



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **It All Belongs to God**

*A Christian Worldview: First of Seven in a Series*

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*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it (Psalm 24:1).*

Of all the stories Jesus tells, the parable of the landowner and the laborers may be the one where we're most likely to miss the point.

You may remember how the story goes. A landowner sets out early in the morning, say six o'clock, to hire some people to work in his vineyard. They agree to do a day's work for a day's pay, which is roughly what people need to live on, while saving enough so they don't have to work on the sabbath and can put a little aside for a rainy day. The laborers are happy to have a job, and they head out to tend the vines.

A few hours later, about nine o'clock, the owner goes down to the marketplace and sees some people standing around. "You can work in my vineyard too," he says, "and I'll pay you whatever is right." They're glad to have an offer, so they set out to join the others. The same thing happens at noon, and again at three in the afternoon. Around five o'clock, the landowner sees a few more people hanging around, and he asks, "Why are you standing idle all day?" "Because no one has hired us," they reply, so the landowner says, "All right, you go on out to work in my vineyard too."

Well, the whistle blows at six and the landowner tells his manager to round up the workers and pay them, starting with the ones who came to work last. To their surprise, those who only started an hour ago receive a whole day's pay. They can't believe their good fortune, and they go away grateful and glad. The others who started earlier in the day see this, and they think, "Wow! If those guys got a whole

day's pay for an hour's work, just imagine what we're going to get. We've hit the jackpot!"

They open their envelopes, and you can watch their expressions go from excited expectation to confused disbelief to aggrieved anger, all in a few seconds. "What!" they say, as they compare paystubs. It turns out, they all got the same day's pay. When they realize what's happened, they do what people usually do when they think they've been gypped: they start to grumble and whine, and those who worked the longest whine the loudest. "We bore the burden of the whole day, and the scorching heat, while these slackers worked just one hour, and you've made them equal to us! It's not fair!" they cry, in righteous indignation.

But the landowner says, "Friends, I've done you no wrong. Didn't you agree to work a day for a day's pay? I've kept my bargain with you. Take what's yours and go. If I choose to give this last worker the same as I give to you, am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you just envious because I've been generous?"

Then Jesus caps the story with one of his favorite sayings: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

I'm guessing the crowd who heard this story the first time Jesus told it reacted pretty much the way you and I react, even though we've seen who Jesus turns out to be, and we know the story made it into the Bible so there must be something to it. You can hear no-nonsense business and labor leaders complaining about the obvious unfairness of it all, and what terrible economic theory the story reflects. Jesus may know a thing or two about religion, they say, but he clearly doesn't understand financial incentives. As the crowd breaks up after the sermon, you can hear a few of the

least impressed listeners muttering something about “socialism,” and you know it’s not a compliment.

But the grumblers who hear the story make the same mistake as the grumblers inside the story: they all miss the point. Jesus is not offering a lecture in labor economics but a parable about the grace and goodness and generosity of God. People make all sorts of mistakes, and cause all kinds of trouble, when they lock onto what they think the Bible says, though the point may in fact be altogether different. Jesus’ story here is no more about the economics of market incentives than the creation story in Genesis 1 is about the science of what happened in seven days when the world began.

So what *is* Jesus’ story about? It’s about one of the most fundamental claims of a Christian worldview: namely, as the psalmist says, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and all who live in it.” And Deuteronomy extends the notion by declaring, “Heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it.” In short, absolutely everything in all creation belongs to God. And that simple fact has all sorts of implications.

For one thing, it means that any form of human ownership is only tentative and temporary, subject always to the ultimate ownership of God. That may sound like a radical claim to those of us who grew up in a culture preoccupied with personal possessions and the right to do whatever we want with what we think we own, but it’s just a logical consequence of the basic truth that everything belongs to God.

Every use of words like “my” and “mine” has to be qualified and careful, lest we confuse our limited possession

of something with the ultimate ownership that is God's alone. Nothing in this world belongs to any of us in a final sense. Our stuff is not just *our* stuff, but a set of resources and opportunities to be used for God's purposes in the world. And for those of us who have children, our children don't belong to us in the end either, though we sometimes act as though they do. We're given the high privilege of bringing them into the world and helping to raise and care for them, but ultimately they belong to God, who has a plan for their lives, just as God has a plan for ours.

More radically still, even our bodies are not entirely our own. They may be ours as opposed to any other human being's, insofar as the right to decide what we do with them goes, but our bodies also belong to God. "You are not your own, you were bought with a price," St. Paul says, reminding us that Christ lived and died to redeem us. He goes on to say that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, to be treated like a place where the Spirit of God can dwell, from which God can accomplish all sorts of good things in the world.

