

## Stories of the Master

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### SM057 – The Generous Landowner

It would be a day of important instruction for the disciples. Already, many unforgettable lessons had been pressed home into the hearts of Jesus' followers. They had heard Jesus speak about marriage with the religious leaders, they had seen Jesus take time to be with children and say that the kingdom was about childlike faith and humility. They had seen Jesus converse with a young Jewish ruler with great wealth and had seen the young man turn away in disappointment when Jesus told him to sell everything he had and follow him. And they had heard Jesus say, that to those who put him first, above all else, he would return blessing upon them a hundredfold in this life and in the end, they would gain eternal life.

“What is impossible with men is possible with God.” Jesus said. “I want all of you to gather close around me. I want to tell you another story, an important story that will help you learn how much my Father loves you and that will help you understand what his salvation is about and how one gains the life of the kingdom.”

The disciples and others who remained with him that day drew close. They all had a smile on their faces. They were eager to hear his story and this is the tale that Jesus told,

A wealthy man owned many large vineyards. This man loved God, was good to his family, and was good to the people of his community. He was well-respected and loved by all. He had enjoyed many seasons of abundant fruitfulness, and this season was no exception. The vines were hanging heavy with grapes, and his olive and fig groves were full and ready to be harvested as well.

As he walked his fields with his foreman, the foreman said, “I will go into the village tomorrow and hire men for this great work that is ahead of us.” But the owner surprised the foreman when he said, “No, I think I will go into the village and do the hiring.”

“But master, that is my work. Have I not been wise in selecting men to work the vineyards in previous years?”

“You have done an excellent job, my loyal servant and friend, but something compels me to go into the village and do the hiring. I don't know what it is, but I will go and while I am hiring the workers, you can make everything ready for those whom I will bring.”

“As you wish Master,” the foreman said, and the two men parted. The next day, the owner of the vineyard got up early. He went to the place in the village where men who did not own their own land and who did not have steady work gathered for what they hoped would be a day of opportunity for them, a day where they might work and earn money to feed their hungry families. They stood there, tall, straight, smiling, eager to please and ready to work for any who would hire them, and when they saw the vineyard owner, their hearts leaped for joy for they knew that he was a good man, a just employer, and one who paid a fair wage.

The master approached them and said, “Peace be with you,” and the men replied, “And with you also, lord.” The master looked over the men, about 15 of them and said, “I need three to help me

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today with the harvest in my vineyards. I will pay one day's wage to each," and then he showed them all a denarius which was the coin that equaled one day's work. "If this is acceptable to you, please present yourselves. I am looking for strength, maturity, and a good spirit for all the workers."

All the men stood tall and put on their best appearance. They would gladly work hard in his field for a denarius and they all hoped that they would be chosen. After looking at them all, the master said, "I want you ... and you, and ... you."

The three who were chosen stepped forward proudly and said, "Master we are ready to work for you for we know that you are a just man" and away they walked toward the vineyard. But as the owner looked at the dozen or so who were not chosen, sorrow filled his heart as he saw the deep disappointment on their faces, and the master said, "Men, take heart, it is early and perhaps another will come and hire you for the day."

For the next three hours, the men who had been hired worked diligently and the Master was pleased with them. The work was going well, but his heart grew heavy as he thought on the ones he had not chosen and he went to his foreman and said, "I am going back to the village to see if there are other workers," and the foreman, with a puzzled expression on his face said, "Master, all is going well. I do not believe we need more workers," but the Master simply smiled and said, "Yes, I know."

He walked to the village and approached the area where he had hired the three earlier that morning. It was now about nine in the morning, and he hoped that no one would be there. He hoped that the other men would have been hired by now so that they might have meaningful work and earn a wage for their families, but as he approached his heart sank for he saw that all still stood in the same place waiting for someone to hire them. But when they saw the owner of the vineyard their hearts filled with hope. Could it be that he had more work?

The Master said, "I wish to hire more men. I want three more to come to my vineyards. I will not tell you what I will pay, but if you will trust me I will give you a good wage for the rest of the day," and when they all agreed, the Master selected three more who went with him to the vineyard.

As the day progressed, and the sun beat down mercilessly upon the workers, the master's heart was still troubled as he thought on the ones that he had not hired. When everyone was taking a break for refreshment, the Master said to his foreman again, "I am going to the village," and this time the foreman said nothing but just smiled and shook his head in amazement as he guessed what his kind master would do.

Even though it was hot, and most owners would be in their cool homes finding refreshment from the afternoon sun the Master walked briskly to the village and thought, "Surely, those men are gone. Surely, they have been hired so they might work and feed their families," but as the master approached the village square he saw that the men were still standing, persevering, keeping up their best appearance and hoping against hope that they might work for at least some of the day.

