



Does God Have Rights? – TouchPoint for September 16, 2020

Matthew 20:1-16 (MSG)

A Story About Workers

“God’s kingdom is like an estate manager who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. They agreed on a wage of a dollar a day, and went to work.

“Later, about nine o’clock, the manager saw some other men hanging around the town square unemployed. He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage. They went. “He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o’clock. At five o’clock he went back and found still others standing around. He said, ‘Why are you standing around all day doing nothing?’ “They said, ‘Because no one hired us.’ “He told them to go to work in his vineyard.

“When the day’s work was over, the owner of the vineyard instructed his foreman, ‘Call the workers in and pay them their wages. Start with the last hired and go on to the first.’ “Those hired at five o’clock came up and were each given a dollar. When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more. But they got the same, each of them one dollar. Taking the dollar, they groused angrily to the manager, ‘These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.’

“He replied to the one speaking for the rest, ‘Friend, I haven’t been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn’t we? So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?’

“Here it is again, the Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last, and the last first.”

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?”

We hear a lot about “rights” these days. My ‘right’ to not wear a mask. My ‘right’ to assemble in as crowded of a space as I choose. This nation is founded on the idea of “INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS”!!!

Though how you have a “nation of individuals” is beyond me. That is an oxymoron if I have ever heard one. It is impossible to have a “nation of individuals”. It will never hold together. It can’t hold together. In a time of crisis, people won’t pull together as a nation, they will go their individual ways, demand their individual rights ... after all ... the nation exists for the sake of the individual. Everything exists for the sake of the individual. Community, common good, the good of the whole, are left in the dust when push comes to shove. MY RIGHTS!!! Above and beyond everything and everybody else. So why are we so surprised when our elected leaders act like the government exist to fill their coffers.

Don’t believe me??? Look outside your window. Read the paper. Watch TV. You can’t be both a nation and an individual at your core. To quote Jesus, “You can’t serve two masters.” You either see yourself as primarily one or the other.

So, we hear a lot about rights these days. But I have a question for you, “Does God have rights?” That’s a weird question isn’t it? Have you ever thought about that? Does God have rights? Can God do whatever God chooses? And how do you feel about that?

That’s the question the parable for today asks of us. Does God have rights? Can God do what God wants?

Can God forgive ad infinitum? 7 times 70? Can God be generous? Especially to the least deserving?

Can God throw our idea of meritocracy out the window? Make a mockery of it? Can God's generosity show us how locked into the idea of reward and merit we are? To the point that we become indignant, when others are shown grace upon grace? You don't think you worship meritocracy? Then ask yourself this, "How would you feel if you were the workers who worked all day?" Would you be happy for the workers who started at the end of the day? Or ticked off at the landowner?

Let's face it. We worship meritocracy. We find our identity, value, and meaning in it. It defines our value OVER and AGAINST others. Which is the whole problem with it. It defines us OVER and AGAINST others.

It makes us less generous rather than more generous. I strongly, STRONGLY, encourage you to google "Clifton Mark, A Belief in Meritocracy" to read about a psychological experiment that shows that those who **believe** they have earned something (even when they haven't), are less generous than those who believe they have been given something.

But back to the parable. What do we do with a God who doesn't work on meritocracy? What do we do with a God who gives the same to everybody? Now I've heard the counter argument and read the commentaries on this passage.

"Those workers at the end of the day still went out and worked. You have to go out and work. You have to do something."

Really?!? That's what you take from this parable? That's the point?!? You've got to be kidding. How in bondage to reward and merit can you get? The counter-point only proves my point.

But back to my question:

What do we do with a God who doesn't work on meritocracy? What do we do with a God who gives the same to everybody?

Here's what we do! We capture him. We torture him. We mock him. We hang him on a tree and deride him... "This is what you get for touching lepers. Talking to and healing gentile women. And forgiving people who don't even ask for it."

No, we can't stand a God who will not uphold our system of reward and merit. God needs to be subservient to our systems of reward and merit... God needs to reinforce our belief in reward and merit... Rather than have reward and merit being subservient to a gracious and merciful God.

