



As the New Year is almost here, I've been thinking about New Year's resolutions. Raise your hand—How many of you have ever made a New Year's Resolution? How many of you have ever broken your New Year's Resolution? Me too! I've stopped making New Year's resolutions because I always eventually break them. It makes me feel disappointed in myself. Like back in Jr. High when I was the last kid picked to be on a basketball, baseball, or dodgeball team. Can some of you relate? It makes me feel like I'm not good enough, and I don't need to feel like that.

My guess is that most of us have felt like we've come in last place—or at least not first place—at one time or another in our lives. Or maybe we've felt like we've been treated unfairly.

Maybe we didn't get that promotion at work.

Maybe we didn't make the cut for the basketball or soccer team.

Maybe we didn't win that competition or earn that degree.

Maybe someone treated us unfairly.

Maybe someone else got something more or better than we did.

In one way or another, we all can relate to being in "last place" or to not being in "first place." Aren't we glad that the New Year brings new beginnings? We have a chance to start fresh and try for first place again!

As we begin this New Year, Jesus has a parable for us. His parable reminds us of who we are. His parable brings hope to our times of difficulty, of need, of disappointment. His parable challenges us to rethink our success. Jesus' parable, I hope, will give us a fresh perspective on following him this New Year.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a Landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard (Matthew 20:1-2).

Let's set some background for this parable. Jesus starts by saying, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." What is the Kingdom of Heaven? The Kingdom of Heaven is not Heaven, or at least not entirely. The Kingdom of Heaven, also known as the Kingdom of God, is where God is reigning as King! Of course, God reigns as King of the universe. But God's rule and reign hasn't come fully, at least not yet. We still see injustice, pain, sin, and death. The Kingdom of Heaven will come fully when Christ returns. Then, Jesus will reign as the ultimate King. Justice will be served. Peace and joy will abound. And sin and death will be no more!

Jesus gives us a picture of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like by telling us this parable. The Kingdom, he says, looks like a landowner who goes out early to hire workers for his vineyard.

Let's make this tangible. Is there a Jr. High or High School student who wants to make a few dollars this morning? If you're interested in some work, stand up so I can see you. Great! We found our lucky volunteer. Come on up!

(To volunteer #1): What's your name? Are you willing to work for me this morning? Okay, New Year's Eve is coming and I need some help. What's more fun than having hundreds of balloons fall from the ceiling at 12 midnight!? But I can't inflate all of these balloons by myself. Will you sit here on stage this morning and blow up some balloons while I talk? I'll pay you \$5 for 20 minutes of work. Do we have a deal? Great! Sit right here. When you're done with a balloon, put it in one of these large bags so they don't fly everywhere.

Now, let's look back at Jesus' parable.

The landowner goes out and hires people to work in his vineyard for the day, just like I've hired someone to help with these balloons for New Year's. In Jesus' parable, the owner and the workers agree on fair wage for a day's work. A denarius was the standard pay for a day's labor. A denarius was worth about minimum wage, like earning around \$50 for the day. It would probably be enough to buy food for a small family and some other minimum necessities, nothing more. Making a denarius a day is much better than not getting paid at all.

For our volunteer blowing up balloons, \$5 is a fair wage for 20 minutes' work, right? And \$5 is definitely better than working for free. The workers in the parable, just like our volunteer, agreed to a fair wage and started their 12-hour shift, from 6 am to 6 pm.

About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went (verses 3–5a).

So the landowner, for whatever reason, decided that he wanted more workers in his field. He goes back to town to hire more workers and promises to pay them "what's right" for their partial day's work. These verses may sound repetitive, but they are not. Jesus clues us in to some important details. The workers (both hired groups) started the day "standing in the marketplace" and "doing nothing." These workers were unemployed. Why were

they unemployed? Maybe they didn't have work papers. Maybe they didn't have the right skills. Maybe they didn't have the right connections. For whatever reason, they were out of work, waiting in the marketplace for someone to hire them. This still happens today. Have you seen this? My parents have hired folks like this.

In the Spring and Fall, my parents always had a lot of yard work to do around the house. There was pruning, pulling dead bushes and planting new ones. There was spreading mulch and bark. There was staining the fence and porch. There was a lot of work to do!

After us kids had gone off to college, my parents would plan how and when to do these big yard projects. When the day was right, dad would drive down to our local hardware store in Santa Cruz. Out in front of the hardware store parking lot, nearly every day you can find unemployed men waiting for someone to hire them. Some of them are young; others are older. Some of them may be skilled; others not as skilled. Some of them may be hard to communicate with. But all of them are waiting for work. They're hoping that someone will come along and hire them for the day to "work in the vineyard."

Like I said, my parents would plan their yard projects, figure out how many guys they should hire, and hire them early in the morning. They would agree upon a day's wage, and get to work. Once, my parents realized that they didn't have quite enough help, or didn't choose the right guys for the job. So dad went back into town, found a couple more good men, and hired them to help finish the work.

The same thing seems to be happening here in Jesus' parable. The landowner finds unemployed workers for his vineyard and hires them for the day. The owner goes back to town a second time to hire a few more. Why? He may need extra help in the vineyard. He may need different skilled help. We're not sure why he's hiring the second group of people, but the owner agrees to pay them "what's right" for their partial day's work, so they get to it.

