

Reverse Greed: A Sneaky Sin Matthew 20:1-16

Henry Ford once said, **"Whatever is good business is good religion."** What we have is an employer handing out the same pay for one hour's work as for twelve. Outrageous. Offensive. Unfair. Get the protest signs and petition booklets. Have a rally, a picket line. This is bad, bad business. But listen to Jesus: **"The kingdom of God,"** said Jesus, **"is like that."** Whatever is good religion is good business.

With the all-day workers, in unison we cry, "Unfair." Go to the Facebook page of "All-day workers" and see the group picture: dignified, well-dressed, and looking good. Go ahead and "friend" them. These are our people: Sun up to sundown, pedal to the medal. Hard working. Honest. Dependable. Give to the church. Help others. Make no mistake these are our people.

Something in my heart pulls for the all-day workers. Think of those who spend the majority of their adult lives working for the same company, only to be fired just before their retirement eligibility kicks in. It is hard to match up the loyalty and devotion and hard work of long-time employees with the harsh and unjust and low regard that some managers have for their veterans. If anyone deserves more it is the all-day workers. Ageism is the new racism of the 21st century.

The economy providing the background for our story was a day-to-day economy. Men gathered in the village around the well to wait for someone who needed workers. The practice still goes on all over our own country. Hand-to-mouth existence. Bread for today. Many Americans have substantial portfolios, but this is becoming a subsistence economy for millions. The Census Bureau reports the number of Americans in poverty jumped to 15.1 percent in 2010. About 46.2 million people, or nearly 1 in 6, are in poverty, while there are 9 million millionaires. There's 1 winner for every 5 losers, the size of the National League Central Division: Brewers the winners, Cardinals, Reds, Astros, Cubs, and Pirates, the losers.

This story intends to offend. The one hour workers are paid right in front of the all-day workers. **Read as theology, the wages represent the benefits of the kingdom.** The all-day workers and the one-hour workers each receive entry into God's kingdom. This is offensive to some Christians because you, if you were in charge, would deny entrance into the kingdom for those you believe are not deserving. There are people who, if they came forward and said, "I want to trust Jesus as my Savior," that would not be enough for you. You would want to vet them and find out what they believed about other issues that have been elevated in your mind as essential for salvation.

Read as cultural reality, this story offends because it calls into question all our systems of fairness, equality, goodness, and rightness; smacks down our elaborate network of assumptions by which we prop up our lives; our system of rewards and punishments, of good works by which we justify our lives before God. We are always trying to square accounts, balance the system, make sense of all perceived unfair

treatments. Tracy Lawrence laments, "Every time I think I'm off and running, I'm barely up to a crawl. Every time I get a leg up on the ladder of success I slip and fall. Like last week down at the factory I was up for a promotion, but the boss's little brother got the call. Seems every time I make my mark somebody paints the wall." All of us have a state-of-the-art fairness meter, and we are quick to cry "Unfair."

So what does God say? God says, "**Friend, I am doing you no wrong; we had a deal. Take what belongs to you and get out of here. 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?**"

Sometimes God brings the gospel like a boxer with two left jabs and a right hook to the jaw: God has ultimate free will. Dealing with God in fairness means we may get less instead of more. Be careful what you ask. The gospel is not positive thinking or self-help lectures although these are the packages that often successfully create mega-churches. It is a hard task to bring the gospel to people and be their friends at the same time. Paul once asked, "Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were stilling pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10).

Flannery O'Connor often preaches the gospel with a violent offense to our ways of seeing the world. Her preachers are often strange caricatures, like "Mary Grace," the disturbed college student, in the short story, "Revelation". Mrs. Turpin, a hog farmer's wife, has an arrogant and self-satisfied opinion about herself and her station in life. "If it's one thing I am, it's grateful. When I think of who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!'"