And surely, if our stuff and our families and even our bodies don't belong to us in any ultimate sense, then the planet we live on does not belong to us either. We're all temporary guests on this great globe God has made. Anyone with any manners knows to treat another person's house with respect, and we get annoyed if someone comes into our home and makes a mess of things. Why, then, would we not treat God's green earth with all the respect we owe to its creator and owner?

Another implication of the fact that everything belongs to God is that we need to live in ways that are pleasing to God. In the same place where Deuteronomy says everything

belongs to God, it also says, “What does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God ... for your own well-being.” That last line is striking. It says we are to live as God would have us live *for our own well-being*. The commandments God gives are for our good. When we follow them we not only make God happy, but live in such a way that everyone can thrive and enjoy the goodness of God’s creation.

That brings us back to Jesus’ parable again. The point is not only that everything belongs to God, but also that God is generous. God’s generosity calls us into being, and shows us how to live, and provides opportunities for us to work and learn and grow, and have a hand in producing what we need to live a meaningful life. And God’s generosity extends to all people. God wants everyone to be able to obtain at least the basic necessities of life. That’s one reason why every worker in Jesus’ story receives a day’s wage. It’s what they need to get by.

If the story offends our sense of fairness, that’s largely because of where we tend to place ourselves in the story. It’s a telling thing about human nature that most of us identify with the laborers who worked all day long, and so we think we deserve everything we get and more. But how would the story strike us if we naturally identified with those who weren’t hired until five o’clock, an hour before quitting time? We’d think it was a great gift of generosity that the landowner treated us so well, and it would never cross our minds to imagine we deserved it. We’d simply be grateful to have received such grace. We would, in other words, have a fundamentally Christian view of our place in the world before God.



Yet another thing about Jesus' parable is that everyone in the story works for the landowner—which is to say, we all work for God, not the other way around. So many people seem to live exactly backwards in this respect. They live as though they think God works for them, that it's God's job to do whatever they want, and they can hire God or lay God off whenever they want. If God fails to meet their expectations, they give God a poor performance review, and they might even think they can fire God by refusing to believe in him.

But that just goes to show how silly people can be when we turn the order of things upside down. The fact is, whether any of us chooses to believe in God or not makes absolutely no difference as to the reality of God. The truth is the truth, and if God exists, that truth is entirely independent of whether or not you or I or anyone else chooses to believe it.

It's amazing how many people in our time act as though they can make some part of reality go away simply by refusing to believe it. They're like little children playing Hide and Seek, who close their eyes and imagine that because they can't see anybody, no one else can see them either. People choose not to see or believe all sorts of things, usually because it's in their immediate interest not to see or believe. Psychologists call that state of mind a delusion. But there's no such thing as a "post-truth world," as some people claim these days. There's only the world as it is, and God as God is, and we have to choose whether to seek the truth as honestly as we can, and live by it, or live in some fantasy world that isn't real but is simply more to our liking.

The central theme of Jesus' parable is that everything belongs to God, but God is generous, and God wants all of us to be grateful, glad, and faithful servants of God—and good to others as God is good to us. To see ourselves in that way is a liberating and empowering way to live. It means, among other things, that we don't have to measure our worth by how much we make or how much we've achieved in comparison to anybody else. The world is far too impressed with money and status. People often mistake wealth for virtue, maybe because it's so much easier to be affluent than to be good. But our Maker loves us and watches over us, and shows us how simple a good life can be, and that should be more than enough for any sensible soul.

When I was in high school, I played the part of a Russian ballet teacher in *You Can't Take It with You*. That was funny for a lot of reasons—not only because the play is a comedy but because I'm the proverbial bull in a china shop. I knock things over all the time, so giving me that part was not exactly type-casting. I don't remember much about the play, but the title has stuck with me ever since. We all know that whatever we accomplish or accumulate in this world, we can't take it with us. There's no carry-on compartment in the flight from this world to the next. The only thing we take with us is our soul, the person we've become in the course of a lifetime.

And that's the last point to make about Jesus' parable for the moment. Because of course the story is not ultimately about hours and wages and paychecks. It's about living and working for God until, at the end of the day, and at the end of our last day here, God will give us all that we need.

So this first fundamental facet of a Christian worldview is that everything belongs to God, and whatever we receive is always a gift of God's grace. By grace we're saved through faith, as St. Paul says. And what God wants from us in return is the kind of soul that neither clamors for itself alone nor complains about what other people get, but is simply grateful to be offered a place in the vineyard, and to serve God gladly there.



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