

Title: I was here first!
Text: Matthew 20.1-16
Theme: The generosity of God
Series: Matthew #96

Prop Stmt: God's generosity seems great unless he is generous to our competition.

C.S. Lewis, author of the Chronicles of Narnia, was a graduate of Oxford University and a professor of Medieval and Renaissance literature at Cambridge University. He wrote a book called Mere Christianity that has become a classic because it introduces the reader to logical and compelling reasons for Christianity. It is a great tool to give people who are interested in Jesus. His first chapter, "The Law of Human Nature" begins like this:

"Everyone has heard people quarrelling. ... They say things like this: 'How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?' - 'That's my seat, I was there first'... Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behavior does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know about." Lewis goes on to say, "It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behavior or morality or whatever you call it, about which they really agreed. And they have. If they had not, they might, of course, fight like animals, but they could not quarrel in the human sense of the word. Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are...."

Do you understand his point? Every human being has a conscience. We have an internal standard of right and wrong. And because we have a universal code we assume that everyone has that same code, so in trying to win the argument, we appeal to that code as proof. C.S. Lewis correctly points out that the reason we have this moral compass and these universal laws of right and wrong are because we have been made in the image of God who is the ultimate standard of right and wrong. When those codes are not kept, we become very disoriented. In our text, Jesus is telling a story. The story has a little twist in it, and then a BAM moment. The BAM moment happens because the story involves what appears to be a violation of one of those universally held beliefs. But, in true Jesus style, he grabs our attention by the throat, in order to engrave a truth upon our hearts. Listen for the twist, then the BAM, and then the truth.

Read Text:

In our study of Matthew's gospel, we have seen over and over how Jesus does not play by our rules. He turns the rules upside down. Turning the rules upside down is essentially a summary of his life and mission. He, the King was born in a barn to one of the poorest couples in the country. He the Messiah, picked the most unlikely band of losers and rejects to be his disciples and through them he turned the world upside down. He the Conqueror, was executed as a common criminal on a cross. He did not come as we thought, did not live as we thought, and did not die as we thought. So, what makes you

think that the church is going to function according to rules that make sense to you?
Please, please, please do NOT miss this.

Jesus is in the process of preparing his disciples for the church. In this text they are only a few months away, perhaps just weeks away now, from his death, burial and resurrection. Forty days after that, Jesus ascends into heaven, and these disciples are left with the mission of making disciples of Jesus from every language group all over the world. What do you think these disciples are supposed to look like? They are supposed to look like Jesus who made an entire career of turning the wisdom of the world on its head. That is exactly what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 3 when he says that God's plan from the beginning was for the church to be a display to the rulers and authorities of the manifold wisdom of God. In other words, just as God, came to the world through the weakness of a baby and ended up breaking the power and penalty of sin by securing our redemption, God has through the weakness of the church set into motion the destruction of all human government and the establishment of a kingdom that will never end. God does the most unlikely things in the most unlikely ways, to accomplish his plan. That story line is all throughout the Bible; a nation of slaves are enriched and set free by their captors and become a nation, a shepherd boy kills a giant with a stone, an old prophet sleeps with hungry lions and is safe. The old rules (the wisdom of the world) do not apply to the kingdom of Jesus. Jesus creates categories that we would never understand. If you are strong, you are weak. If you are in charge, you serve. If you have power, you give it away. If you want to accomplish great things, pray! And now, here comes one of the most amazing truths of all. If you are first, then you are last, but if you are last, then you are first.

The story is describing an aspect of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is probably more accurate to say that it is describing the King of the Kingdom and his propensity to be generous to his subjects. The details of the story are easy to understand. They do not contain some hidden and obtuse meanings, they point to a central point that once again reveals not only the heart of our King, but it reveals the fact that our tendency is NOT to think and react like he does. Big idea: God is incredibly generous and we think that is amazing until he is generous to people that we tend to view as our competition.

We all assume that we are the poor (last week's text) don't we? We all know of those who are rich who use their money and power to get their way and trust in their own influence and position instead of casting themselves upon the mercy of God. We can all spot pride and self-righteousness in others. We just can't see it in ourselves. But, the truth is, there are times when we are the rich and other times when we are the poor. There are times when we are the leaders and when we are the followers. There are times when we are first and other times when we are last. Sometimes you are first and sometimes you are last. It is easy to rejoice when you are last and you get to go first. It is a test of your love when you are first and the others get to go last. Do you see that? Again, think of what is going on here. The disciples are quickly becoming the outcast and the outlaws. They are going to be identified with Christ who was crucified. They are going to be treated as being in the "last" category, but will soon be in the first. The disciples, who were last, will be the leaders in the church. They will become first. They, the Jews, are the first to believe in