Mary Grace, a fat ugly college girl attending Wellesley, scowls at Mrs. Turpin, and then flings a book at her, hitting her in the eye. It is no accident that she hits the eye because Mrs. Turpin's way of seeing life is distorted. "**What have you got to say to me?**" Mrs. Turpin asks hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation." Mary Grace says, "**Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.**"

Have you seen those Ally Bank commercials where a child is deliberately treated unfairly? "Would you like a pony?" Man gives little girl a toy pony and then he asks a second girl, "Would you like a pony?" And out comes a real pony, saddle and all. You didn't say would I like a real pony? You didn't ask. Kids know when life is unfair.

Read as economics, this story still offends, especially the pay of the one-hour workers. "Overpaid." How many question the salaries of teachers but never blink at the knowledge that baseball players often make more than \$20 million per year? The president of the United States makes \$400,000. Football coaches at powerhouse programs routinely make \$4,000,000. Somehow we are angry when someone gets what we see as special treatment and we don't get the same treatment. And sometimes we are just mad-dog jealous because we have enough but we want others to have less. In the topsy-turvy world of more, sometimes we get grim satisfaction out of others getting less.

Yet for all our sympathy for the all-day workers, strict fairness may not be good for us. "They thought they would receive more." They grumbled against the landowner. "You have made them equal to us. We have borne the burden of the day and the heat." Touchy subject: **equality**. Even in this great land that so honors equality, we are not always the most honest practitioners of it. The complaint is reverse greed.

Part of the pain of this parable is that it forces us to face our own sense of entitlement. "We worked for it. We deserve it." Check to see if you have a sense of entitlement; a feeling that even if you don't deserve more, there are people who certainly deserve less than you. In the fictional world where MORE IS BETTER, we have no concept of ENOUGH, but lately, we are convinced that others should have LESS. More or less, we are hooked by the fiction of **entitlement**. It especially afflicts those who assume they are superior to those awful people who dare to believe differently. If the ministry of Jesus is an indication of heaven's population, the place will be crawling with people that we have struggled to keep in their place, people who have been refused Christian fellowship. Some folks will stomp around heaven, like the big self-righteous ghost demanding his rights and opposing "bleeding charity" because he resents a murderer's admission to heaven.

Claud tells his wife, Mrs. Turpin, "You look like you might have swallowed a mad dog." What she has swallowed is her undiluted anger with God. Ultimately, Mrs. Turpin has to do business with God. "What do you send me a message like that for? How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too? Why me? It's no trash around here, black or white that I haven't given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church."

Now, here's the right to the jaw. God says, "Do you begrudge my goodness?" The King James Version puts it, **"Is your eye evil because I am generous?"** The eye sends a message to the brain that turns our thoughts evil and stingy. "After all the light of the body is the eye: if therefore your eye be single, your whole body shall be full of light. But if your eye be evil, your whole body shall be full of darkness."

All-day workers sound the same in every era: In the 1930's Mr. du Pont argued that the rich shouldn't pay any taxes. Taxes ought to be paid by the working class. Andrew Mellon told President Hoover "the depression might even be a blessing. It will purge the rottenness out of the system. People will work harder, live a more moral life. Values will be adjusted, and enterprising people will pick up the wrecks from less competent people." Secretary of War, Patrick Hurley: "To give a gratuity to an individual, is divesting men and women of their spirit, their self-reliance. It is a striking at the very foundation of the system on which this nation is builded." Of course there are always other ways of seeing. Boston retail tycoon Edward A. Filene: **"Why shouldn't the American people take half my money from me?"** he asked. **"I took all of it from them."**

Mrs. Turpin shakes her fist at the heavens and screams at God, **"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?"** She drops all pretense and shows her true colors: on an equal par with or above God. She speak to God as if God were a servant, white trash, or worse.

Well, God has an answer: I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am who I am. God has an answer: Goodness and not fairness. God has an answer: the abundance of manna. God has an answer: a blow-out-the-doors banquet for a returned prodigal

son. God has an answer: a man who was rich yet for our sake became poor and died on a cross for all. God has an answer and it comes from the revelation of Mrs. Turpin who saw a bridge filled with a vast horde of souls rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of blacks, dressed in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics, shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud (and all-day workers and you and me), had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.

Do as you please with the teaching of Jesus. Some of you might not want to accept it: but in the kingdom of God, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Amen.