



THE BIG-HEARTED VINTNER

God's character can be difficult to get your head around sometimes. E.g. God is 1, and yet He's also 3. God is all-powerful, and yet He holds each of us accountable for our actions. God is all-knowing, and yet He wants us to talk to Him in prayer. God is all-loving, and yet He creates a world with earthquakes and tsunamis.

Like I said, difficult to get your head around.

Now the same can be said for some of the parables Jesus told, and it's especially true of the one we're looking at today:

The Mysterious Story of the Big-Hearted Vintner.

Matthew 20:1-16

Versions of this parable have found their way into Jewish tradition (the *Mishnah*) and Islamic tradition (the *Hadiths*), so it's got around a bit (but it's only when Jesus tells it that we get the story's original meaning – and best!). And it's all about a vineyard-owner who spends his day hiring laborers to harvest his vineyard.

If you look at OT passages like Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5, you get an explanation of the details in this parable:

- **The vintner** = God (c.f. Jesus' first miracle).
- **The vineyard** = Israel (and potentially the world).

- **The laborers** = Jesus' disciples (i.e. you and me!).

And the crux of the story is this: the vineyard-owner promises a fair wage, and yet the laborers who start work at 5 pm, 3 pm, 12 noon and 9 am earn the same salary as the laborers who have been working since 6 in the morning: 1 *denarius*, a day's wage. Everybody, no matter when they start or how much they do, gets the same reward.

How might they have felt? And what does it tell us about God?

He's what the parable either tells us or hints at:

Complaint #1: He's Unfair. As kids tend to be experts on fairness, I decided to try this out on some of the kids at MFC - except I changed the job spec to pulling weeds around the church building, for a fun-size bag of Mars Bars. And all was fine until we got to the Mars Bars. Emilia said, "That's not fair." Akshay said, "That's not fair." Josh said, "That's not fair." Aashish said, "That's not fair." Doniel said "That's not fair." Nyasha said, "That's not fair." In fact, only Ben and Anneke seemed cool about it – the rest wanted to bring in the union rep!

So, is the vineyard-owner unfair? The guys hired at 6 am obviously thought so. But you could also argue he treats everyone equally (I bet the 5 pm guys wanted to buy him a drink!). Everyone, no matter who they are, is of equal value and importance to the wine-maker ... and to God.

Now raise a hand if you're kind of glad God is so unfair?

Complaint #2: He's Unsound. Imagine if news gets out that this guy is willing to pay a day's wage for an hour's work: people could start to take advantage (to put it politely)! But the vineyard-owner is willing to take that risk - because he's crazy, right? No – because he loves them, he believes in them, and he sees the best in them. When you see the best in people, you often *get* the best in people.

And that's how God sees us. He takes weak, screwed-up individuals like you and me, with all of our problems, and invites us to be a part of what He is doing. Will we take the proverbial? Maybe. Mess Him about? Probably. Let Him down? Definitely. But He invites us all the same.

Now raise a hand if you're kind of glad God is so unsound?

Complaint #3: He's Unmoved. This guy is not going to change his mind. This is how he does things, and that's it. He cannot be manipulated; cannot be coerced; cannot be persuaded. He's willing to listen, yes; but ultimately, His decision is final. He's the boss.

With some people this would be a frustrating character-trait. But with God, it's actually a reassuring one. When He says "Whoever believes in Me will never perish but have eternal life"; or "Whoever comes to Me I will never push away"; or "No one can snatch you from My hand or the Father's hand", it means He's never going to have a change of heart, never going to let you go. *Never.*

Now raise a hand if you're kind of glad God is so unmoved?

Complaint #4: He's Unkind. To the 6-6 guys, at least. Or is he? I'm not so sure. See, the vineyard-owner has a foreman. And that means he could have sent the foreman to hire the workers, while *he* spent the day enjoying a siesta. But instead, he sends himself. He steps into the world of the poor workers, befriends them, becomes a part of their lives, and offers them the chance to come and work for him. And he keeps going back for more – even the ones no-one else wants. This is the God we worship! Not a distant God who couldn't care less, but a God who knows us, a God who loves us, a God who 2000 years ago stepped into our world and gave everything for us. Not because He needs *us*, but because we need *Him*.

This is Bethlehem and Jerusalem, incarnation and crucifixion, all rolled into one. This is *Jesus*.

Now raise a hand if you're kind of glad God is so unkind?

The Moral Of The Story ...

The moral is summed up in vs16: "The first will be last and the last will be first." I.e. God loves us all the same. That's why, in the central stanza, vs8, the man begins to hand out the same wage - to *everyone*. For Jesus' original Jewish audience, this idea would have rocked their worldview – because they were God's chosen people; descendants of Abraham; keepers of *Torah*; a cut above the rest.

We too can have problems with it, for 2 reasons:

- **We confuse entitlement and privilege.** Entitlement says, "Because I do so much, everything should be about me. I deserve it." Privilege says, "Because God has done so much, everything should be about Him. I *don't* deserve it." Even my thesaurus confuses the 2!
- **We confuse accomplishment and significance.** Accomplishment says your value is measured by what you do and what you have. Significance says your value is measured by who you are and what you mean to God. What do you mean to God? The cross!

It's this confusion that causes so much of the greed and jealousy and disappointment and strife we see around and inside of us: the 'evil eye' or envy referred to in vs15.

So what's the Mysterious Story of the Big-Hearted Vintner really all about? One word: grace. A divine generosity we don't deserve, but a generosity God wants to show us anyway. To quote a U2 song of the same name, "Grace finds beauty ... in everything." In everyone.

How has God been gracious to you? And how can you share it?