

Friend I Do Thee No Wrong

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Let us return to Matthew chapter 20. We would like to look at the parable here in verses one to 16, but take as our main text verse 13.

“But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny?”¹

“Friend, I do thee no wrong.”²

“If I were God...”

I am sure you have heard that said. Usually those who say it are about to say something that will criticize God’s dealings with them or with someone else.

“If I were God I would do this. If I were God I wouldn’t have done that.”

And underlying this, of course, is this sense that they are more just than God or that they are more gracious than God, that there is more goodness in them than in God. And, of course, this is a tendency in all of us to think—especially when we pass through hard times, tough times, difficult times—that God is not just or God is not good. And this parable at least partly is given to us to show us that in all circumstances God is just. And in all circumstances God is good.

I would like to look at five principles taught to us in this passage, five phrases that contain a lesson to us about God and about ourselves.

The first one is that God is gracious and we are debtors. God is gracious and we are but debtors. How do we see that?

Well, in this parable we have the kingdom of heaven being portrayed like a marketplace or a vineyard or both of them together. We read in verse one a man that is a householder goes out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard.

¹ Matthew 20:13.

² Ibid.

Now this is a very common scene in these days. Those who had charge of land went out to the marketplace and those who needed work, they went into the market place and they tried to match one another up. The employer, the master would come and look for those who were looking for work. In fact, they are described here later on a couple of times as idle, those who are waiting for work. You will notice in verse three he goes out at the third hour. He sees others standing idle and again in verse six he finds others standing idle and in verse six he asks them, “Why stand ye here all the day idle?”³

Now this is a significant word in this parable.

And, of course, it is not a parable to teach us about worldly work or every day callings. This is about the kingdom of heaven. This has a spiritual lesson. It is to take us into a spiritual realm.

And when we read about idleness in the kingdom of heaven it is speaking of those who are spiritually idle. It may be men and women, young men and women who were extremely busy in their lives, who have got very high powered busy jobs. It might be also those who presently don't have paid work. It really doesn't matter what your present employment situation is because this is not speaking about that. It is speaking about a spiritual world, a spiritual dimension, a spiritual idleness. And it is basically saying that no matter what work we have or what work we don't have, if we are not active in the kingdom of heaven, we are idle. If we are not serving the Lord with our lives, he views us as idlers. And so really he is saying whatever work we are engaged in, however busy or not busy we are, the biggest question of all you have to ask yourself is this: Am I serving the Lord? Is my life, my hours, my day, my week, is it about to the Lord, serving the Lord, for the Lord, for his glory? If not he is saying you are an idler. That is how God views you, as an idler. A horrible word, isn't it for an American to hear or a Dutch American to hear, an idler in this culture of hard work, intense work, to be called an idler. And yet that is how God views you if you are living apart from him, if your life is separated from him. However much dust and sound and fury is around your life, if God is not at the center, he views all your doing as idleness, as worthless and as valueless.

And he comes to you as he comes to these people and he says, “Why are you idle? Yes, you, idle?”

Does that describe you tonight? If we are not serving God we are not doing the work for which we were made. And so God comes to these idlers.

We read it is early in the morning, verse one. God is pictured here as getting up early in the morning. He is not some kind of absentee landlord, careless, disinterested, unconcerned, looking at this situation of idleness and he is idle, worthless, valueless lives and washes his hands of them. No. He sees it and he is up early. He is concerned. He is active. He is interested.

³ Matthew 20:6.

In fact, we read in Jeremiah 44 verse four, “Howbeit I sent unto you all my servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, saying, Oh, do not this abominable thing that I hate.”⁴

God depicts himself as rising up early in earnest to go out and to seek those who are idle the marketplace. And so he goes out and he goes out with gracious offers of employment.

God doesn't need laborers. God is not under obligation to employ laborers and none of the laborers have a right to be employed. And yet despite that God graciously comes with offers of employment.