Why is it we so despise God's grace?

Oh, I know...it was just the people in biblical times who despised God's grace. People like the workers in the vineyard ... and the Pharisees and the scribes in Jesus times.

We are different right? We don't despise God's grace. We embrace it! We celebrate it! We share it!

Oh really? Let me give you an experiment to do. The next time you are in a bible study or with a church group, say this, "I think everyone will go to heaven. I think God's grace will win out over our sin." Then sit back and watch the reaction. My favorite reaction, one that occurs about 90% of the time, is this, "Then why bother going to church?" It's a great question. Why do we bother going to church?

May I suggest to you that there just may be an answer that sits outside the paradigm of reward and punishment.

May I suggest to you that there just may be an answer based on God's grace, forgiveness, and mercy.... Maybe even a sense of thanksgiving??? Just suggesting...

As Gerhard Forde, a Lutheran theologian, wrote in one of his books, "If you want to cause chaos and disruption in the church, just say you think everyone will go to heaven."

Or take Rob Bell for example... once a pastor of a huge non-denominational evangelical church in Michigan, over 10,000 members, who wrote a book a few years ago entitled, "Love Wins" ...and in it he suggested...just suggested... the possibility that even hell will be defeated and all will go to heaven.

He was excommunicated. To paraphrase Henny Youngman, "Take Rob Bell...Please."

Now what was fascinating to me wasn't so much Rob Bell's writings. His thoughts have been an integral part of Christianity since its beginnings. No, what fascinated me was the reaction: All the people who were angry.

One would think that as Christians we would be excited about the possibility of all going to heaven. We would want to learn more about this possibility.

But that doesn't seem to be the case. There seem to be as many or more 'hell enthusiasts' as there are 'heaven enthusiasts' in the Christian community. There seem to be as many or more people who look forward to there being an actual hell as there are who look forward to heaven.

And I wonder...I wonder... if on judgment day, if God says "Everyone is welcome" if they won't stand up and say, "Hey, wait a minute...someone has to go to hell." And I just wonder if God won't look at them and say, "OK, if you are demanding that Hell be occupied...as you wish...be on your way." In other words, be careful what you wish for.

Why do we despise God's grace? God's generosity? Because it doesn't give us the final say. The last word. Why we can even hang God on a cross as our answer to his generosity, and you know what he is going to say, "Father forgive them."

We can betray him, deny him, grow tired of him and run away from him, as our answer to his generosity. And you know what he is going to say... "Take and eat...take and drink... this is my body and blood given for you and for ALL people for the forgiveness of sin."

Why do we despise God's grace? Because it doesn't give us the final say. The last word.

I don't know why we can't just see God's grace in the same way we view the sun. Always there and always shining down on us. I mean, I've never had anyone come up to me and ask me if I accepted the sun as my personal source of light and photosynthesis in my life.

And while I've heard roosters crow at a sunrise, I've never heard anyone yell at the sun as it comes up, "BUT WHAT ABOUT MY FREE WILL!!!! Don't I get a say in whether you come up in the morning or not?"

Why do we despise God's grace? Because it doesn't give us the final say. The last word.

But why can't we just see God's grace in the same way we view the sun. Always there and always shining down on us.

God is going to be generous to those God wishes to be generous. Do you begrudge God, his generosity? Be careful how you answer that. You just might be in need of a generous God someday... or every day!!!

But in the end, even how you answer that question isn't going to matter. God is going to be generous to you either way. And why do I say that? Because you can't earn God's generosity... just like you can't earn a morning sunrise...

You simply have to live with it. Live and move and have your being in it.

Along with EVERYONE else.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

Be Still, know that I am God.

Calm Me Lord

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.
Still me Lord, keep me from harm. Let
all the tumult within me cease. Enfold me
Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

The Lord's Prayer

The Meal

Come Drink of Living Water

Come drink of living water. Never thirst again.

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you. To shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you. And give you peace....