

# Let Me Count the Ways

Matthew 20:1-16

September 24, 2017

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## INTRODUCTION

I have to admit – there are passages in the Bible that I hate to read and hate to talk about. Today's lesson from Matthew is one of them.

## THE LESSON FROM MATTHEW

### Matthew's Parable

It just doesn't seem fair. Let's say that I get hired to do a job for \$100. That's basically minimum wage for a long day's work but at least it's a job. A few hours later, others get hired. A little later still more are hired. And so on until the end of the day. At the end of the day, people who worked for only an hour get \$100 – and yet all I get is \$100 for a full day's work. **It's not fair.**

**If God isn't fair (because God is the landowner) – then he probably isn't just – then why should I believe in him? Why should I commit to him?**

Jesus' answer is hardly comforting – the landowner can do what he wants with his own field – i.e., Great – God can do whatever God wants. So don't complain.

OK. I don't question God's right to do whatever God wants – but I expect him to be just and fair and paying people the same salary for one hour's work as for eight hours' work just isn't fair.

There's no way around the fact: the passage challenges us to commit to and believe in a God who doesn't seem to be fair ... at least, not as long as I focus on the economic component. **As long as I define my relationship with God in terms of a balance sheet, then I have a problem with God and with this passage in Matthew.**

### A God of Justice – Is That Enough?

That's exactly how many Christians define our relationship with God.

It's biblical. The Bible does mention a book of life in which God records all our deeds – good and bad. In the Last Judgment, God will read from that book to determine where we will go. In popular culture, we talk about Santa Claus keeping a list of who is naughty and who is nice.

Often, we present the Gospel in terms of a balance sheet. We are sinners; we've messed up. Justice requires we be punished – we need to suffer consequences. Something needs to balance the books. Jesus' dying on the cross was God's way to do just that. His blood blots out whatever was recorded in God's ledger.

It's a simple and clear message. For many Christians, it's a message that defines their relationship with God.

But is that what we really want or need? Do we really want God to keep a record of everything we do – right and wrong – and in the Last Judgement, report on where we stand before telling us we're saved from judgement because of Jesus? Do we really want God to tell us: *three steps forward here; two steps back, there?*

If we are honest with ourselves, then we already know we have failed probably more often than we have succeeded at keeping all of God's laws or living the life God intended us to live. We want life to be fair but, at the same time, we don't want God to be completely honest with us – we want some mercy. We need a different type of relationship.

## A God of Love

Let me just stress a couple of things.

- I am not challenging the idea of God being just.
- I am not challenging the Gospel saying that we are sinners and that Jesus died for our sins.

**What I am challenging is whether we want an accountant's balance sheet type of relationship with God. – or maybe I never forgive myself...**

Change the focus – change how we define our relationship with God – and everything changes – including the way we interpret the parable.

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**Let's step back.** We say that God loves us. Let's start with that. If we define our relationship with God in terms of love instead of the pluses and minuses of a balance sheet ...

How many of you are parents? Do you love your firstborn child more than any of your other children? Do you favour one over the other? I know – sometimes it is hard. We connect better with one child than another. We see ourselves in one child or the other and that can be good or bad.

I also know that it's possible to have favourites. I don't have any children but I have had two dogs at a time. I have to admit that one was my favourite – and yet ... sometimes my favourite was Sparky, my Chihuahua at the time; and sometimes it was Tyler, my Pomeranian. It really depended on who was sitting next to me at the time.

What it did not depend on was who I had known the longest.

I was the youngest of three children – and yet never doubted my parents' love for me. Granted that my father treated my older sister and brother differently than he treated me but that was because of their behaviour and what was going on in their lives, not because of how long he had known them.

**If I know how to love my pets and if parents know how to love their children regardless of how long or how short a time we have known our pets and our children, then we can expect God to look at us and love us at least the same way if not better.**

**What God offers us is a relationship built on love.**

Sometimes I find myself looking at the past or comparing my faith with others. You hear stories of Christians persecuted just for being Christian, and read about Christian martyrs or about the sufferings that Christian missionaries experienced ... and I realize I couldn't have done it.

I'm no Father Brébeuf or Mother Teresa. As deep as my faith is, I'm sure I could not have withstood being dunked in tar and set aflame like the early Christians were at the time of Emperor Nero. I'm sure I could not have withstood living as a Jesuit missionary in New France.

