

Tracy Daub  
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**Matthew 20:1-16**

## THE REWARDS PLAN

Everywhere you turn, some business has a rewards plan they want you to join: the airlines, credit card companies, the corner drug store, even the pet supply store. "Do you have our rewards card?" they ask as you pay for your items. You wouldn't want to lose out on the rewards you deserve by failing to be part of the plan.

Even the disciples want to know about Jesus' rewards plan for them. What prompts this inquiry is a statement Jesus makes about rich people. Remember that in the world of ancient Palestine, wealth was considered a sign of God's blessing. But Jesus contradicts this prevailing belief when he says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." This is a stunning statement. And it shatters the disciples' world view in which money and worldly success were seen as the rewards one got for following God faithfully. The disciples wonder: if wealth is not a sign of God's blessing, well then, just what kind of a rewards plan does God deal in?

So Peter asks Jesus: What about us disciples? We have given up everything to follow you. What then will we have? What is our reward?

Maybe this is a question you have wondered yourself. What then will we have, we who have tried to follow Jesus in *our* lives. What is our reward for faithfulness? What is your reward for your years of dedication to the church, for all those hours baking desserts for a mission fundraiser, for the commitment made to come in early and set up communion, for the visits you made to nursing homes and hospitals? What is your reward for doing the sometimes tedious work of committees, for volunteering at the food pantry or for fixing a meal for a homeless

family, for teaching Sunday school all those years, for coming to church even in a snow storm? What about your faithfulness outside of the church? What is your reward for taking in your brother's troubled kid to live with you when he was facing a difficult time? Or for your pain and struggle in trying to forgive your ex-spouse or your irresponsible sister because Jesus told you that we are supposed to forgive? What about when you spoke out against the unethical practices taking place at work and how you never received another promotion after that? What about the ways you have tried to live out Jesus' call to love our enemies, even your brother-in-law or colleague who makes those racist, sexist, and homophobic remarks? What is your reward for the hours spent holding your elderly neighbor's hand in the ER because he had no relatives living in town? What is your reward for the volunteer hours you gave on behalf of the homeless, or to champion immigrant rights, or to protest torture? What is your reward for loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and for loving your neighbor as yourself?

Jesus tells us that our efforts at faithfulness are not ignored or forgotten. He tells Peter that everyone who has made sacrifices for the life of faith will indeed know abundant, manifold blessings and will, as Jesus says, "inherit eternal life." God will remember our efforts, our labors of faithful living. And Jesus adds, "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." In other words, in the Kingdom of God, there will be an inversion of society as we know it. The rich may know earthly rewards now, they may be the first in line for all the goodies this world can offer them, but Jesus tells his followers that in the Kingdom of God, the order will be reversed and the last will be first. Blessings will come to you, he tells his disciples. They will come.

So here's the interesting thing. Just after promising his disciples that they are indeed included in God's rewards plan, Jesus immediately tells them a parable to illustrate what the

Kingdom of God is like, this kingdom where the last are first and the first are last. And what an odd parable it is. When Jesus tells a story, it's like he takes a stick of dynamite and wraps a story around it and then lights it on fire, because most of Jesus' stories are destined to blow up in our faces.

We have this story about a landowner who goes out and hires day laborers to work in his vineyard. We might imagine such a story taking place around here--near Lake Chautauqua or in the vineyards of the Finger Lakes. The owner hires some workers and promises to pay them a typical day's wage. Maybe in today's world we could imagine him telling them he will pay them each \$100. And they agree to work for this amount and off they go to work. But then the owner goes out later in the day and hires more workers and he tells them he will pay them what is fair. And then he does the same thing even later in the day, and then again at 5 o'clock. When the day's work is over they all line up to receive their pay. And the owner starts with the people hired at the very end of the day. They worked just one hour. They are handed their pay envelope and when they open it they pull out a crisp \$100 bill. This is amazing! A hundred dollars for one hour's work! Well, the other workers in line start to do the math in their heads. So the ones who worked 2 hours think to themselves, "Hey, I'm going to get \$200!" And the ones who worked 5 hours think to themselves, "I'm going to get \$500!" And the ones who worked 8 hours are thinking, "I'm going home with \$800." And the ones who worked 12 hours are thinking, "I'm going to get \$1,200!" But instead, all of them open their envelopes to find a single \$100 bill. And they explode. It's an outrage! It's unfair!