Again, let's make this real!

(To volunteer #1): How are you feeling? Getting tired from inflating those balloons? How many balloons do you have so far? Not too many, eh? At this rate, I need to hire at least one more person!

(To the audience): Can I have another volunteer who wants to make a few dollars this morning? I'm looking for another Jr. High, High School student or adult. Great! Come on up to the stage.

(To volunteer #2): What's your name? Are you willing to help inflate these balloons? You'll be on stage for the rest of the morning, but I'll pay you what's right. We have a deal? Great! You're hired!

(To the audience): Now I have two groups of workers helping me just like in Jesus' parable. Let's see what happens next.

He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing (v. 5b)

This is a bit odd. How many groups of workers have been hired now? We have the workers who were hired in early morning, probably at 6 am, like our first volunteer here. We have the workers who were hired around 9 am like our second volunteer. The landowner went out two more times, at 12 noon and 3 pm, to hire people from the marketplace. Why does the landowner need so many extra workers?

There's two ways of understanding this part of Jesus' parable. The landowner is either a bad manager because (a) he doesn't know how to hire good workers, or (b) doesn't know how many workers he needs for his urgent project. Or the landowner is hiring these men for a different reason than needing help in his vineyard. In my opinion, I think the landowner has plenty of help. I believe the landowner is hiring people for a different reason. His reason will become clear in a few minutes.

With these four groups of laborers working in the vineyard, the workday is quickly coming to an end. There's not much sunlight left and sunset (6 pm) is quitting time. The first workers have been hard at work for nine hours or more. Who knows if they had any lunch break or were offered anything to drink.

(To volunteer #1): Can you believe it, you've worked a 9-hour shift already! Ready to be done with this job? I would be too!

(To volunteer #2): You've been working about 6 hours, or much less if you were with the 3 pm hires. How are you feeling?

Now, there's plenty of help in the vineyard. What happens next?

About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

"Because no one has hired us," they answered.

He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard" (verses 6–7).

The owner goes out one final time to hire more workers for the vineyard. This is confusing. Hiring this late in the day doesn't make sense unless there is an urgency to finish the work. Jesus' parable doesn't give us a sense of urgency or a reason for the late hires. So, the work is probably not urgent.

This leaves us with a few questions about the owner's actions: Why hire someone to work for an hour or less? And why walk all the way from the vineyard into town to find these last laborers? The only answer Jesus gives is this: The owner hires the men because "No one else hired them."

If companies hired by this logic today, this would be absurd! We'd have 0% unemployment, which is amazing! But there'd

be all sorts of other trouble. Any company that hired this way would likely go bankrupt fast. How would you keep everyone productive?

It's likely that the owner doesn't need more workers; he has plenty. Instead, he walked to town to make sure all the unemployed guys had been hired. He probably hoped to find everyone hired already. He hoped none would be left, waiting to be hired. To his surprise, the owner found some unemployed men still waiting for work. For some reason, he chooses to hire them for one useless hour of work, 5 to 6 pm.

Let's bring this parable to life again. I need one last volunteer. Who is willing to work for me for the rest of our time this morning? You've got to be unemployed and waiting for work. Just kidding! Come on up!

(To volunteer #3): What's your name? Thanks for volunteering. Do you trust me to pay you fairly for this last hour (more like three minutes) of work? I told the first workers they would make \$5. I told the second workers they would be paid what's right. They've been here half-time. They should make \$3? How much should you make for 3 minutes work? \$1? Trust me, I'll pay you fairly for your work. Do we have a deal? Great! Help inflate these balloons.

(To audience): The owner in Jesus' parable has done a great thing. He's created some jobs, hired the unemployed, and agreed to pay them fairly. Let's see what happens as the work day comes to a close.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first" (v. 8).

It's 6 pm. Work is done. The owner calls in the workers and says, "Good work today. It's time to get paid." But oddly, he pays the workers in reverse order. I guess I'll do the same.

(To all volunteers): Guess what? You're done! Thanks for your hard work. Will you line up in reverse order of how I hired you? How many balloons did you inflate? *(To volunteer #3):* One or two? *(To volunteer #2):* About ten balloons? *(To volunteer #1):* Wow! You had about 25? Let me pay you all.

(To volunteer #3): We agreed to a fair wage, but I feel generous. Here's \$5 for your work. Thanks for helping me! You may have a seat. *(To volunteer #2):* Thank you for your hard work. You accomplished a bit more than volunteer #3. I agreed to pay you what was right. So, how much should I pay you? Well, here's \$5 for your work. Thanks again. You may have a seat. *(To volunteer #1):* You've been up here the longest. You've inflated the most balloons. How much should I pay you? Should I give you more than \$5? Why? But we agreed to \$5 when I hired you, didn't we? \$5 is better than nothing, right? Here's your \$5. Thank you for your work. You may have a seat.

The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. "These who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day" (verses 9–12).