The Master wasted no time, "I want you three to go into the vineyard and I will give you a wage at the end of the day," and the three hurried to the vineyard.

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But the Master still was not at peace in his heart, and later he went again to the village to hire three more. Finally, the sun was beginning to set. The Master knew there was only about an hour's worth of work to be done. He knew his entire vineyard would be harvested in a day, and he thought on the men who had worked hard through the heat of the day, but he found his heart returning once more to the village where all had stood, and he remembered there were three more.

The master thought to himself, "Surely they have gone home by now. Surely, they have not stood for the entire day. And then he thought on the deep disappointment they must have felt in not being chosen, and he thought on the shame they would feel when they returned home with no wage and no money to buy food for their families. As the Master thought on this he found himself walking once more to the village, and when he came to the hiring place, he could not believe what he saw. The last men were still there, standing tall, waiting, hoping for something, for anything. Not a handout but a hand that would point them to work, and the master's heart was filled with compassion as he said, "Brothers, why have you been standing here idle all day long?" And they said, "Sir, it is because no one has hired us," and the master's heart broke for them and said, "Quickly, run to my vineyard and tell the foreman I have hired you. You can still work for me for one hour."

And the men ran with all their might, told the foreman what the master had said, and the foreman found work for them for one hour.

The master walked slowly to his vineyard. He thought on the unusual events of the day. He thought on the men he had hired in early morning and those he had hired throughout the day. He thought on the ones that worked the final hour. And he thought on all the riches God had given him. His heart filled with love for God and for those who had worked for him.

When he came to the vineyard, he saw the last of the fruit being put into baskets and stored in safe places, and he said to the foreman, "Call the workers and we will pay them their wages."

The foreman started to call the men who had been hired first, early in the morning, but the master said, "No, stop, call the men that I hired at the last hour," and then he whispered something into the foreman's ear, and the foreman looked at the master with admiration and joy.

The men who had stood all day in the village stepped forward. They knew they would not get much. They had only worked one hour, but when they reached out their hand to receive their wage, they were astonished for the foreman pressed into the palm of each, a denarius, the coin for a full day's work.

"There must be some mistake," they started to say, but as they looked to the owner of the vineyard all they saw was him shaking his head "no" and smiling as if he were saying, "There is no mistake. There is only love." And they walked away, rejoicing over this unexpected display of grace towards them. One by one, the other workers came, those who were hired in the afternoon, those who were hired at midday, and those hired in the morning and to each of them, a full day's wage was given and they too walked away with joy in their heart at the grace of the master.

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Then, those who had worked from the rising of the sun stepped forward. They knew what had happened. They knew the master had given to the others more than they deserved and they thought, “Surely, the Master will give us even more for we have worked all day,” but when they reached out their hands they were disappointed when only a denarius was pressed into their palms. They began to grumble and say, “What are you doing? We have worked all day! We have worked through the heat of the day for 12 long hours. Yet those who came at the end of the day and worked only one hour received the same as us.”

And the master, with sadness over their hardness of heart and their greed said, “Friends, did you not agree to work for a day’s wage? I have done you no wrong. Take what is yours and go, but if I wish to be gracious to those who worked only one hour, what is that to you? Cannot I, the owner, do as I please with what is my own? Are you going to give me the evil eye because I am generous to others?” And the workers walked away, some angry, some humiliated, and all disappointed even though they had received the just wage the owner had promised.”

Jesus finished the story he said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” The disciples looked puzzled. What did Jesus mean? What was the lesson he had for them? What is the lesson he has for us?

### Interlude

What did Jesus’s story of the generous landowner mean? Why did Jesus tell this story of the gracious vineyard owner who gave the men who worked only one hour the same amount of money as those who worked all day? Right after the story Jesus said, “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.” What did this mean? It meant that Jesus was trying to help his disciples understand that God was a God of grace.

It is true. Those who worked only one hour did not deserve a full day’s wage. In the same way, those who worked only three hours and six hours and nine hours did not deserve a full day’s wage. Yet, the master was generous with all of them and gave them more than they deserved simply because he was full of grace, full of love, and full of compassion to the men.

This is what kept him coming to the village to hire more men, and if the men who had first been hired early in the morning had had hearts that were full of compassion and love, they would have rejoiced at the master’s generosity to their friends and fellow workers. They would also have realized that their full day’s work and their wage was only because the master sought them out and freely hired them.

