

Zumbro School of Accounting
September 18, 2011 Proper 20A
Matthew 20:1-16
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Here we are at the Zumbro School of Accounting. Class, I'm sure you've all read today's assignment.... What, you haven't read the assignment? You were up late watching Saturday Night Live? Grrr. Look, this is a school of accounting, not a Sunday School. We've got homework!

Well, for those who haven't read it, let me review our case study. A man owns a vineyard. It's been a good year. The grapes are plump. The harvest is ready. So Mr. Robert Mondavi gets up early one morning and goes down to the village square. He's going to hire some workers to pick grapes. Unfortunately, every other grower is also looking for help. So Mr. Mondavi has to pay a premium wage to get the people he needs: \$300 a day.

I see a hand. Yes, George? No, \$300 a day is not a ridiculous wage. It's a good wage. George, this is 2011. A denarius might have been enough in Bible times, but it's not enough today.

Anyway, Mr. Mondavi loads the crew into his pickup and heads back to the vineyard. But the harvest is so good and the grapes so ripe that he quickly senses the need for more help. Back in the pickup he goes...at 9 o'clock, and at noon, and at 3:00. He promises to pay top dollar.

An hour before quitting time, Mr. Mondavi hears a weather report. A storm is coming. He fears the job won't get done. So back to the village square one last time. The only workers left are your usual assortment of drifters and deadbeats. A guy with dark sunglasses and a heavy gold chain around his neck and blue eel-skin boots. A young woman with purple hair and a rose tattoo on her cheek and pungent body odor. They're smoking a joint together. But Mr. Mondavi approaches them anyway and offers them work. What the heck, they think. It's only an hour before dark. Maybe we can make enough to go halves on a six-pack.

So, class, let's go back over this story. What do you think happens when Mr. Mondavi drops off each successive group at the vineyard? Right, they go to the workers who got there first, and ask: "What's the old man paying you?"

"300 bucks" is the going rate.

Somebody does the math. "Well, let's see, 300 divided by 12. That's 25 bucks an hour. Wow! That means those who came at noon get \$150. The ones who just got here...there's a good \$20-25 for you. You can buy two or three six-packs with that."

Mr. Mondavi, however, has a surprise in store for them. At the end of the day, all the grapes are safely in the vats. They finished just ahead of the storm. Mr. Mondavi is a happy man. He starts paying everyone, beginning with those drifters and deadbeats. The first guy, the one with the dark glasses and heavy gold chain, opens his envelope. He finds fifteen \$20 bills. Then he, he...

No, George, he doesn't say, "Mr. Mondavi, excuse me, I think you made a mistake." Hardly! He straps on the headphones of his MP3 and starts walking away as fast as his blue eel-skin boots will carry him. The girl with the purple hair and the rose tattoo, she doesn't say, "Mr. Mondavi, this is way too much, I don't deserve it." No, she hurries out of there with her purple hair flying every which way.

And when their friends, who got there earlier, finally get their envelopes and catch up with them, these two latecomers can't wait to tell them what fools they were for sweating out there most of the day. They could have gotten the same amount for one hour of work, and in the cool of the evening too.

And imagine how the good people feel, the good people who've been there since dawn. They've been slaving away the past 12 hours, enduring the heat of the day. They open up their envelopes. They also get fifteen \$20 bills. Suddenly they're beside themselves. They hightail it back to Mondavi, screaming their heads off: "Is this any way to run a vineyard?"

"Look, pals," says Mr. Mondavi, "Who made you chief bookkeeper? You agreed to work for \$300 a day. You worked one day. You got \$300. If I want to give some poor schlep the same as I gave you, so what? Why get your nose out of joint? I'm only having a good time. Why should you mope about my generosity? Go on by the tasting room and get a free glass of chardonnay. Drink up and join the party. Or get out!"

Now, Zumbro School of Accounting, think hard. Is this parable of the workers in the vineyard a case study in the grace of God or the judgment of God? Gloria, you say *grace*. Why? “Because the losers get rewarded with the underserved, extravagant love of God.” Okay. Larry, you say *grace* too. “A little like the story of the Prodigal Son, where the wine-women-and-song younger brother is forgiven, and the obedient, high-SAT-scoring older brother comes up short.” Nice analogy, Larry. It’s a story of grace.