Notice here these laborers did not make their way to his vineyard for work, that he made his way to their marketplace to hire them. They didn't come seeking him. But he came seeking them.

And this parable, these initial verses are all about setting this context of grace. Here is this God up, active, involved, concerned, seeking, offering. God is gracious. Contrast it with these idlers who are not seeking, who are not making their way to him. And yet he comes to them and he gives them work.

We read in verse two he agrees with the laborers for a penny a day. It is just a standard daily wage for a soldier or a laborer. So this is just a fair wage. There is no exploitation here. It is six in the morning. The working day started. It went from six till six.

And then we read in verse three he goes out about the third hour. That is 9 AM and he offers them work. Verse five he goes out about the sixth hours. That is midday, the ninth hour, that is 3 PM and he does likewise. And then about the 11th hour, that is 5 PM, he goes out and he finds other standing idle and he says to them, ‘Why stand ye year all the day idle?’⁵

And notice after the first offer at 6 AM all the others he says, “Whatever is right I will give you.” He doesn't actually promise a wage. He does that with the first ones. He says, “I will agree with you, a penny.” The others he says, “Whatever is right I will give you.”

There is no negotiation. There is no contract. They trust him. And they go to work for him. And at the end of the day each is paid the same.

So the day begins with God's gracious initiative and it ends with his gracious reward, giving more than these people had any right to expect. And so the bookends of this day and the bookends of this parable are God is gracious. God does not deal with us as we deserve. God deals with us graciously, mercifully. He takes a gracious initiative. He gives a gracious reward.

⁴ Jeremiah 44:4.

⁵ Matthew 20:6.

And it paints everyone in this story apart from this master as a debtor. Whatever is gained at the end of the day is sheer grace, sheer gift. God is gracious and we are debtors and whatever situation we are facing in our lives let that be our conclusion. God is gracious.

Me, I am only a debtor and ever a debtor and always a debtor.

But secondly here God is right and we are wrong. God is right and we are wrong.

We read in verse eight, “So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.”⁶

The evening came. Perhaps this evening is the evening of world history. World history, as it were, is coming to a close. It is winding up, heading towards the end here. And the Lord has returned to deal with how people have been through the day of world history or their own personal history. And as he gives out the penny to those who came last we read, “They came that were hired,” verse nine, “about the eleventh our, they received every man a penny.”⁷

So he pays those who came at five a penny; those that came at three, a penny; 12, a penny; nine, a penny; six... We read here.

“But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house.”⁸

What are they saying? They are saying, “You are wrong. This is wrong.” They grumble. You can hear what they are saying. First come, first served, surely. And he deals with the last first and the first last. They grumble. Longer hours, harder work equals better pay, surely. That is what they say.

Verse 12. “These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.”⁹

They had agreed the penny and yet they are unhappy and they are grumbling. And what are they unhappy with? They are unhappy that others less deserving than them got the same as them.

And you can see the self importance here. They started off as debtors that day, unemployed, idlers. Someone comes along, graciously gives them work, graciously promises them a reasonable wage. They get to the end of the day and suddenly they are

⁶ Matthew 20:8.

⁷ Matthew 20:9.

⁸ Matthew 20:10-11.

⁹ Matthew 20:12.

taking the high ground. They are the creditor. God is the debtor. They are in charge. God is the servant. They are dictating the terms and God has to accept them.

They have gone from being humble beggars now to being sovereign kings. And they are saying, “You are wrong. Listen to us. We have got a finer sense of justice than you. You have made them equal to us?”

Verse 13.

“But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong.”¹⁰

He is feeling the point of this accusation. This good man has been told, “You are wrong,” and he turns around and he says, “Friend, I do thee no wrong. Did you not agree with me a penny?”

And the rightness and the justice of God is a theme throughout this parable. Look at verse four when he promises to the later employee. He says, “Whatsoever is right I will give you.”¹¹

Verse seven. “Whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive.”¹²

He is right. He is right. He is right. He is right in giving these first laborers the penny agreed and yet at the end of the day they come and point fingers in his face and say, “You are wrong and you are wrong because you have made others equal to us, we who have worked longer, we who have worked harder, we who are more deserving. You have made others equal with us.”