Jesus was telling a story about the grace of God. He was telling a story that revealed the heart of God. In the story, the master is the one who went into the village to hire the workers. This was unusual for the master to do the walking to the village and the hiring of the workers. He had a foreman who could have done that. But Jesus tells the story where the vineyard owner seeks those to whom he can be gracious because he wants his people to know that God is a seeking God.

Do you remember the story of the heroic shepherd who endangered his life to seek for one lost lamb? God is like that shepherd. Do you remember the story of the woman who searched diligently

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for one lost coin until she found it? God is like that woman. Do you remember the story of the heart-broken father who looked down the road every day hoping to see his son returning from a distant land? When he saw his son coming home, he ran to him and embraced him with compassion. God is like that father, and God is like an owner of a vineyard who seeks to bless people with work in his vineyard and who pays them more than they deserve because he is a God of grace.

This was a difficult lesson for God's people to understand. Many of the religious rulers thought they had special favor with God because they had been working for so long getting the laws of God just right and taking care of all the religious needs within the land. And then here comes Jesus and who does he welcome? He welcomes the prostitutes, the tax collectors, and others like them who had strayed from God. The religious rulers, rather than rejoice over the grace of God, complained bitterly when Jesus welcomed them back as full members in God's family and made them first in his love and said that the last will be first and first will be last.

This may be a difficult lesson for some of us. Many religious people think, "I have special favor with God. Look at all I have done. For years I have served God. I have attended church faithfully. I have given money to the work of God. I have helped others. Surely God has special favor for me because of all I have done. Surely the kingdom is reserved for me because of my merit."

When we think like this, we show that we have forgotten that our salvation and anything we might do to serve God is a gift from the God of compassion and grace. But when we remember that our God is a God of grace, that our salvation is a work of his grace, and that any opportunities we receive to work in his vineyard are purely by his gifting and his grace, then we will walk with a grateful heart toward him for his grace to us and for our opportunities to serve him and others.

Jesus finished the story and he said, "Let's get our things together now. We are headed back to Jerusalem." The disciples started to get everything ready. Other followers who had heard this great story prepared their things because they wanted to follow also, and then Jesus said, "I want my twelve apostles to come with me into the courtyard. I have something important to say to them."

When the 12 gathered with Jesus he said, "we are going up to Jerusalem; and I will be handed over to the rulers, and they will condemn me to death, and they will hand me over to the Gentiles. They will mock me, scourge me, and crucify me. Then, on the third day I will be raised."

The disciples looked at each other with puzzled and alarmed expressions, but before they could say anything a woman approached and interrupted them. She was the mother of James and John, two of the twelve disciples. She came to Jesus, bowed before him and said, "Master, I have a special request for you." And He replied, "What do you wish?"

She said, "Jesus, when you enter your kingship, command that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right and one on your left."

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Jesus paused. He looked at the mother of James and John. He looked at James and John and then the other disciples and said, “You do not know what you are asking. Are your sons able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”

James and John, at first embarrassed by their mother, but now emboldened by her request stepped forward and with confidence said, “Of course! We will drink from whatever cup you give us. We will follow you anywhere and do anything you ask.”

Their mother was so proud of them. She had a look of love and pleasure on her face, but Jesus had a faraway look in his eyes as the future unfolded before him. He saw James led to a place of execution and a swordsman following who would do the terrible deed. He saw John in exile on a rocky island in the Aegean Sea – alone, in need, and suffering.

Jesus looked at them and said, “My cup you shall drink. But ... to sit on My right and on My left in the kingdom? This is not Mine to give, but My Father gives it to those for whom he has prepared it.”

James and John walked to their mother and embraced her, but while she was trying to advance her sons’ career with Jesus, and while James and John had been bragging about what they could do, the other ten watched and listened with anger and said, “Who do you two think you are? I don’t care if your mother is here, you have no right to try to get ahead of us. What makes you think you are so special? Maybe we should sit on his right and on his left and you should go to the back of the line.”

Jesus listened to them for a moment and then sadly said, “Have you learned nothing from today? I have shared with you that with God, the first will be last and the last will be first. What is it like with the pagan kings in this world who oppress you? They lord it over you and all others. They flaunt their authority. They revel in their riches and boast about what they think is great. But this is not my way, this is not the kingdom of God, and if you are my followers it will not to be this way among you.

“Do any of you wish to be great? Then you must become the servant of all. Do any of you wish to be first? Then you must become the last and the slave of all. I, the glorious Son of Man have not come to be served. But I have come to serve others. And I have come to give my life as a ransom for many.”

“If you wish to be my disciples, you must follow me. And now come. We are going to Jerusalem and everything will happen just as I have said.”

Silently, and with shame in their hearts, the disciples picked up their few belongings and followed Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem.”