Yes, Virginia. You don’t agree. You say *judgment*. How so? “Because the dutiful, hardworking types get clobbered by harsh words. The father’s forgiveness might have felt great to the prodigal son, but it went down like castor oil to the older brother.” Okay. Maybe what we need to say is that one person’s grace is another person’s judgment.

So class, one final question: As you listen to this parable for yourselves, how many of you hear it as *good news*? Raise your hands. How many hear it as *bad news*? Raise your hands. How many of you aren’t sure? It’s tricky, isn’t it, especially for those of us who majored in bookkeeping. About all we can say for sure is that in the kingdom of God, things don’t get added up in quite the same way as they do in a school of accounting.

John Wesley could speak to this. Wesley was once kicked out of an English pulpit for preaching on grace. Afterward he remarked, “There are few matters more repugnant to reasonable people than the grace of God.” Repugnant? Yes. You see, God can be generous with anyone God wants to be—slip some extra \$20s into the envelope of a loser, throw a party for a runaway, deadbeat boy.

In my mind, this parable sounds more like judgment than grace. For when the Lord of the Vineyard finally loses his cool, he vents his anger not on the losers, but on the winners. He’s fed up with those insiders who can’t stomach the scope of God’s acceptance. He asks, quite literally, “Is your eye evil because I am good? Are you envious because I’m generous? Really?”

My apologies to you bookkeepers, but I’m afraid it’s this “evil eye,” this evil bookkeeper’s eye—always fixed on the accounts, always keeping score, always adding up the points—that gets God so worked up. In the economy of the kingdom, you see,

bookkeeping is a sin. There's no minimum balance below which the grace of God refuses to forgive. There's no debt so high that our credit gets cancelled...ever.

Here's the truth: We're not meant to agonize over whether our balance is enough, because as far as God is concerned, it's never enough. We all live in the red, all the time, eternally indebted to the One who made us. If we're ever going to make it to the party, it's because the Lord of the Vineyard invited us, and not because we wiggled our way in with our winsome personalities.

Maybe one reason Jesus is so hard on insiders like us is because we so readily presume to be living in the black. After we've been in for awhile, the danger is that we start thinking we deserve to be in—that we're the good guys—as opposed to some others who aren't so deserving. Our gathering can start to feel like a club of nice, like-minded people. I mean, would you feel comfortable sitting next to someone with purple hair and a rose tattoo and a bit too much body odor? And if not, here's the question: what makes you any more deserving than her?

Author Robert Capon says that, if the world could be saved by bookkeeping, God would have sent Moses and left it at that. The law was okay, as far as it went. But about all a thousand years of law proved was that, in Paul's words, "No one is righteous, not even one." You want to talk extravagance: God, in Jesus, gave up his job as an accountant, closed the books forever, gathered up all our IOUs, and nailed them to a cross.

A single mother of a large brood of children understood something about this extravagant love of God. People admired the woman because she raised her children on her own. "How did you do it," she was asked over and over again. "I suppose you loved your children equally, making sure you gave all of them exactly the same treatment?"

The mother shook her head and replied, "I loved all of them, loved them dearly, but I never tried to love them equally. I loved the one who was down until he got up. I loved the one who was weak until she was strong. I loved the one who was hurt until he was healed. I loved the one who was lost until she was found."

God's love is like that. Always reaching out to us when we need it most. Never stopping to ask whether we've got it coming or not. It's ours and it's free and it's more than we could ever deserve. Period! God gave up on salvation by the books long ago.

The only way for you and me to get saved is to say yes to the invitation and come to the party.

If you *do* say yes, does it mean you'll have a carefree life of no responsibility? No, I'm not suggesting that (and neither is this parable). God has lots of expectations of you. But it does mean that God isn't keeping score. If you're down, God will love you until you get back up. If you're weak, God will love you until you're strong. If you're hurt, God will love you until you're healed. If you're lost, God will look for you until you are found.

And at the end of the day, when the judge puts on the wig and the robe and bangs down the gavel to pass judgment upon your life, your only hope—whenever you got here, in whatever condition you arrived—your only hope is that Jesus will continue to party with sinners and love the losers. Amen.