



“You Have Made Them Equal To Us!”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

We should have known this was how Jesus was going to balance the scales. It was even predicted by the prophet Isaiah over 700 years before Jesus was born. that one day, “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” These same words were again preached by John the Baptist as he prepared the way for Jesus who was soon to appear. We were told, or maybe warned is a better word that Jesus would be balancing the scale. At first, this announcement that Jesus was going to level the playing field sounds like good news. It sounds like someone we would want to be associated with or work for. Someone who balances the scales and makes all things equal and promotes equality. It sounds good, that is until you are the one who is brought low and you see someone who is raised up who you feel doesn’t deserve the lift. It sounds good until we learn that in God’s eyes equality does not happen by treating people with what they deserve.

Jesus tells the parable of the laborers in the vineyard to describe how he chooses people for his kingdom. However, as the parable begins, it was only the first group that were chosen early in the morning that are the kind of laborers any person in their right mind would hire. They were ready to go to work before the landowner arrived. They had planned on putting in a full day of work when they got out of bed in the morning. They had their lunch packed and water bottles filled because they had checked the weather forecast the night before and knew it was going to be a hot day. But the heat of the day would not prevent them from working. This group of people were the first in line and the first to raise their hands when asked who wanted to go to work. These laborers were even in control of their pay. Jesus tells us that it was **the landowner who agreed with the laborers** on what they would be paid. After all, isn't that the kind of person that you would want to work for you? Wouldn't you choose first the ones that are most willing to work and aren't afraid to ask to be paid because they know what they are worth to you? Today, these laborers are called self-starters and innovators.

Then there are the other four groups that were chosen to work by the landowner in the vineyard later in the day. I suppose you could give a little more credit to the group punching in at 9:00 in the morning compared to the ones that were picked at 5:00 in the afternoon. But the truth is that Jesus described all other four groups

chosen, those chosen at 9, noon, 3, and 5 o'clock people as those who were standing idle. These are the types who maybe forgot their lunch on the kitchen counter at home making them late or they forgot to fill up their car with gas before work so they were late to be one of the first draft picks. Maybe they are the kind who instead of being early to work decided to hit the snooze button one or two more times and are used to being late. Or maybe they were out too late the previous night and really didn't care if they worked at all the next day, but by late in the afternoon they went to see if there was anything left to be done, but showed up late with hope that someone else had done all the work. To the first chosen, the worthy workers, they expected the landowner to recognize the difference between good laborers and those standing idles by prorating the pay scale and paying the idlers less, or maybe withholding all of their pay to teach them a good lesson.

The idlers were subdivided into two groups when it came to their pay. The 9, 12, and 3 o'clock workers didn't come with any payment in mind when they showed up to be hired. When the landowner told them that they would be paid, "whatever is right" and they just nodded their heads in agreement and went to work. They probably would have even gone home without asking for their pay that day. When the 5 o'clock idlers were chosen to go to work, the topic of payment was never mentioned. We don't know if they were disappointed that they were chosen to still go to work or surprised they were still wanted. But whatever the case, they just went to work without a thought about what they would get paid.

It would be expected that a little grumbling may have happened in the vineyard by the laborers who saw the idlers show up for work late. But the real grumbling happened when the wages were paid. The real grumbling is heard when Isaiah and John the Baptist predicted it would happen when the valleys were filled, and the mountains and hills made low. The serious grumbling happened when the landowner tipped the scale treating all laborers with equality by paying all laborers the same wage regardless of the amount of work that was done. Wouldn't a good employer know treating employees with fairness is more important than treating them with equality? And for heaven's sake, if you are the landowner and you can do whatever you want, why would you want to hear the grumbling from the laborers which could have been easily avoided by just paying the laborers first. Since the laborers were in the front of the line to go to work, wouldn't you at least call them to the front of the line to be paid and pay them the amount they asked to be paid and give them an additional thank you for their hard work so that the idlers would all be able to hear and learn from their good examples.

This would be a good move in this kingdom, in this world. Scales are most often tipped one way more than the other in this world. Usually the more you work the more you get paid. But even with this effort to treat people fairly, does not guarantee workers not to grumble. In this world, if you have the authority to do something that will appear unfair to others, it is usually done under the table so no one will know. Jesus didn't tell the parable to help the working environment in this world. Jesus told this parable to describe how he chooses who he chooses for his kingdom.

In the first lesson for today, this is why Jonah did not raise his hand or be first in line when God told him to go to Niveveh. Jonah had heard how God operates. He knew that God is gracious and merciful and doesn't play by the standards of this world. If he did, God would have commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell that wicked city to get ready for what they had coming to them. But the message Jonah was told to deliver to Nineveh was to repent. And the greatest fear Jonah had was that this message that he was to deliver might be

heard and they would do what he asked them and worst of all God would change his mind by forgiving the city rather than destroying it. Jonah was right on all of his fears. This great city was even worse than a city of people with lazy work habits. The people in this city participated in every evil wickedness that you could imagine. They were the lowest of lows, but God would raise them up with a short sermon from Jonah. "Repent" and they did.

When Jesus first told this parable, he most likely was speaking to the Jews who had been chosen by God, but they didn't trust this choosing would stick only by God's promise. They believed their place in the kingdom was made more secure by adding their works. When Jesus first told this parable, he most likely was speaking to the Gentiles, people like you and me, who were the idlers and were raised up from the valleys and brought into the kingdom without doing anything. To these Gentiles of that day, it sounded like good news. To the Jews, it sounded unfair and they grumbled.

You have heard this parable again today. Maybe today, you have heard this parable differently. Maybe, you have become the laborers who watched the scales of the idlers get tipped in their favor without doing little or nothing at all. Maybe you might be the ones who would say what the good laborers told the landowner, "You have made them equal to us." Maybe you have become like Jonah who was not pleased with God who showed mercy to the undeserving.

The good news of this parable and the story of Jonah is not determined by how we think the scales should be balanced. The good news is your heavenly reward is the same whether you have known about God's mercy all of your life or you have heard God's mercy is for you for the first time today and his choosing of you has nothing to do with what you can for him. Knowing that God's mercy is unconditional will turn our grumbling into rejoicing knowing that "He has made us equal to them." Amen