despite the grumbling of discontented workers, the landowner is sure that he is not doing them any wrong. The seemingly harsh words on his lips—“Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”—overlap in our minds with the words of a biblical father who’s confronted with his older son. Refusing to join in the celebration for his younger brother, who’s come back after “devouring the father’s property with prostitutes,” the elder brother complains: “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command” (Luke 15:29). And the father, who has never given him even a goat, orders that the fatted calf be killed for that good-for-nothing boy! Isn’t it reminiscent of the first worker’s complaint that the landowner made the last ones equal to those “who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat”? The prodigal son’s father might have comforted that worker by saying, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (Luke 15:31).

Read against the background of these words, the landowner’s remark sheds a different light. Even though he talks about “what belongs to you” and “what belongs to me,” he also says, “I am generous.” The point is not so much that the landowner is partial to some workers as that he wants to give the first and the last the same. He is giving to everybody according to their needs, not on the basis of their merit.

Peter has asked what the disciples who have left everything for Jesus will receive, to which Jesus promises “a hundredfold”; Jesus also tells the disciples that “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave,” and that he “came not to be served but to serve.” Focus on the formula that comes before and after the parable like bookends: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

The vineyard in the parable is the kingdom of God, a world that is totally different from ours. B. Rod Doyle calls it a world where “comfortable expectations are withdrawn, and the unexpected prevails.” It is characterized by its owner’s generosity and mercy, which parallels that of a father who waits for his lost son, and a king who invites guests from the streets for the wedding banquet. Through the parable, Jesus enjoins those who were called first to comprehend the world into which they have been invited, and to join him in inviting the last ones—the sick, the poor, the women, the latecomers, the unimportant—instead of comparing and complaining.

My friend’s parents-in-law must have wanted my friends to have the same heart as they did toward the younger son. The father of the prodigal invites his elder son to join his celebration just as others in the Bible seek a lost sheep or a lost coin. Likewise Jesus is asking those of us who have been called first to understand the nature of the kingdom that has been initiated with his coming, and to be workers with him. We will be great only by becoming others’ servants; we will be exalted only by humbling ourselves (Matt. 23:12).