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Matthew 20:1-16 Pastor Fraser Pearce

In the sermon on the mount we hear these words from Jesus:

'The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!'

Let's think for a moment about how we use our eyes:

If we look at someone with anger or jealousy or lust

We commonly experience that we can physically feel it *in the way we look outward*

And others, as they look at us, can see in our eyes

What it is we are thinking; or at least they can have a good guess

Psychologists have noted that, because we humans have whites in our eyes

It is evident to others, even from a distance, *where* we are looking

And, to some extent, what we are looking at

Even from this pulpit I can gauge a lot....

OK: *How do we look at God?*

Today's parable is going to raise this question

Do we look at God simply as the administrator of justice?

As giving people what they deserve?

Now today's parable will indeed teach that God is just

That he keeps his word, that he is willing to deal with us

According to what we deserve

But it reveals much more than this

It reveals that God is good, that he is generous

There is a warning: that if we think that God is only just

That he is obliged to treat us only according to what we deserve

Then we will end up giving God the evil eye

Looking at God in anger, but more than this

Thinking that God is fundamentally unjust, even cruel

And we will be filled with spiritual darkness

But in this parable is also very God News:

God is more than just: he is good, he is generous

And we can trust that he will deal with us according to his generosity

So: be prepared to receive

Through this parable Jesus is freeing to look at God

With healthy eyes that see that God is generous

So that we may be filled with the light of God

Let's listen to some context first of all

In the previous chapter we hear of this encounter

Then someone came to [Jesus] and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good.'

Notice the repeated use of the word 'good'

Jesus reminds the young man that there is only one who is truly good

And this, of course, raises the question of who Jesus is

He is the good one, the generous one

This word 'good' is going to come up at the end of our reading

Jesus then goes on to tell this rich young man hears that to be perfect

To be spiritually mature and complete

He must sell all he has, give to the poor, and follow Jesus

He leaves sad

And when Jesus then says to his disciples that it harder

for a wealthy person to be saved than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle

They are amazed: if the wealthy cannot be saved, then who can?

Jesus assures them that what is impossible with human beings

Is possible with God

Then we hear this: **Then Peter said ... 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?'**

Note: Jesus does not say that Peter's attitude is all wrong

That they should do the right thing out of sheer duty

Or that virtue is its own reward

On the contrary, Jesus gives promises of a return on investment

That would make the most unscrupulous stockbroker blush

Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.'

They will receive: glory; power and authority; a hundredfold return

And, oh yes: eternal life

God sees what his disciples give up for his sake

He sees, and he repays, more than handsomely

God is just, he is fair in his dealings; we need not be worried

But then we hear these words of Jesus: But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

And he goes on to tell them a parable to save them, to save us

From dealing with God as if he is only just, as if he is only faith

As if he deals with us only according to what we deserve

Let's listen to the parable:

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.'

This is a parable about God's reign, about God's rule

About how it is to live in the kingdom where God

He agrees with his workers: they say the same: a denarius

A good days wage: they go out to work

Now listen to how the parable goes on, and spot the difference: **When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.**

What will he pay them? He does not nominate an exact amount

He assures them what he will give them what is right; what is just

So they go out working for a wage that they trust will be fair

The parable goes on: **When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.**

The same agreement: for a fair wage, which we can assume is getting smaller

At last we have these words (and again, notice the difference): **And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard."**

Here there is no specific payment mentioned

Not even the promise of a fair return for their work

Just a command: go into the vineyard

Perhaps: it is less shameful to do something rather than nothing

Now here is where things become interesting: **When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first."**

The owner has a plan; he wants to teach a lesson

And the order of the pay reveals who the owner is

What sort of character he is: **When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.**

No one is treated with injustice, but some are treated with generosity

Especially those who came last: they know that the owner is a generous man

But those who were hired first have an issue: **And when [those hired first] received [their denarius], they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."**

To them the lord appears unjust

They were treated equally to those who were undeserving

Now the Lord does not say that those who came last deserved the denarius

He takes a different path: **But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; 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?"**

First: 'friend' three uses in the new Testament, all in Matthew

Here, at the wedding banquet to the man who does not wear the robe,

And to Judas in the garden: I am doing you no wrong

That is: What is going on in you?

He asks them questions according to their own standards

Didn't they agree that a denarius is a fair wage?

Would they like to be told how they should spend their denarius?

Then he gets to the heart of the matter

Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Literally: **Or is your eye evil because I am good?**

Do you look at me as if I am untrustworthy?

As if I have ill will towards you? As if I am a fool to be generous?

As if I am evil?

And then Jesus sums up with the words that immediately preceded our reading:

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

In God's kingdom his goodness encompasses his justice

Those who seem to be first in the line to the kingdom from a human point of view

Are last from God's, and vice versa...

In all this note: The one who gave us this parable is the one who is *good*

He assures us that God is just, that we are wise when we look to God

To repay us for what we do in his name

But more than this: he assures us that God is good, that God is generous

Jesus, who gave his life to win you for the kingdom of God

Shows you the generosity of God: look away from what you or others deserve

And look to him who holds back nothing from you

But gives even his Holy Spirit

Look to him, and have your eyes filled with the light of God