

September 24, 2023 – Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30 & Matthew 20:1-16

You get what you pay for. It's a fundamental rule of capitalism. And yet, it's not really an American concept. Or even a Western concept. It's been around for far longer than that. In fact, I would argue it's almost an instinct of human nature.

You get what you pay for. We trust things that are more expensive. We value things that we have to work harder to get. We're suspicious of a free lunch and we're rarely inclined to give one out. It's just the way we are. You get what you pay for.

It's an instinct that Peter himself expressed to Jesus. You see the parable we read in our Gospel lesson today is pretty straightforward, but there's actually quite a bit of context leading up to it. In the passage immediately prior to this, Jesus is approached by a wealthy young man who asks, "*Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?*"

The man is obviously trying to buy his way into heaven. He's rich. He's got limitless resources. If there's one key thing he can do that will guarantee him entry through the pearly gates, he almost certainly has the means to do it. But Jesus isn't about to indulge him in his fantasy and tries to squash it right off the bat. You have to keep all the commandments, Jesus tells him. You have to be absolutely, 100% perfect to get yourself into heaven.

But the man is pretty well deluded and tries to insist that he's done this. He's never sinned. He's kept every single commandment. And so Jesus turns around and hits him where it hurts: The wallet. "Alright," Jesus says, "Then all you have to do now is give away everything you own and follow me." He crushes the man's pride and proves that there was still at least one sin left in his heart: greed. So the man leaves, very, very sad.

But Peter overhears all this and gets excited. Because it sounds an awful lot like Jesus is telling the man, "You get what you pay for." The more you give away, the more you sacrifice, the more hardship you endure to follow Jesus, the greater your reward. And there is no one in the entire world at that moment who has given up more to follow Jesus than his disciples. For three years they have sacrificed family and home, wealth and comfort, jobs and dreams to follow Jesus around as he ministered to Galilee.

And so Peter turns to Jesus, full of arrogance and pride, and says, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" And it's with the parable we read today that Jesus answers him.

A parable about the master of a vineyard who pays his workers a flat wage of one denarius, a silver coin worth roughly one day's typical wage during the period or about, let's say, \$100 in today's money. And he asks them to work 12 hours. Or 9 hours. Or 6 hours. Or 3 hours. Or just 1 hour.

And at the end of the day, when the workers protest this method as being unfair, his logic is perfect and inescapable. It's his money to give. He hasn't lied to them. He hasn't tricked them. Everyone was promised \$100. Everyone will get \$100. And, as the one paying them, it's up to him to decide if that's fair, not them.

And he's right. And yet, it still feels wrong. The first workers did the most work in the hottest part of the day for barely \$8/hour. The last workers hardly worked at all and received \$100/hour. This isn't right. What in the world is this vineyard owner thinking?

That's a good question. And it gets at the root of our discomfort. Because the master isn't thinking like we expect. He isn't thinking with human instincts and human greed and human sinfulness. He isn't thinking like a human at all.

He's thinking like God thinks. And God doesn't think that you get what you pay for. God thinks that you get what he decides to give you. "My thoughts are not your thoughts. My ways are not your ways," says the Lord.

It's a frightening circumstance, really. We are utterly subject to God's sovereignty. We are completely and totally bound by God's decisions. And we can't do a thing about it.

If God says, "You're going to hell." There's nothing we can do to stop him from sending us to hell. There's no overtime we can work in God's vineyard. We can't pick up a few hours on the weekend and hope to earn a little more credit. God gives what he chooses to give and we take what we get. And there is no pay rate that we can fall back on and say, "But God, I did more work than that guy over there." We get what God decides to give us. And that's the end of it.

It's frightening. And yet, it's also a blessing. Because although this parable about the vineyard owner may feel like a story about God being too stingy with those who worked hard for him, it's really a story about God's generosity.

As I mentioned, a denarius was one full day's wage for most people in that society. And no one in the story worked more than one day or received less than a denarius. In fact, most of the workers there worked for less than a day and still received one full denarius. This master wasn't stingy. He was generous. Far above human standards would demand.

That is our God. A God who tells us that no matter how long we work in His kingdom, we can all depend on the same reward. A God who promises us not the weight of 'you get what you pay for,' but the hope and freedom of 'you get what I give you.' A hope and freedom that is, really, a blessing to us our entire lives.

Several years ago, a friend from college passed away. He was a youth pastor in Arizona. 32 years old. Died in a car accident after he took a turn too fast and rolled his car. And it caused many of us as his friends, understandably, to ask, "Why?" Why let him die so soon?

But what struck me about his death was that it was a perfect example of exactly what he preached. He died far too young. And yet, though he had worked fewer hours in the vineyard, he still had the same reward waiting for him as those who worked far longer.

Which is how we end up with what St Paul says in our Epistle. Because, at first glance, what he says might be a little disturbing. "*For me... to die is gain.*" "*My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.*" If you didn't figure it out, he's saying that he wishes he were dead. And he's hoping that he dies soon.

But Paul is not suicidal. Far from it. He's simply recognizing what Christ said in the parable: at the end of the day, we will all receive a denarius. At the end of our lives, we will all receive the same reward. And so he's simply being honest: I hope I'm someone who only has to work 1 hour, not 12. That would be really nice.

Yet, he also realizes the importance of the work he's doing. "*To remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith.*"

The church needed Paul to live. The Philippians needed Paul to live. There was more work to be done. And Paul was the man to do. And so, for their sake, Paul would keep working every day that God gave him on this earth.

That's something else that the vineyard workers who worked for 12 hours didn't realize: the work they were doing was important. Because that vineyard wasn't just an ordinary job. It was work for the Kingdom of God.

And so, yes, some will work for 12 hours and some will work for 1 hour. Some will work for the Kingdom of God for their entire lives and die at a ripe old age, having given their all to the church. And some will be baptized on their deathbeds, having only known the hope of Christ for a few minutes. And we will all receive the same reward.

And on the last day, we'll be happy with that reward. Because those who worked for 12 hours will have spent an entire lifetime knowing the blessing of work in the vineyard. And those who worked for only 1 hour will know the joy of God's immense grace, that defies all human wisdom.

And we will all receive a reward that surpasses all understanding. Because we get what he paid for. We get all that he decides to give us in abundance. We receive grace we don't deserve from a God who loves each of us the same. Amen.