

GOOD AND BEAUTIFUL GOD SERMON SERIES DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS

12 & 13 JUNE 2021

GOD IS GOOD AND GENEROUS TO ALL

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

Additional Scripture: Psalm 23

Overview of this series:

The general intention of this sermon series is to encourage us to see and experience our God who is good and beautiful, even in times of darkness. The sermons and study guides will suggest a Spiritual Workout that is intended to help us be attentive to God's goodness and beauty in daily life at work and at home.

In this session, we look at God's generosity and discuss how that might differ from the world's view of generosity.

The recommended time allocation for your group meeting is:

If you meet weekly :

- Worship through song (10 mins)
- Discussion - 1 session worth of core questions (40 mins)
- Discussion - 1 session worth of additional questions (30 mins)
- Sharing, Prayer, Fellowship (30 mins)

If you meet fortnightly :

- Worship through song (10 mins)
- Discussion - 2 sessions' worth of core questions (60 mins)
- Optional - additional questions (10 mins)
- Sharing, Prayer, Fellowship (30 mins)

Core Questions for Discussion

(If your group meets fortnightly, combine Core Questions of two sessions and choose one Further Question from either session.)

- 1 Before you start this question, pray together and ask the Holy Spirit to give each of you a fresh pair of ears to hear from Him.**

Read Matthew 20:1-15. It may be more meaningful if one person was selected to read the entire passage instead of asking each group member to read one verse each.

As you follow the reading, try to set aside what you think you know about God and listen as the story is read out with a fresh perspective. Try to imagine that you know nothing about God and listen carefully to Jesus telling you this parable about the God He knows.

Now, consider and discuss the following questions as a group.

Context

The Gospel according to Matthew, written to a primarily Jewish Christian community, contains over a hundred Old Testament references. The overarching purpose of Matthew's Gospel is to affirm that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed God's long promised Messiah (anointed King).

Jesus' spoken teachings about the Kingdom of God (Matthew chs.18-20):

- Starts with the disciples asking about who is the greatest in God's Kingdom.
- All of Jesus' illustrations and parables point to God's Kingdom being far from what fallen humans envision it to be: of humility and repentance, seeks out the lost, forgiveness, restorative, united under the headship of Christ; last will be first and first will be last (note the repetition of 19:30 and 20:16 which together bookend this parable).
- This parable of the vineyard workers is told to Jesus' disciples immediately after the encounter with the rich young man, and just before Jesus' mention of his impending death.
- This parable is part of a larger section of narrative which concerns the reversal of society's usual expectation about status, success, and honour. This section shows us how God's kingdom is based on higher values than what we are used to in human culture and society.
 - Mt 19:13-15. Let the little children come to me, for to such belongs the kingdom.
 - Mt 19:16-30. Easier for a camel to enter the eye of a needle...
 - Mt 20:1-16. Our parable.
 - Mt 20:17-19. Third Prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection.
 - Mt 20:20-28. Zebedee's mother requests special honour for her sons.

1.A) How many groups of workers did the landowner hire? How much did the landowner pay to each worker?

- The landowner hired 5 groups: the early in the morning group, the 9am group, the noon group, the 3pm group and the 5pm group.
- The landowner paid each person, irrespective of what time they started working, one denarius, which is a usual day's wage.

1.B) Do you think the landowner paying each person one denarius (a usual day's wage) was fair? Why, or why not?

Allow some time for the group to discuss. If the group wants, they could split into two teams to address this question in a debate format.

- On one hand, the first group of workers, who worked the most number of hours, grumbled and felt that they deserved more than the usual day's wage (vv.11-12).

- On the other hand,
 - the landowner answers, “I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?” (v.13)
 - The first group had a willing contractual agreement with the landowner, they were not coerced into working at an unfair wage (v.2 and 13)
 - the second group of workers likewise willingly agreed to the landowner’s terms: whatever was just (v.4).
 - All the workers received a wage they were promised, whether or not they deserved or merited it. None of the workers were coerced to work.
 - The landowner had the right to determine whom he hired, how much he would offer them (v.15), and to give more than what was expected or imagined (generosity).
 - The landowner was intentional in giving the same amount to the first as to the last (v.14).
- In summary, despite the workers’ accusations, there is no evidence or basis to suggest that the landowner was unfair to pay every group the same wage. In fact, the landowner was *both just and generous* at the same time.

1.C) Do you think Jesus’ original audience would have been surprised at how the parable turned out? How does the parable reshape the usual narrative or perspective we encounter in our culture and society?