and follow Christ. But, God's plan is to bring other races and ethnicities into the church. His plan is to create one new race, one new nation, one new kingdom out of all the races, nations and kingdoms and this new nation will not be kosher. These Jewish disciples who had been with Jesus from the very beginning, would have to move over and not only make room for Gentiles at the table, but would need to welcome them, defer to them, train them, entrust them and give them leadership and ownership, just like Jesus did to them. But, if I understand Romans 9 correctly, there is coming a movement of God among the Jews who will turn to Christ. That means that it will be the Gentiles turn to move over and give them a seat at the table. How they did that, and how we do that is a test of whether or not we understand the generous heart of God.

1. The Story

a. The Generous Owner

This story is something that we can certainly understand because when it comes to the time when the strawberries are ripe or the cherries, or the blueberries, or the peaches and apples, we see the workers (some of them migrant) who are temporarily hired in order to help harvest the crop. That is what is happening here. The grapes are ready to be harvested, and the landowner needs additional help in guarding them, harvesting them, driving the donkeys, and getting them to the basins for processing. Therefore, at this time of the year men who wanted to work would show up in the marketplace where they could be hired on an "as needed" basis. When the harvest is ready, all hands are needed and the hours are long, generally 12-hour days are put in. The first batch of workers is hired for a denarius per man, per day, which was customary and around 6 am begin their work. There is nothing unusual about this at all. An agreement has been set and it is fair.

Apparently, the owner needs some more help. So, he goes back to the marketplace and finds some guys standing around, who have not yet been hired. This happens at 9 am, noon, 3 pm and even 5 pm the owner kept hiring workers. Jesus tells this story in a way that draws more attention to the workers hired at 6 am and 5 pm, since they are the ones highlighted by the conversations. This sets up the tension that is to come.

I am impressed that these guys are still in the marketplace. They could have gone home long ago and told their family that they had really tried. But, whether it was out of embarrassment they did not go, or it was because they were really determined to find work, even a little work, is left up to us to imagine.

Man with shirt on that said, "I was picked last in gym in 1970." (Boston Marathon runner, 2015)

There was probably a reason why they were the last to be picked. They were probably the least impressive of the bunch. At any rate, they were hired even though they only worked for an hour. But, here is the difference. The workers that were hired first, all had a specific wage that was promised to them. The rest of the workers were banking on the

fairness and generosity of the owner. The only promise that he made to them was that they would be given “whatever is right.”

The owner, who was apparently not in the field too much because he was busy hiring workers throughout the day, instructs the foreman to “*Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.*” Once again, the contrast between the first and the last is being highlighted. There is no logical reason for the workers who were last to be hired would be first in line to be paid, except that this would ensure that those in the rest of the line would now have a better opportunity to see how much they were being paid. And then the bomb goes off. The workers who were hired at 5 pm, who probably did not even break a sweat, were paid for an entire day’s wage! The scene is set. Expectations have changed. If they were paid a denarius for one hour, can you image what we will get paid after working for twelve!?! And, like many of the stories that Jesus tells, he has us, doesn’t he? He set the hook and we all latched on to the bait. We want to know, like the long-day workers, how much they are going to get paid. And then it comes. The long-day workers get paid the same amount of money as the guys who only worked an hour!

b. The Grumbling Workers

This is not an old problem. A baseball player signs a contract for 3 million per year for 10 years. For most of us, we have a difficult time thinking that every time this guy gets up to bat that he is making \$4-5000. However, by the 8th year, guys who are not as good as he, not as experienced as he, not as proven as he, are signing contracts for 5 and 6 million dollars per year, and he is making a measly 3 million per year and he still has the 8th, 9th and 10th years to go on his contract. So, what happens? He does not show up for spring training. He wants to re-negotiate. He wants some consideration. He wants what is fair. The thrill of getting a job and earning a salary and providing for your needs is quickly lost when you start comparing your situation to someone else’s, and when you appear to be working harder than they do and getting less for it.

So, here is the tension. The long-day workers point out that they were the ones who not only worked all day, but because they worked all day, they bore the scorching heat of the day. It was not just the hours; it was the intensity of the conditions that only added to their frustrations. We can certainly identify with that. But, keep in mind that the guys, who only worked an hour, were not lazy. They had been looking for work. They were willing to work all day.

c. The owner's explanation

While the complaint was voiced by the group, the landowner focused his response on one worker who was probably the spokesperson for the group.

