

“GOLD WATCH SINNERS”
Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16
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John Vannorsdall, a Lutheran minister and one of the great preachers of this century, refers to church people as “gold watch sinners.” We are the self-avowed 12-hour workers in the vineyard: responsible, dependable, hard-working. Mostly we don’t lie or cheat or steal. Mostly we try to do good, hold responsible jobs, raise our children carefully and lovingly. We come to church and serve on every committee. We give a significant portion of our income to worthy causes. We try to be kind. And all we want at the end is not a big show, but just a little acknowledgment—you know, a warm handshake and a gold watch when we reach the pearly gates, and St. Peter whispering, “Well done good and faithful servant,” as the angel choir swells in the background. We don’t want much, we just want God to quietly appreciate our virtue, to value us a little more than the people who haven’t tried so hard or worked so long.

Gold watch sinners: we are the backbone of the church; we are the salt of the earth; and we are, for the most part, hopelessly unprepared to deal with the kingdom of heaven.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” Those he found, he contracted for a fair day’s wage. And three hours later, he found more workers, and invited them to work. And again six hours into the day, then nine, then eleven. Up to this point, we gold-watch types can admire this householder and his desire to hire all those in need of a job.

The place where it gets difficult for us, of course, is at the end of the day when the householder lines up all the workers, and pays each one of them exactly the same. This is the place where our values are affronted, the place where the kingdom of heaven diverges sharply from the kingdom of the world. In the kingdom of the world, we gold watchers, we are trained to judge. We pride ourselves on judging well, judging fairly. The parable stirs us up because we want justice for the twelve hour workers, because we want what we consider to be good judgments validated. Mostly though, if we are honest, this parable stirs us up because it announces to us that the kingdom of heaven is radically different from the kingdom of the world, and by the kingdom of the world I don’t mean the messed up, broken kingdom of the world as we see it every day, but the kingdom of the world as it exists in our best judgments, the kingdom of the world as we think it ought to be, with justice and fairness, and everyone treated and judged according to the best of standards. Even if all of that were to come to pass, the kingdom of heaven would still be different, because the kingdom of heaven is about not judging at all; it is pure generosity, and that’s a lot for us gold watch types to wrap our heads around.

The parable tells us that the twelve-hour workers complained to the householder, and the householder’s response was as follows: are you envious because I am generous? What a question! One could argue that it is the theological question for us gold watch types. Are we envious because God is generous? I look into the world of recovering alcoholics and younger

brothers, the black sheep, screw-ups, and rehabilitated felons of the world. These people find their way into the church; they know themselves as six, three, or even one hour workers, and when they hear of God's generosity, there is no jealousy in their hearts. They praise God that the kingdom of heaven is far from the kingdom of the world. They call themselves sinners; in many cases they don't have words enough to count those sins. God is not fair. Their response is to celebrate with a pure and holy joy. One hour workers understand grace in all its senseless abundance.

Are you envious because God is generous? The question exposes our sin. We gold watch sinners, the places we fail in faithfulness usually have to do with the small, undramatic—we might even say—unimportant sins of jealousy, of envy, of mean-spiritedness and self-righteousness. We tend to think of such interior vice as small potatoes on the chart of Really Important Sins. But isn't it interesting that it is we who make that judgment; and isn't it interesting, as well, that Jesus spent about 85% of his teaching ministry addressing precisely those particular sins. Envy, jealousy, mean-spiritedness, self-righteousness—though they might be invisible to the eye, they are a subtle poison in our souls. They can destroy our relationships as completely as drunkenness or grand larceny; they rob us of joy and cause us to substitute our stingy well-parsed judgments for God's endless abundance. And through it all, the worst of it is that we think we have done nothing wrong—or at least not much.

The kingdom of heaven is different from the kingdom of the world, and St. Peter hands out gold watches to all who enter there, whether they have worked twelve hours, one hour, or not at all. There are some people in this congregation this morning who already embrace that reality and are tempted right now to shout Hallelujah because they know its power and grace. My word to you this morning is to remember you are Congregationalists, and Congregationalists don't shout in church no matter how theologically astute they are.

For the rest of us, well, we still have some work to do. We need to understand the deadliness of our gold-watch sins. Take envy, for example. Remember a time that you have felt the hot bile of envy in the pit of your stomach at a family member, or a work colleague, or someone you barely know who experienced unexpected good fortune. Now, don't give me blank looks because I know that at least most of you have been there. What did that feeling do to improve your life or your relationships? Did it help you feel closer to God? For most of us, the acid of jealousy or envy isolates us; it turns us away from our best self, away from community; away from God. Think of the body of the world's great literature. Shakespeare, Voltaire, Tolstoy. How many bent personalities, how many dastardly acts are motivated by envy, jealousy, a sense of entitlement interrupted. Do you still think these are trivial sins?

And the reason that I'm pushing against all this is that the way most of us will come to celebrate the generosity of the kingdom of heaven is to understand ourselves in need of such generosity. You and me, in need of the generosity of our God. If we are honest with ourselves, most of us hope that God ignores a good bit of our behavior and a whole lot more of our thoughts if we are going to get our gold watches. And the good news of the parable is that God ignores none of it, and is generous with all of it and with all of us. Are you starting to feel better about the parable?

For that is the genius of this story. The parable is designed so that we push against it and push against it, and in that pushing, we see the small places of our hearts. The story points us to the healing we need to do. And the good news is that you're going to hear this story a lot in the church. Every three years, whether you need it or not, you get to measure your response to this parable. Every three years, you get to ponder how you're doing in being thrilled rather than outraged at Jesus' telling of God's abundant grace. God is patient. And we gold-watch types, well, we're good at learning. So there's hope for us. Are you envious because God is generous? Even you can come in time to celebrate God's generosity and the unordered grace of the kingdom of heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.