- The original audience would likely have been surprised at the parable’s outcome, as we too, are surprised. We are surprised because society has taught us to expect that those who work less deserve a lesser reward.
- The worldly perspective of needing to keep on earning status or earning the approval of others often seeps into our perspective of God.
 - For example, we may believe that we have to perpetually strive to keep gaining the approval of friends and family, or of society at large, or even of God.
 - With such a mindset, we would, like the first workers, believe that the landowner acted unfairly in rewarding the other groups who did not strive as hard.
- Jesus’ narrative and the reality of God’s kingdom is quite different.
 - Jesus illustrates a kingdom where love and blessings are given generously and justly.
 - This blessing is given freely and equally without consideration of human striving. This is a narrative of the reality of undeserved grace.
 - This narrative of love and grace underscores the entire Bible, from God providing clothing to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21), to being saved by grace through faith and not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Reading this Parable, without over-interpreting

A parable is essentially a story, and hence is not necessarily true to life in every detail. The point behind every parable is in the truth Jesus shared and not the finer details.

In this parable, there are several unusual aspects which are simply part of the narrative backdrop, rather than lessons to be drawn. For instance:

- The landowner made multiple trips to the labour market throughout the day. Was he going out of his way to show compassion to the unemployed? Or did he simply mis-estimate his manpower needs? The parable does not give an indication either way, nor should we try to go beyond the text and press the point either way.
- There were several cohorts of idle workers. Were the latter cohorts lazy, having slept in and only coming out to seek work late in the day? Or were they in fact hardworking, having been employed for part of the day in another task, and coming out even late in the day to seek even more employment? Again, the parable does not give an indication either way, nor should we try to go beyond the text and press the point either way.
- Why does the parable not state the amount eventually paid to the 2nd to 4th groups? Did they also all receive the daily wage of one denarius? If so, why would the 1st group have thought they would receive more than one denarius (v.10)? The various groups of workers are likely part of the narrative backdrop, rather than to be identified as representing specific groups of persons. This also means it is unlikely this parable is describing persons who convert to Christianity earlier or later in life, for instance in childhood, adolescence, adult years, senior years, or at their deathbeds.
- The setting of a vineyard and master may remind hearers of an Old Testament metaphor representing God's relationship with Israel (see Isaiah 5, Psalm 80:8-16, etc.). However, in that imagery, it is the *vineyard*, not the workers, which represents God's chosen people. This, coupled with the ambiguity concerning the 2nd-4th groups, makes it less likely that our parable is addressing the matter of equality between the Jews (the earlier workers) and the Gentiles (the later workers). Of course, the truth that Jews and Gentiles both have equal access to God through faith in Jesus Messiah is stated unequivocally in places like Gal 3:26-29 and Eph 2:11-22, just not in this parable.
- Nor does this parable specify equality of wages or rewards as a universal norm for society. In the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30), Jesus speaks of different rewards for different individuals. Thus, reading the Bible holistically, we are unable to draw a divine mandate on wages and rewards from this parable. What we do see, nonetheless, is the emphasis that landowner (God) is generous beyond the expectations and norms of human society.

For further reading, see Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus (2nd ed)*, pp.362-379.

2 We have read in the Bible and heard from the sermon that God is generous. What are some ways you have experienced unearned blessings from God? Or, have you had experiences which made you doubt God's generosity?

- This question encourages group members to explore how we each see God based on our experience (or from what we have seen God do in others).
- Quite often, we hear a broad but incomplete message that says: "God is good, I am bad, therefore I need to try harder".

- This is incomplete as it denies the fundamental fact that it is God who first loved us and reached out to us, as seen in the gospel of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.
- Recall what we discussed during the 1 John series, particularly 1 John 4:7-21, and that incredible statement, "God is love" (v.16). John emphasised the fact that God showed love first with these words (1 John 4:9-10):

"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

For some in the group, their experience with God may not seem spectacular.

- Yet, each small or large blessing from God is meaningful and evidence of God's love and generosity.
- Encourage them to share how they have encountered God's generosity in both "big" occurrences as well as in everyday events.

For others, a hardship or challenge is seen as a blessing and part of their journey of transformation – rejoice in that with them as well.

- (Note to leaders: if a group member shares about a challenge or hardship and how this causes them to struggle to see God as generous, don't rush to tell them that their challenge is a blessing but remember to take time to listen to them.)

In summary, let's encourage one another to cultivate a heart of gratitude, not only for what God has provided for us, but for His generosity to others as well.