“Friend, I do thee no wrong.”¹³

And God will never do wrong and God never has done wrong to any single person in the whole human race. To everyone who comes to God and points a finger in his face and says, “You are wrong,” God says, “No wrong.”

To everyone that comes to God and says, “Look at my life and compare it to these people’s lives. You are wrong in the way you have dealt with me.”

God says, “No wrong.”

He is never wrong to anyone. He will never wrong you. God can honestly defend himself with these words to every single person accuses him. “I do thee no wrong.”

¹⁰ Matthew 20:13.

¹¹ Matthew 20:4.

¹² Mathew 20:7.

¹³ Matthew 20:13.

Are you daring to come to him and say, “This is wrong. What you did here, what you did to hi, what you to her, what you have done to us is wrong”?

This parable comes to you with a very powerful challenge to give up that accusation, to confess it and to join with the Lord himself who says, “I am right, right, right and it is you that is wrong, wrong, wrong.”

Let us never find ourselves reversing that equation. God is right and we are wrong.

Thirdly here God is sovereign and we are servants.

You will notice it says in verse 15, he turns to these people that are arguing and murmuring, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?”¹⁴

See what he is saying there? My own?

In a sense these people were coming along and saying, “I am sovereign here. I have a right to dictate who gets paid what, who gets dealt with in what way.”

And God says to them through this parable, “They are not yours and this money is not yours and this situation is not yours. It is mine own and as my own I have the right to do what I want with my own.”

Is it not lawful for me if you accept as truth I am his, we are his, all is his, then does he not have the right to be sovereign? He is saying, “I am not subject to your expectations. I am not subject to your laws. I am not subject to your norms, your standards. I am not subject to anybody’s law because I am the sovereign. I am the lawgiver. I decide what is lawful. I administer justice. Everyone is under me including you. It is right for me to be sovereign. It is lawful for me to do what I will with my own.”

Has anyone ever succeeded in challenging this right? God is sovereign. We are but servants and ever will be. We are subject to him, not he to us. We are his not he is ours, as it were, to control. God is sovereign and we are servants. And he is speaking especially here about his dealings with the worst of people, the worst of people and we will deal with that shortly.

But fourthly here we read God is good and we are evil. God is good and we are evil.

After seeing in verse 15, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?”¹⁵ He says, “Is thine eye evil, because I am good?”¹⁶

¹⁴ Matthew 20:15.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

This whole parable as we have seen is about the generosity of God, how he gives sufficiently to all, good unto all men as the Lord. He has a good heart he is saying, a heart that delights to do good.

“I am good.”

He looks back over his dealings with everyone that day and he says, “I am good. I have done good and I delight to do good. I enjoy my goodness. I enjoy giving goodness. I am good.”

And all spotlights are on him shining the goodness and the generosity of God towards those who are so undeserving. But in the midst of this bright shining light of God’s goodness he sees a dark, evil eye.

He says, “Is your eye evil because I am good? Does it make you jealous to see me being so good? How can it cause you such pain to see me being so good to others? You agreed with me about the penny when you started working. You saw goodness in that. But now, now your eye is evil and it is not because I gave you less than I agreed, but because I have dealt with others in a way that has made them equal with you. And this is how [?] envy and your malice and your ill will. If you could take that penny out of their pockets you would. Your eye is evil.”

What a contrast to this here between a good and a generous God and this miserly, malicious, murderous spirit in the heart of these people.

“Your eye is evil.”

They didn’t complain because they didn’t have enough. They complained because of others were treated equally to them. It is agony to them.

But fifthly here God is wise and we are foolish.