But is it? Is it really unfair? Obviously, this story is a parable telling us something important about the kingdom of God and is not about how we should conduct our own businesses, otherwise we would have workers refusing to show up at 9 in the morning. But is the

owner in the story really unfair? After all, he paid those who worked all day exactly what he promised them. So, they aren't cheated out of anything. No promises were broken. So the owner is not unfair. But he is outrageously generous. And his generosity undermines our assumed norms about the rewards plan. The rewards plan in this parable has some of the workers receiving more than we think they deserved. Jesus says to us, "The kingdom of heaven is like this."

I think this parable is told by Jesus as a cautionary tale to his disciples--to his ancient disciples and to us sitting here, his modern disciples. I think this parable is offered as a warning to us and our assumptions about God's rewards plan.

The reason I think this, is because of an interesting aspect in Jesus' story. Notice that in telling the story, Jesus has the owner of the vineyard tell his manager to pay the workers beginning with those hired last and then going to those hired first. By doing this, all the workers see exactly how much money the workers who worked only one hour received. Why not have the workers who were hired last get paid last, then the others would have already left, there would be no one to witness the owner's extravagant generosity, and there would be no grumbling from the other workers. But it is an important element in the story that all the workers witness the owner's extravagant generosity. This isn't simply a story about God's generosity to the last and the least. This is a story that undermines our human assumptions about entitlement and status and rewards.

Let's remember that Jesus has just confirmed to his disciples that they indeed are included in God's rewards plan. Their faithfulness to the way of God will be seen and blessed. But what happens to us humans as soon as we know we are part of some special rewards plan? We begin to feel entitled. We become impressed with ourselves. We become protective of our status.

Whether it pertains to the jobs we hold, our educational background, the schools our children attend, or the frequent flyer privileges we receive on the airlines, we begin to cherish our special position in life and the rewards that come with such positions.

I think Jesus was offering this story as a cautionary tale to his followers--to all of us--to curb any sense of entitlement that we may mistakenly believe we have. Yes, we are part of God's rewards plan. But if we recall the beginning of this conversation about rich people and camels and eyes of needles, we know the rewards Jesus speaks about are not material wealth and worldly success. The lasting, eternal life God rewards us with both now and in the life to come will take a radically different form than money and material possessions. I wonder, I wonder if the true reward is that we are invited to be part of God's kingdom, to participate in God's work in the world, to be partners in advancing God's realm day by day. In other words, the reward comes in being invited to spend our lives in God's vineyard. Come labor in my vineyard, God says to us, and you will be richly rewarded.

What bugs us about this story, what offends people, are those people in the story and the people in life who are given the same rewards but who we think don't deserve that benefit. Our society is organized around who we think deserves certain benefits--who came to this country the "right" way, who has demonstrated their commitment to our church or organization, who has demonstrated good habits in life, careful spending, mature decisions, and so forth. These are the deserving folks. And I wonder if the offense so many Christians have with this story down through the ages is that we have all cast ourselves in the roll of those workers who labored all day. We see ourselves as the deserving workers.

But what if, what if in the heavenly scales of faithfulness, what if it turned out that you and I are really more like those folks who came into the vineyard at the very end of the day?

What if compared to others of God's faithful people, our efforts at loving our enemies, serving our neighbor, forgiving one another, sharing our resources, caring for the least and the vulnerable, standing up and speaking out for others, what if all our efforts are really on whole rather paltry? What if we are the ones who have shown up late to work? And suddenly, suddenly, amazingly, we pull out our \$100 bill from the envelope. Maybe, maybe we are the undeserving ones who have been generously included in God's rewards plan.

There is a great vineyard out there. And God calls us to come to work. This is the world you and I are invited to enter every day as we get out of our beds, interact with our family, go to our schools and jobs, and participate in the life of our community. God's kingdom isn't just a place we go to in the future when we die. God's realm is among us right now. And God calls us to enter it and live it out: to live out a concern for the last and the least of society, to live out God's radical generosity and grace to those the world may consider undeserving. Because here, here in the vineyard of God, all of us, *all of us*, get more than we deserve.