



The Pay Ethic - The Kingdom's Measure

Matthew 20: 1 - 16

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Newtonbrook United Church

Sept. 20, 2008

Let me introduce myself. I'm really a nobody - just a simple peasant worker. I lived in Galilee about 2000 years ago.

For some unknown reason, I've been invited to come here this morning and tell you a story about one day in my life - one particular day that gave me **HOPE. It was a day of The Kingdom of God.** As I said, I'm a nobody; my name doesn't matter. What is important is the story. But, I don't know why someone invited me to tell the story. After all, times have changed over 2000 years and the issues that we faced in those days have surely been corrected.

Let me tell you a bit about my work. In those days I was called a "day labourer." You're probably not familiar with that term. It meant that those of us who were seeking work gathered around the marketplace every morning. If someone needed extra workers for the day, they would come and choose who they wanted.

I went to the square every day hoping that someone would hire me. Too many days I went home to my family with nothing. Nothing that we could use to buy food for my children to eat; no money to buy clothes for them - not even in the cold of winter. I felt like a failed father on those days. I couldn't provide for the people who I loved. I hope that none of you have ever felt that way because, after 2000 years, things have surely changed. No?

Farmers often came to the square in planting and harvest seasons to hire extra workers when they were busy in their vineyards, for example. Some of us would get hired for the day; some of us would be hired for longer periods. They worked on a contract - but they still had no job security, and often they were only a cancelled contract away from having the wolf at the door.

That was the way the economy worked in those days. It was designed to provide "flexibility" for employers. People who worked for a living were expendable. It meant that those of us who worked for a living were always on the edge of poverty - we were always afraid of going home in the evening without any money; there were too many times when our children went to bed hungry.

How do you explain to a three year old that there's no food today?

I suspect that after 2000 years, and in a country as rich as this one is, that doesn't happen in your neighbourhood. I don't know why they asked me to tell this story.

Speaking of rich, in my time our society was divided. Either you were one of the affluent, or you lived in poverty. There was hardly anyone in between. If there was a big storm, the

people in the big houses - I don't mean prisons - were usually able to get through it. Sometimes they would just jump into their chariots and ride away, leaving all of the rest of us to get through it as best we could.

I suspect that after 2000 years, and in a country as rich as this one is, that doesn't happen in your neighbourhood. I don't know why they asked me to tell this story about **The Pay Ethic**.

One day, I was in the town square, just like on all the other days. A landowner came early in the day and hired some people to work in his vineyard. I heard that he promised each of them a day's pay for their work. I thought nothing of it.

A few hours later - about nine o'clock - he was back. He hired some more people.

He came again at noon, and again in the middle of the afternoon.

At five in the afternoon he came again. He asked why those of us who were left were still there.

We said we were still waiting for work. He hired us.

We went to work in his vineyard until evening came. That's when the surprise happened. That's when things began to get ugly.

All of us were lined up to receive our pay, and the landowner indicated that those last hired were to be paid first. He said something about **the last being first and the first being last** - whatever that meant, I don't know. That wasn't the problem.

When I received my pay, I received a whole day's pay. I didn't work a whole day, but I received a whole day's pay. It was enough to buy food for my family, and a bit more.

The people who had been hired early in the morning also received a whole day's pay.

Some of them were quite abusive when they discovered that we had all received the same amount of money. They crowded around the owner of the vineyard and **demand**ed to know why. It could have been quite a violent incident.

The owner of the vineyard calmly asked them how much money they had agreed to work for.

After a bit, some sheepishly answered, "**The usual daily wage**". (Mt. 20, v2)

The owner of the vineyard asked; Why do you begrudge me my generosity? Don't I have the right to be generous if I wish to?

Yes, ALL OF US were being paid the usual daily wage - the amount that we all needed to support our families and live the abundant life that God - you knew that I was going to involve God in this, didn't you - the abundant life that God has created for all of us. We were all being given a day's pay - sufficient to support our families.

I suspect that after 2000 years, and in a country as rich as this one, everyone in your neighbourhood is living an abundant life. I don't know why they asked me to tell this story about **the Pay Ethic**.

After I went home that evening, I began to imagine what life might be like if every employer paid **at least a living wage** to every employee.

What if there were to be a **guaranteed annual wage** so that nobody had to live with the fear of losing a job, or of not working a certain number of days per year?

What if there were to be an insurance payment to **every worker** who was unemployed?

What if there were to be a **pay ethic** that meant that workers deserve **a fair day's pay** for their work - instead of the lowest wage possible?

I suspect that after 2000 years, and in a country as rich as this one, a story like this would never happen in your neighbourhood. I don't know why they asked me to tell this story about **the Pay Ethic**.

I don't know if everyone in your town is receiving a full day's pay, but you look like the kind of people who would change that if it isn't happening - no?

In my day we had a prayer that we used - maybe you could look it up. We used to pray like this:

"Your Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven."

2000 years ago we could only IMAGINE what this world would be like if everyone were to be treated alike.

That day, 2000 years ago I saw that prayer come true. It gave me HOPE that God's way could really happen here on earth. There was, for a day, a pay ethic that represented the Kingdom of God.

I don't know why someone invited me to tell my story. After all, times have changed over 2000 years and the issues that we faced in those days have surely been corrected.

*"Speak out for those who cannot speak,
For the rights of all the destitute."*

Proverbs 31: 8

Pastoral Prayer - Newtonbrook - September 20, 2008

Eternal God, Creator of all that is, Spirit of life;
We bring to you the prayers of our hearts.

Creator of all, we are privileged and grateful for our many blessings; economic, political, geographical, and social. We give you thanks, Creator and Life-giver.

As we journey in your world this coming week, may we be more aware of those among us who are not privileged;

- men and women dying of poverty and malnutrition;
- children in pain with no health care;
- elderly people making it through another day;
- people living in fear of bombs,
- those who are feeling neglected,
- and our neighbours who are either without stable employment, or living in fear that their jobs will be lost.

Creator of all, we remember your dream of justice for all, and this morning we think of those who have put themselves and their wants first, rather than working for the needs of others, and the common good, as a priority. We pray for those who have abused the power that they have had.

Lover of this world and of all life, we know the earth groans under our heavy step. We have used the earth as if it were an unlimited bank account when, in fact, our account is now close to being overdrawn. May we each re-evaluate the footprints that we are leaving behind us in this earthly journey and may you help us to step lightly on your earth.

Gracious God,
grant us your strength for the journey,
lead us in the ways of your wisdom,
help us to see your infinite beauty in all of life, and in each other,
calm those fears that keep us from caring, from helping, from loving, from growing in your way of peace with justice for all living things.

We bring to you the profound prayers of our hearts in this time of quiet:

Creator of all, may we be a community that is faithful to you, you alone. Amen!