“So the last shall be first,” verse 16, “and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”¹⁷

God is basically organizing his household here and he is saying, “The way I do things is the best way, the wisest way and this is how I do things. The way I do things is not first come, first served. It is first come, last served and last served first served. That is the way I work. That is my wisdom. And I know it is not yours, but your thoughts are not my thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. So my thoughts and my ways are far higher than yours. And you will really never understand fully how wise I am and how foolish you are, how contrary the ways of our thinking and dealings are. I am wise. You are foolish.”

¹⁷ Matthew 20:16.

There is no defensiveness here. There is no sayings of, “Ok, well, I served the last first and I gave them equal to you, so maybe we should adjust this a little bit.”

No. He is absolutely crystal clear. This is my wisdom, last, first, first, last. Many called, few chosen. And we will see what that means in just a moment.

Five basic principles about ourselves and about God. We are told here God is gracious and we are debtors. God is right and we are wrong. God is sovereign and we are servants. God is good. We are evil. God is wise and we are foolish.

How do we apply this? What does this men for us? What is the application of this parable?

Well, I think initially the application is to the Jews. They were those who were hired at the beginning of the day. They had the first call in the gospel. Sadly like these men here they perverted the gospel and they turned it into a commercial bargain, a kind of contact, agreement with God so that they felt, “Well, if I do this, then God will give me that and if I am this, then God will be that to me.” And it became very works oriented. It was a very cold, calculating legalistic agreement. They were given the first call of the gospel. God came to this nation in spiritual idleness, gave them the gospel and on the whole they perverted it, rejected it. And so God turned to the Gentiles and that is what we see here in the 9 AM and 12 noon and 3 PM and 5 PM. This is the gospel going beyond the Jews and it is no longer this... it is not a commercial agreement here. God just basically says, “Whatever is right I will give you.”

And they trust him. There is much more trust in this arrangement. It is not this kind of pre-dealing. You know, before we do anything we need to get this in writing. We need to fix the wage, fix the hours, fix the conditions. No.

He simply says, “Whatever is right I will give you.”

And they say, “Amen. I trust. I follow. You lead. I will do it.”

And at the end of the day the Jews see the Gentiles coming in who are but of recent calling. They have had the gospel for hundreds of years and now these Gentiles are coming in with no past and no tradition and no history and no amount of works. And they are hastening into the kingdom and they are accelerating past the Jews and they are looking on and they are saying, “This is not right. We have worked and we have labored. We have worked far harder far longer than them. We deserve more. They deserve nothing.”

And God is saying, “Friend, I do thee no wrong. I do thee no wrong. You wanted to be saved by the law, then keep the law perfectly. You want to climb into the kingdom by works and labor? Then why don’t you go and climb. I will do you no wrong, but you will never succeed. Friend, Jew, I do thee no wrong.”

That is who this parable was first addressed to. But this is also addressed to us in our own day. It is addressed to the unconverted just as the Jews were as a whole unconverted. It is addressed to the unevangelized unconverted.

We sometimes say, "What about those who never hear the gospel, who have never been evangelized, who don't have a Bible? How is God good? How is God just in dealing with them? How can God send them to hell and deal with them as strict justice when they have never had the gospel?"

Well, they have creation and they have conscience. Romans one tells us that God's creation preaches to them. Psalm 19 tells us that God's handiworks, his fingerprints are over all the world sending a message to every tongue, tribe and nation and everyone has conscience in which God has put his law. Again, calling them. And that is how these unevangelized heathen will be judged.

How did you respond to the calling of creation and the calling of conscience? And to every one of them as he deals with them at the end of time when the evening of this world comes, he will say to every single one of them, "Friend, I do thee no wrong. You had creation and you ignored it. You had conscience and you deafened your ear to it. Friend, I do thee no wrong."

But this is also a message to the evangelized unconverted, the unconverted who have heard the gospel and yet have not responded to it.

Are you now being spoken to here tonight? The gospel is calling you out of your idleness. The Lord is coming to you with gracious offers in the gospel and saying, "Why stand ye here all the day idle? Why pass so much of your life in spiritual idleness, spiritual inactivity, spiritual unemployment, spiritual laziness, spiritual sloth?"

