

How to be Unhappy – Without Even Trying!

Matthew 20:1-16

“He never forgot where he came from.” You’ve heard those words. They are usually part of a eulogy to someone who rose from humble beginnings to become famous. “He was a great man but he never forgot where he came from.” The truth is we all come from the same place, a fact that was made clear to one European tourist when he asked an elderly lady in a quaint village, “Excuse me. Were there any great men born in this village?” She responded with a puzzled expression, “No, only babies.”

The parable today is a reminder to never forget where we came from. Those who forget where they came from and how they got there are destined for dissatisfaction.

In order to understand this parable let’s look at some key phrases:

“He went out” (vv. 1-7) This expression is used four times in six verses (vv. 1, 3, 5, and 6).

The landowner depicts God and is portrayed as actively pursuing workers who will serve him. The Bible portrays God as one who seeks.

He seeks the lost **Ezekiel 34:16** “I will **seek** the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick.”

He seeks those who worship in spirit and truth **John 4:23** “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father **seeks** to be His worshipers.”

He seeks those who are fully devoted to Him **2 Chronicles 16:9** “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.”

The God of the Bible is not a God who sits in His heaven playing hide and seek. He does not require us to find Him somehow. He comes after us, wooing us as a lover, inviting us to enter into an intimate relationship with Him and to be involved in His mission on this earth.

“Pay them their wages.” (vv. 8-9). The parable turns on the payment of the workers at the end of the day. The common theme in many of Jesus’ parables of the kingdom is what happens at the end of the age. He avoids eschatological details like the timing of the rapture, the tribulation, or the details of a 1,000 year millennial reign, but He does not shy away from one very important fact – THERE WILL BE A PAY DAY SOME DAY.

In two of the previous parables we have studied – the wheat/weeds and drag net – Jesus warns about a separation of the righteous from the unrighteous. This parable is different – everyone gets paid. No one is left out. This is not a parable about salvation. This is a parable about discipleship.

“I do what I want with what I own.” (vv. 10-16) God does whatever he wants. The psalmist said, “He does whatever He pleases.” (Ps. 115:3) God’s choices sometimes conflict with ours. Have you ever noticed that God is not always logical? He transcends logic. He chooses the foolish things to shame the wise and the weak things to shame the strong. He chose David and not Saul. He chose Jacob and not Esau. He chose you to represent him and me to preach the Gospel. Now that’s not logical! This parable appears illogical. The landowner acts in a way that seems “unfair” to our logical minds. The worker in the story represents people who are followers of Christ but lack the joy and energy God intends for them because God hasn’t given them what they expected. We’ve all met Christians who just seem to be stuck

on miserable. How could that be? The parable provides some important insight into how we can be unhappy – without even trying. Let’s look closely at the response of the worker who was hired first...vv. 10-16.

1. If you want to be unhappy presume upon the goodness of God. (“they thought they would receive more.” v. 10). The man who was chosen first made a mistake as critical as it is common – He assumed that the landowner thought like he thought. He worked longer than the others so he should be paid more. God doesn’t think like us: **Isaiah 55:7-11** “Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding *in the matter* for which I sent it.’”

Voltaire once said, "God created man in his own image, and now man is returning the favor." The man in the parable presumed to know what the landowner would do at the end of the day. The irony is that the landowner did exactly what he said he would do but the man “thought he would receive more.” Our thoughts are not God’s thoughts. Our thoughts can get us into trouble.

Eve thought that eating the fruit would make her like God. Abraham thought he was too old to have a son so he produced one through a woman who wasn’t his wife. David thought no one noticed what he had done to Uriah to hide his sin with Bathsheba. Pilate thought he could silence Jesus. How about you? What do you “think”? Do you think you deserve to be happy? Do you think only bad people should die young? Do you think the United States is God’s chosen country and immune to His judgment? Do you think sin has no consequences? These are thoughts that commonly pop up in the minds of those who presume to know what God thinks. When things don’t work out the way we “think” they should, we fall apart or feel betrayed.

2. If you want to be unhappy always compare yourself to others (v. 11). Do you hear the arrogance in the words, “you have made them equal.”? The human heart is corrupt and full of pride. Pride is the source of all other sins. In my pride I want to be unique, special, a cut above. The fact is that, in God’s eyes we are of equal worth. Think of how silly our pride must look to God. My daughter played host to some VIPs during the NBA All-Star game. She said that some of the stars showed their importance not by their clothes, everyone was decked out, not be their jewels, everyone had their bling on, but by the number of body guards that accompanied them. Even the welterweight boxing champion of the world, Floyd Mayweather, had four body guards! For security? Does a guy who is 40-0 in his boxing career need four body guards?

When we compare ourselves to others we sin twice; once by envying or coveting what others have and twice by ignoring the uniqueness God has given us. You are “his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works that we should walk in them.” (Eph. 2:10). There is no

one else like you, created and called for God's sovereign purpose. Stop comparing yourself to others and get busy doing what only you can do.

3. If you want to be unhappy resent the generosity of God (v. 15). Notice the cause and effect question, "Are you envious because I am generous?" When we discover the truth about who God is we can either embrace the truth and correct our faulty presuppositions or we can sulk because we are not the only ones to receive His grace and attention. The latter response is the "Jonah syndrome." Jonah was angry at God for sparing the Ninevites. When something triggers an angry response like Jonah's our pride is exposed. Jonah's anger was not based on anything outside himself, it came from something inside of him. If he truly valued what God valued he would have rejoiced at the response of God to the repentance of the Ninevites. But he didn't feel that way. In fact, he said he would rather die than see his enemies saved... v. 3. In his self-centeredness Jonah was trying to dam up the wells of salvation to water his own garden. That's what the man in this parable wanted to do. He viewed God's generosity as a threat to his own self-importance.

True justice, God's justice, looks for ways to express love. Our justice often looks for ways to elevate ourselves over others. God is a just God but He is also a generous God. The landowner in the story was good to the first man but in his arrogance that man wanted to limit the master's extravagant generosity on the basis of fairness. In the process he was blinded to the generosity of the landowner. A gracious act on the part of God becomes an evil deed in the mind of the one whose "eye is evil."

Jesus concludes with "the last shall be first." What does this phrase mean? He is not instructing us on a clever way to get to the front of the line in heaven. He is reminding us that human perceptions about rankings are insignificant and will be stood on their heads in the kingdom. He is sovereign, He knows what we don't and His grace is full and free to all who come in faith.

Never forget where you came from. You were dead in your trespasses and sins, you were lost, without hope, alienated, hostile to God. But our generous God came seeking us, and found us and offered us not only eternal life in the future but meaningful service in the present.

Remember the fairy tale where the young woman who was despised and abused was miraculously invited to the Royal Ball where she met a handsome prince? She had to leave before the clock struck twelve but the prince pursued her until he found her. His love transformed her from a pauper to a princess. Not because she was worthy but because he was good. That story is timeless because it resonates in every human heart. That's not just a Cinderella story, that's the Gospel. We want to be pursued and found and loved and transformed from what we are into what we could be. The Gospel is not a fairy tale. God is seeking someone this morning. It might be you. Receive Him. God is transforming many of us this morning. Cooperate with Him. Surrender to His love and follow after Him.

Our God is a generous God. Rather than comparing ourselves to others, let's give thanks for what God has done for us. One of the traditions of the church is partaking of the eucharist. Eucharisteo is a word that means "to give thanks." What an appropriate way to respond to this parable this morning. Let us give thanks...