- 1) I did exactly what I promised. You received that which is fair. You have no ground for complaint. I have not violated any law by being generous to some. (Legal answer)

- 2) It is my land and my money, right? I have the right to do with my money what I want. If I want to be generous to some, that is my business, correct? (moral answer)

2. What Jesus is NOT teaching.

- a.** This is not a lesson in fair labor laws.

In fact the Bible has a lot to say about fair labor and paying your workers not only what is right but paying them in a timely fashion. When my son was old enough, I taught him how to cut the grass, edge and trim. It wasn't long before a neighbor asked him to cut their grass, then another and then another and another. So, he had this little lawn business going on and I was now one of his clients. I would pay him, fairly regularly when I had some cash on hand, but it wasn't with exact regularity, although we always tried to keep track. But, he was my son, and he knew where I lived, so it wasn't like he wasn't going to get his money, I just wasn't as prompt in paying him as I should have been. One day I was reading James 5.4 which says, "*Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you have kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.*" I remember feeling like thunder had just exploded in my chest. That night I paid him what I owed him and tried to stay current with him and the girls who inherited the lawn business from him. So, no, this parable is not about fair labor laws. Nor is it a model for how to manage your workers.

- b.** This is not a suggestion for how to manage your workers.

Keep in mind that this is a parable. Everything in the parable is a set-up for the bam! Jesus is using an example that everyone can relate to. We have all worked in situations that appeared to be unfair to us. We all have a sense of what is right and wrong

3. What Jesus is teaching.

- a. If you begrudge the generosity of the owner, then you have no part in his kingdom. (14a)**

The language is strong. Take what is yours and go! Leave! Being part of the kingdom of God is not a matter of fairness; it is a matter of grace.

- b. Because of the generosity of the owner, we all stand on equal ground.**
(The ground is level at the foot of the cross.)

The only way that you can become a follower of Christ is by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. God's grace eliminates the "I was here first" mentality among his people.

c. Followers of Christ have to embrace a completely different set of rules.
(16)

d. Sometimes you are first and sometimes you are last. (19.30 and 20.16)

It is so much easier to rejoice when you are the last and you receive the benefits of the first than it is when you are the first and you are treated the same as the last. But, when you are first and you are treated as the last, you have an opportunity to see how much you really love other people and how much you prefer other people and how much you are able to rejoice with those who rejoice.

Let's test drive this a little bit. This account has a BAM moment in it for the reader because this truth is designed to explode in your brain. I initially looked at this text from the perspective of the land owner and quickly realized that Christ was speaking about the Sovereignty of God. He is the ultimate landowner and he has the right to do with his resources, whatever he wants. That is absolutely true. I need to understand that. I need to accept that. I need to happily submit to that. But, there is more. This truth: the last will be first and the first last is perfectly put on display in Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of that. He (the first) becomes last. And in becoming last, he becomes first. But, let me press on that a little more. How did he, as the first, become the last? He chose to. He deliberately put himself into our shoes, lived our life, experienced our emotions, felt our pain, suffered our loss, and took our sin. He sympathized with us, without excusing us or condoning us. We know that he knows. We know that he feels what we feel.

So, the question that I had to ask myself this week was this: What are the situations where I am viewed as being "first" and how can I rejoice with, defer to, encourage, and understand those who are "last"?

I thought of my family. I need to have this conversation with my daughter-in-law.

I thought of the elders. I need to have this conversation with the new elders.

I thought of the church. I need to learn more from our new members.

One more area of application: Look for someone who is from a different socio-economic background, or different ethnicity than you, and ask them questions so that you can learn about their perspective, so you can enter into their shoes (like Jesus), so you can feel what they feel (like Jesus), so you can identify with their hurts (like Jesus). Ask them what it is like to be "on your turf" and to come into your world.

26 years ago, when I was considering coming here to be the pastor, John Senak, who is with Jesus now, told me that he wanted me to become the pastor of this church. But he said, "We are an old church, full of old people and we are going to die, and unless there are younger people that come here, there will be no church." He, who was here first, told me, that he not only wanted to make room for me, but he was willing to defer to me, so for the joy of the gospel and the advancement of the church. Now, I am no longer the new

kid on the block. Now, I get to do that same thing. And so do you. But we do this, not simply to be nice to people, we do this as a means to put Jesus on display. We do this as a reflection of the gospel. For our sake, though he was rich, he became poor that we through his poverty might become rich. He, who was the first, became the last that we might become the first. So, we empty ourselves of our own concerns and take upon the concerns of others, so that we might all look more and more like Jesus. Who is "last" in your world, in your church, that you can reach out to and intentionally give them a seat of honor at the table of your life?