Idleness.

And to you at the end of the day when your evening comes and you are confronted by the good man of this house, he, too, will look at you and say, "Friend, I do thee no wrong. I offered you the gospel. I came to you early and I came to you often and I came to you earnestly and I even came to you late and you still [?]. Friend, friend, I do thee no wrong. Depart from me into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Probably the moral unconverted, the moral unconverted... you may be here tonight and you are looking at your life and you feel you have led a good life and you have outwardly, no question. And you have been a loyal and a faithful father or mother or husband or wife or son or daughter, faithful in coming to church and faithful in many external duties of Christian religion. But you are seething because you are seeing some filthy sinners being converted. You are seeing some who have come so late and so undeserving and they are not just being treated equal to you. They are passing into the kingdom. The Lord is having mercy on their souls. They are saying, "I am a son of God."

I am a daughter of God. The Lord has loved me and gave himself for me.” And you see them sitting at the Lord’s Table maybe and you seethe. “How dare they?” Or, more accurately, “How dare he pass me by and treat them like this when I have lived like that and they have lived like this and look how we end up?”

“Friend, I do thee no wrong. It is your eye evil because I am good?” He is saying, “Let that reaction teach you where your heart really lies. Let that evil eye teach you about your own evil heart. If you can’t rejoice in me giving grace to others, you have never experienced grace. If you can’t bear seeing me being good you have never tasted of my goodness. Friend, I do thee no wrong.”

Or maybe you are young and unconverted. The Lord is coming to you early in the day of life. You are privileged amongst many children your age in this world to hear the gospel from a young age. The Lord, as it were, has risen up early and has come to you eagerly and is offering your life, calling you into his kingdom, into his vineyard, what a privilege you have got. You have got a whole life stretched out in front of you, so much service and labor you could give to the Lord out of love to him. You are hearing his call. He is pointing you to his vineyard and he saying, “Whatever calling in life you have, whether it is a plumber or a secretary or a home maker or a minister or a road sweeper or whatever. Serve me in it. Glorify me in it. Devote your whole life and trust that whatever is right he will give you. He is a giving, good and generous God.”

What if you are middle aged? The Lord is coming to you at the noon day of your life. You have heard many calls early in life and in the teens of life and in the 20s of life. But it comes to you again in the noon day of your life. He hasn’t given up.

He is still coming and he is still saying, “Why stand ye here all the day idle? Why have you not yet labored for me? Why have you not get devoted your life to me? Why? Why the idleness? Why all the business and business? Why all the business in home? Why all the business in the community? No spiritual business, no soul business, no business with heaven. Why? Why stand you here all the day idle?”

He comes to you and he says as he says to these men who in verse four and verse seven, “Go ye also into the vineyard. Go ye also into the vineyard. Yes. The locusts have eaten many years, but don’t let them eat another. Go ye also into the vineyard.”

But what if you are at the 11th hour of your life? The evening is drawing nigh. My gray haired friends, I can’t help but wondering where you are bound. I can’t help but wondering where you are bound. It is the 11th hour. And he comes again. Again he comes. It is late. It is sadly late. It is dreadfully late. It is shamefully late. It is sinfully late, but it is not too late. The gate is shutting, but it is not yet shut.

The 11th hour. You look back over all the years of your life, all the wasted years and you might think, “What can I do for the Lord? I have only got a year left, two years left, maybe a few years left.”

Well, when the Lord came to these men at the 11th hour he might have said, “[?] What can they do for me?”

Instead he said, “What can I do for them? What can I do for them?” The 11th hour God is still seeking to do you good. He is not tired of inviting you yet.

“Go ye also. Go ye also.”

There is a story told of a man under the ministry of John Flavel. He heard a sermon in his teens or 20s and forget all about it. By the age of 103 he was sitting under a hedge in Virginia and he remembered a sermon that Flavel had preached at Plymouth when he was a teenager.