The work is done and it's time to pay the laborers. The owner begins paying the last laborers first. To everyone's amazement, the owner generously pays a full day's wage to the workers who only worked the last hour. If you or I were there, we'd be thinking, "Wow! I worked the whole day. I'll probably get more!" As the owner walks down the line, he continues to pay the laborers the same daily wage no matter how long or hard they worked. Those who had worked longer became frustrated and grumbled. They felt that they deserved more pay than the workers who only worked for an hour. They decided to take their issue up with the owner by saying something about it.

If I were in their shoes, I might do the same, wouldn't you? Would you feel like you deserved more? Would you approach the owner and ask him for more? We all know what it feels like to be treated unfairly. That's how these all-day workers feel. They're being treated unfairly.

But these workers have missed something. They forgot something incredibly important. So the owner reminds them and responds to their complaint.

But he answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (verses 13–15).

The workers agreed to work all day for the fair wage of a denarius. The owner shines a light on the workers' motives. They are not seeking fairness. They are simply jealous that others received a better deal than they did. The workers are masking their jealousy by justifying the fairness of the situation.

This is just like so many people today. We think that we are doing what's fair for us or others. We think that we are justified in asking for more or having to do less. We feel "entitled" to our fair share, right? After all, we worked hard for that money. Others aren't as skilled as we are. After all, we deserve it.

But what is truly fair in this situation? Do these workers deserve more than the others? Are we really entitled to what we have? Here's what Jesus says in conclusion of his parable.

So the last will be first, and the first will be last (v. 16).

Obviously, the last workers were paid first. And the first were paid last. But that doesn't teach us much if it's simply a summary of what occurred in the parable. What lesson is Jesus really teaching us? What does this parable show us about the Kingdom of Heaven?

Jesus is teaching his followers about what's important in God's eyes. Jesus wants us to recognize who we are in the story. He's showing us that our earthly ideas of fairness and value need some adjusting. Jesus wants us to come more inline with God's values and to live them out.

What's the point? The point of the parable is in three parts that I'll summarize into one statement. Like the owner, God is lavish and generous. Like the workers, we are all unemployed and cannot make it on our own. Jesus challenges us to recognize the grace we've received and to be grateful, not like the grumbling workers. Let's not be first to take God's mercy for granted. Instead, this New Year, live in last place. Live in light of God's generosity. Put him first because he won't leave you in last place.

Practically, what does it look like to live in last place? How can we live in last place like the workers in Jesus' parable? This morning, you may find yourself in one of three categories:

You're here and you don't know Jesus. This idea of God's generosity and lavish grace is foreign or makes little sense.

Maybe you're here and you're going through hard times. You feel like you live in last place all the time. For whatever reason, life seems hard and it's only getting worse. Young in your faith you have trusted in Jesus as your Savior and are ready or eager to mature more in your faith.

Maybe you're here and you've put your trust in Christ as your Savior. Life is going well for you. You know grace and mercy well and are maturing in your faith day by day.

Let me speak to each of these groups of people.

If you're here this morning and you have not trusted Jesus with your life, then take this idea home with you: God is so generous and good. He wants what's best for you and for others. Just like the owner in the parable, God is constantly returning to the marketplace of your life, looking to bring you into his vineyard. He loves you. He sent his son Jesus to be fully human so he can relate to you and you to him. He even chose to suffer the punishment for your sin and mine by dying on a cross. He is a good

and generous God. Will you choose to put him first, to trust and follow him this New Year?

If you're here this morning and you feel like you're often in last place, God has a message of hope for you. I don't know what you are going through, the medical issues your family faces, the bills that aren't being paid, or the pain or disappointment you're in. But I do know this: God understands our suffering and he will bring us from last place to first place in his time. Jesus himself suffered in last place; his own people rejected him and, on top of that, they crucified him. He can relate with your pain and suffering, your longing and heartache. Like the owner, God will come and find you in your unemployed and helpless state. He will take you from despair and bring you into joy in his time. So, wait for God and trust that he is generous and good. He won't leave you in last place.

Also, if you have a difficult time trusting that God is good, that he can relate to you, that he will rescue you in his time, I encourage you to take up the E100 challenge. The Essential 100 Bible Reading Challenge is a great way to see God's heart for his people, to see his faithfulness, and to be encouraged in your faith. If you feel in last place in life, take on the E100 Challenge, listen to God's encouragement through the Word, and trust and wait on him to bring you out of last place.

If you're here this morning and life is going well for you, you've put your trust in Christ as your Savior, and you know grace and mercy well, then Jesus' parable may have a different message for you. Heed Jesus' warning about seeking first place. Remember that our every breath is a gift from God. We are not entitled to what we have. We have not earned our good life; no. Our lives are a gift from God. We were all like the unemployed workers and God came and brought us into his Kingdom. So, don't be jealous when someone else has it better than you. Instead, live with grateful and generous hearts. Let's show others the same generosity that God has shown us!

This New Year, let's learn to live in last place. Let's trust that God is good and generous beyond measure, that he understands our situations and wants what's best for us. Live in light of God's generosity. Put him first because he won't leave you in last place.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2013 Central Peninsula Church North, San Bruno, CA
Catalog No. 1391-N