I don't have that kind of courage. **But then I remember. I don't have to feel guilty for what I'm not.** God isn't judging me by my courage or lack thereof. God's isn't judging me at all. God doesn't love the first Christians or early missionaries more than he loves me who comes 2000 years later.

**God loves each and every single one of us as we are – today – unconditionally.**

How do I know? The parable tells me so. The landowner – God – treated everyone the same.

## A Story of Love

When Matthew was writing the Gospel he was not simply writing a biography of Jesus' life. He was writing a message for the early Church. He was writing to people who had followed Jesus for years and for people who had come to Jesus only after his death and resurrection.

And the message is that it doesn't matter when you were called – when God found you and adopted you. There's no difference between long-time Christians and newcomers in God's eyes.

What seemed to be so unfair at the beginning is only unfair if we define our relationship with God in terms of a balance sheet. Define it as a relationship built on love, then the parable becomes a love story – of God's love being so great that it cannot be contained to one person – one church – one denomination – one people. God's love is so great that he reaches out to others and keeps reaching out to them – inviting them in. There's room for everyone in his vineyard.

## AVONMORE'S ANNIVERSARY

### Relationships

One thing about relationships – they need work. You can love someone with all your heart but if you don't take time to be with them, to listen them, to communicate ... the relationship starts to go bad.

God doesn't change but we do. Things get in the way: work, family, friends, chores, travel. The next thing we know, we've forgotten all about God – or, in my case, my pets on occasion. It's not that we stop loving as much as get too busy and forget. No excuses though – and, thankfully, spouses, children, and pets can give us a good kick now and again to remind us they're still there and we better stop and listen. **God does too but we often miss his reminders.**

**Relationships take work and, if they endure, they need to be celebrated from time to time.**

Which brings us to today and Avonmore's anniversary. Anniversaries are special occasions. People gather together and share stories. Stories of how the relationship began. Stories of problems and challenges along the way. Stories of success and tears. Stories to be remembered and passed on because they are a part of who you are and why you are.

*[This weekend is also my sister's 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. I thought it was to be last weekend. Oh well.*

*Marge met her future husband in January (I think). She was maid of honour at her best friend's wedding; he was best man for his best friend's wedding. She couldn't stand his name – "Charlie Wilson? What kind of name is that?" I don't know what he thought of hers. Charlie was with the Navy in Virginia Beach. Marge lived and worked in Montreal. In May, he and the newlyweds came up to Montreal for Expo '67. That's when Marge and Charlie started getting serious. He would fly a Navy plane some weekends, and get "lost" – landing in Vermont I think. She would meet him there. In August, she flew to Mississippi to meet his family and called home to tell us she was getting married in September. They had a private wedding in Virginia Beach – no family; then honeymooned for a week in Montreal and then he flew off to Naples, Italy for 6 months. She joined him there in January. They returned home in March and held the wedding reception then and we all went.*

*As you might imagine, Charlie and Marge didn't know each other very well when they married. There were problems those first few years especially when Charlie became an airline pilot and was away so many days a month. Why did their marriage survive?*

*Marge and Charlie liked each other, respected each other and wanted to be together. Their commitment to each other got them through the tough times. Theirs is a love that, I think, is almost too deep for words. It's built on commitment, a conscious decision to be together. It's built on history. It's built on love. It's built on God.*

*The specifics may change but isn't that true of most relationships? Isn't that true of your relationship with God?]*

**Some stories are rather fun.** I remember reading what one person wrote about life in the early 1800s in Ontario.

*Sunday is 't great day for shooting when pigeons come past, and sometimes it is forgotten altogether. I past James Holden's clearing once and found him hard at work chopping, and when I asked why he worked on Sunday, he held out that 't was Saturday – he'd fairly lost count, and I'd hard work to show him he was wrong.... I never thought, when I was in England, that a church and parson war half sae much use as they are.*

At least we're good for something. We help people tell time.

Granted, Avonmore was built much later, but take time today and maybe this year, if you haven't already started, to share stories of Avonmore's history and relationship with God.

- Who built the church?
- What was life like back then?
- What are some of the stories from back then?
- How did your church live its relationship with God?
- How are you living it today?

### **CONCLUSION**

I'd like to close with a few lines from one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnets. It seems to capture the essence of the parable with its two-fold imagery:

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of being and ideal grace.*

**Happy Anniversary!**