And this is what happened to that sermon.

Mr. Flavel at the end of a sermon instead of pronouncing the blessing said, “I cannot bless you. How can I bless you? How can I bless those who do not love the Lord Jesus Christ?”

“If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ let him be Anathema Maranatha.”¹⁸

Over 80 years later that sermon came back to his mind and God blessed it to his conversion. He was spared to live three years more. And when he died this inscription was put over his grave.

“Here lies a babe in grace, aged three years who died according to nature aged 106.”

It is the 11th hour. How many hours do you have left?

Spurgeon told this story of a man he knew, an old man who got lost in the woods on one winter’s night and the darkness was falling. The snow was falling. The wolves were howling. And he was lost. He didn’t know where to go, what to do. So he gathered a few leaves together and a few dry twigs he could find and he had a box of matches and he thought, “I have to get a fire started to keep away the wild animals,” so that he could last the night.

And so he started lighting the matches. It didn’t work, didn’t work, didn’t work. He had 70 matches, went through them all.

Of course, as he was going through them and it wasn’t lighting and it wasn’t lighting and it wasn’t lighting he became a lot more careful as he came to 10 and then five and still no fire. Four, three, two...

The darkness had fallen. The snowfall was rising. The wolves were howling. His joints were numb. His fingers were frozen. He had two matches left. He strikes the second last,

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 16:22.

fire goes. It is blown out. He has one match left. How do you think he would have prayed about that last match? His whole life depends on one match. He calls upon God. He cries to him.

“Sixty-nine matches have gone out. I have got one left. My life depends on it.”

Such earnestness and concentration and everything he thought he goes to light that match and it flames. How did he rejoice.

Some of you are in your 69th year. Some of you have been given more than the years of the very strong. But your matches are running out. Your sermons are running out. You may be down to your last. And I can't help but wondering where you are bound, where you are bound. I can't help but wondering where you are bound.

Are you going to end your day with these horrific words as you feel the fire burning, “Friend, oh friend, I do thee no wrong. I do thee no wrong. I do thee no wrong”? Will that be the echo through all eternity in your ears? “Friend...”

Yes. How friendly did God show himself to you? How many tokens of friendship did he offer you and you spurned and you rejected?

He will do you no wrong. Whatever is right, he will give you. It is not too late. He comes again and he comes with offers of grace and mercy. Will you not run? Will you not jump at the chance? Will you not take this sermon as your last match and use it for the salvation of your soul, trusting the Lord, no longer bargaining, no longer contracting, no longer dealing, working for rewards, but trusting him, him alone, his grace, his mercy your only plea.

Will you not call upon him as he comes into your marketplace tonight? If you were really desperate for work, as it were, for labor, for service, for salvation, call. As these unemployed men in that marketplace must have felt at the 11th hour. “I have got one last chance to get some bread on the table for my family.”

You have one last chance maybe for bread for your soul. Call. “Me, Lord. Take me, even late, even now. Despite all my resentment through the years, despite all my accusations, despite all my rejections of your sovereignty, despite me saying your goodness is evil and my evil is goodness, despite me saying you are wrong and I am right, forgive it all. Despite me resenting greater sinners hastening into the kingdom ahead of me. Please take me at this late, late hour.”

And let me finish with a word to the children. Lest you think you have got plenty of time, maybe your 11th hour and maybe any one of us 11th hour. It might be the last match for the youngest soul here. You need a friend that sticks closer than a brother. You need the friend of friends. Seek him early. Seek him now.

Amen.

May God bless his Word.

Let us pray.

Sovereign Lord, please come and save every soul here soon, even now. May we hear thy calling? May we repent of our idleness and may we trust thee whatever is right, thou wilt give us. And please save those who are nearest to death first. Thou knowest where all our clocks are. Thou knowest which of our clocks are at one minute to midnight. Thou knowest which of us are on the edge, the very precipice of eternity.