- In next week's spiritual workout, we will continue to practise this as we look more at counting God's blessings.

3 Similar to the first group of labourers in this parable, our eyes are often fixed on our circumstances and on what others have, rather than on what God has generously given. This often leads to envy or disgruntlement. How can we fix our eyes on God and learn to live a life of gratitude?

- Based on the discussions of previous questions, we might have a sense of the ways in which we share the attitudes of the first group of workers. The intent of this question is to encourage everyone to learn to fix their eyes on God.
- Another parable that contrasts God's generosity and own human envy is the Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32).
 - Are you more similar to the older brother who sees his father as unfair for giving his younger brother a celebration while he put in the hard work?
 - Or are you more similar to the younger brother who receives his father's generous blessings despite going astray?

- Remember that the father told the older brother that 'Everything I have is yours.'
- God's generosity towards us is not dependent on our works for him.
- We can, through the empowering of the Spirit, train our hearts and minds to turn away from envy and instead focus our eyes on God's generosity.
 - Training our eyes is a form of spiritual workout. By daily practice of thankfulness and gratitude, we can learn to keep our eyes focused on God.
 - The suggested workout (see below) for this session is prayer, and specifically, praying Psalm 23 daily.
 - Praying using the psalm helps us lift our sights to God's daily grace and work in our lives.
 - Try the workout together as a group and enquire about it next week.

4 Has this study and discussion given you a fresh view of God's generosity? How does this impact the way you lead your life? How would you live or act or think or worship differently henceforth?

- How we view God or what we believe about God affects the way we lead our life.
 - If we believe God is stingy and compulsive about us following His rules, we are likely to live a fearful life often anxious about consequences.
 - On the other hand, if we only see God as that kindly grandfatherly figure who only dishes out praise and presents, then we might not be particularly concerned about living a holy and blameless life, or with "working out" our salvation with fear and trembling (see Session 1 of this series).
- Encourage your group to take time to reflect on this question, and to first try to identify what they believe about God. It may be useful to extrapolate what they have already shared in the preceding questions to discuss how this affects the way they lead their lives.
- In response to this question, James Bryan Smith declared:

"What I have discovered is this: when I came to know the God that Jesus revealed, I absolutely fell in love with God. The more I grasp about the nature and work of the triune God, the more I am enthralled with the truth, goodness and beauty of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I want to turn your attention to the God Jesus reveals. His God is good and beautiful, loving and trustworthy, self-sacrificial and forgiving, powerful and caring, and out for our good." (*The Good and Beautiful God*, p.111)
- The hope of this Good and Beautiful God series is that we, as a church, would learn Jesus' narratives of God, the God He knows, that we might grow more deeply in love with God, and our lives would be an expression of that love and not a struggle to earn His love.

Further Questions for Discussion

(Optional question for discussion if time permits. Do allocate adequate time for prayer and fellowship.)

5 Read Psalm 23. What is the most meaningful phase or word for you from Psalm 23? Why?

6 Suggested Spiritual Workout: PRAYING PSALM 23

(For each session in this sermon series, a spiritual workout will be suggested for you to exercise on your own or together as a group.)

Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The psalmist presents His God as overwhelmingly generous. Some key words we can observe are:

- "I lack nothing"
- "he refreshes my soul"
- "for you are with me"
- "he prepares a table before me"
- "my cup overflows"
- "goodness and love shall follow me all the days of my life"
- "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever"

(Extracted from *The Good and Beautiful God*, by James Bryan Smith)

As you go about your week, carry this psalm with you and recite it as often as you can. Try to recite this psalm before you fall asleep each night, and again when you awake. Before your feet hit the ground, try to slowly meditate on each word. Recite it so often this week that it becomes second nature to you, as natural as breathing. You will notice yourself beginning to pray it at odd times.

This psalm contains a narrative about the exceedingly generous God. By letting the images wash over your mind, you imbed this true narrative into your life. Your mind and your body will begin to be shaped by these words. As you begin you will probably have to refocus your attention, but it soon turns into a prayer experience.

Prayer Suggestions

7 Would you consider praying:

- a. That the Holy Spirit might open your eyes to see evidence of our good and beautiful God and that you might experience His generosity of love afresh throughout the week. And remember to pause to give thanks.
- b. That God would turn our eyes away from envy and comparison with others, but instead nurture in us a spirit of gratitude that focuses on God's generous gifts, and on our generous Giver Himself.
- c. That you might be God's expression of generous love to family, friends, colleagues and strangers this week. That the love you offer is out of the abundance that God has first bestowed on you.