



The Economy of Grace
Matthew 20:1-16
August 2, 2026

Rev. Ann Palmerton
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

I'll be honest. This parable bothers me. Every time I hear it, something in me protests

Some workers start at dawn and labor through the heat of the day. They carry the burden. They earn their wage. Then, at quitting time, a group of workers who put in only one hour receive exactly the same pay.

"It's not fair." And that's right where Jesus wants us. Because this parable isn't really about wages or even fairness. It's about what happens inside us when someone else receives an unexpected gift.

I've felt this myself. Before our younger son committed to play golf in college, there was a season when we so hoped someone would notice him. We'd walk courses at tournaments, and other parents would quietly mention that coaches from this college or that university were following other players. I remember a little knot forming in my stomach. It wasn't that I wanted those young men to fail. I just wanted someone to notice our son, too. It's amazing how quickly someone else's good news can make us lose sight of our own blessings. That's what comparison does. It steals our joy.

In our parable, the first workers are content with their earnings, until they see what everyone else receives. Nothing has been taken from them. They all receive exactly what they agreed to. What changes is that someone else receives the same compensation. At the end of the parable the landowner hears them grumbling and asks a potent question: *"Are you envious because I am generous?"* (Matthew 20:15).

The Greek is even more vivid, *"Is your eye evil because I am good?"* That phrase, "the evil eye," isn't about superstition. In the Bible it describes a heart that resents another person's good fortune, a way of seeing the world through comparison rather than gratitude.

Christian tradition has a name for that: envy. It has long been counted as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Not because it's the worst sin or vice, but because it quietly gives birth to so many others: resentment, bitterness, division, even violence. Envy isn't wanting what someone else has. It is sorrow at another person's blessing.

"I was fine...until they got the promotion."

"I was happy...until their child got into that college."

"I was content...until they received the recognition."

"I was grateful...until someone else got the same thing."

The church has long recognized how deeply human this is. Author and speaker Brené Brown writes that envy is one of the emotions we are least willing to admit.¹ We'll admit we're frustrated or disappointed. We'll even admit we're angry. But few of us will say, "I'm envious." Instead, we tell ourselves another story. "It's just not fair."

Brown also reminds us that envy and jealousy aren't the same thing. Jealousy fears losing what I already have. Envy grieves what someone else has received.² That's what's happening in Jesus' story. The workers aren't afraid of losing their wages. They've been paid. They're distressed because someone else received the same amount. Comparison changes everything. Think about how often that happens.

- A new employee who has been with the company for six months receives the same year-end bonus as someone who's worked there for ten years.
- Parents spend years helping a child through addiction or financial hardship, while the responsible sibling wonders, "I've always done the right thing. Why does all the attention go to them?"
- Someone receives student loan forgiveness after someone else spent years sacrificing to pay off their own debt.

In each case, our own circumstances haven't changed. Comparison has changed how we see them. Comparison fuels envy because it whispers a story: "No one notices me." "My faithfulness doesn't matter." "Someone else's blessing somehow diminishes my own." Maybe that's why this parable feels so personal.

I don't think the first workers were greedy. I think they probably were tired. And wanted to be seen. Maybe the wage they received had become more than a day's pay, maybe it had become a measure of their worth. At times, I think we've all felt that. "Does anyone see how hard I've worked?" "What about me?"

Those are deeply human questions. And here's something I love about Jesus. He doesn't shame those who carry those questions. He never says the workers aren't tired. He never says their labor doesn't matter or their faithfulness isn't real.

Instead, he asks a different question. Can you celebrate goodness that isn't directed toward you? Can you rejoice when someone else receives unexpected grace? That's a much harder question than whether God is fair. Can you celebrate when someone receives grace you don't think they've earned? How about when a church down the street thrives? When a colleague succeeds? When someone whose life has been marked by struggle finally catches a break?

Christian tradition says the opposite of envy isn't simply contentment. It is love. Love is the ability to celebrate another person's joy. To say, "I'm so glad this happened for you." Not because it benefits me or because I think it was deserved. Simply because another child of God is flourishing.

This is where I think Jesus wants to take us one step further. To see our human envy as a symptom of something even larger.

Envy flourishes wherever we believe there isn't enough. Not enough recognition. Not enough opportunity. Not enough love or blessing. Envy is born from scarcity. And scarcity teaches that if someone else receives more, there must be less left for me.

¹ Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*, p. 25.

² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

The kingdom of God resists that story. The landowner doesn't take anything away from the first workers. He simply refuses to let the last workers go home hungry. God's goodness toward another person doesn't diminish God's goodness toward you.

A while ago I had to renew my driver's license at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. I did what you're supposed to do and reserved a time online. When I arrived, the waiting room was packed. Chairs were filled and people stood along the walls. I sighed and thought, "This is going to take a while."

A few minutes after I arrived, we heard an announcement, asking for anyone with an appointment to come forward. I looked around expecting others to move. No one did. Just me.

I walked to the front of the line. It felt awkward. It also felt good! I hadn't earned this by working harder or waiting longer. This was a gift. My job was to receive it.

I wonder if that's a little like what Jesus is describing. Sometimes we're the workers who have carried the burden of the day. Sometimes we're the ones who arrive and discover that grace has already been prepared for us.

Like the workers in the vineyard, we find it hard to celebrate God's generosity when someone else receives the same grace we do. Comparison comes easily. Envy is persistent. We will still have moments when we feel that knot in our stomach and wonder, "What about me?"

Spiritual maturity is not about never feeling envy. It is about learning what to do with it, about noticing when comparison takes hold and choosing, again and again, to lean toward love.

We will not do this perfectly. We will fail. We will need grace ourselves. But we keep growing. We keep practicing gratitude. We keep learning to see one another as God sees us. This is the way of Christ, whose grace is always more than enough. Amen.