

EPIPHANY 3
ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
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THE VALUE OF DIVINE GENEROSITY
(Matthew 20:1-16)

Back in the early part of the 20th century, a small piece of America's history came into existence- the "wooden nickel"? Now days, It's a valueless token made of a thin slice of wood found at state fairs, amusement parks, or even church VBS. Essentially, it's a souvenir designed to trick you into believing you possess something valuable when, in reality, it's just a piece of wood. During the Great Depression, some US towns allowed limited use of wooden nickels for buying groceries due to the scarcity actual money. However, grocers soon refused them, realizing the dirty secret – they were worthless. This led to the saying: Don't take and don't give any wooden nickels, meaning, don't be deceived and don't deceive others.

Many view religion, particularly Christianity, as a wooden nickel – something that provides temporary comfort but lacks any actual value. Unbelievers and skeptics have always existed. But what about us? Does it sometimes feel like God is handing out deceptive tokens, diverting our focus from present challenges with the constant promise of heaven? Let's examine this question in light of Jesus' parable in Matthew 20:1-16. There we learn of **The Value of Divine Generosity**.

(ESV) "For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. (2) After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. (3) And going out about

the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, (4) and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' (5) So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. (6) And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' (7) They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' (8) And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' (9) And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. (10) Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. (11) And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, (12) saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' (13) But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? (14) Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. (15) Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' (16) So the last will be first, and the first last."

The thought that coins carry any worth has long faded. Few stop to pick up a penny, or even a nickel or dime, though some may stop to pick up a quarter. It's been ages since any coin represented a good day's wage. At places like Aldi, a quarter today mostly serves as a bribe to return shopping carts, yet people gladly let it go if the next customer is willing to take the buggy. Do the math, and you will find that returning the cart to its right spot is worth far more than the face of that quarter indicates. Multiply \$.25 of the course of

an eight-hour day working and you'd find yourself being paid \$45 per hour... But, it's just a quarter.

Not so long ago, a quarter held a significantly higher value. In my childhood, it represented the difference between three tiny pieces of bubble gum which cost a penny and a whole candy bar. Now days a quarter means next to nothing to children or adults.

This raises the question: What happened to the quarter's value? It didn't vanish overnight but eroded gradually. Politicians and economists convinced most of us that inflation and the devaluation of our money is a necessary evil for economic progress. I fear it's actually a symptom of humanity's incessant devaluing the gifts of God. What was once valuable is now deemed worthless – the new car purchased four years ago, the shoes purchased six months ago, the left overs put in the fridge just two days ago.

In the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, Jesus describes a scenario that captures this malady that affects us all . The early hires, initially thrilled with the promised denarius, equivalent to about \$250 for the day, deemed it practically worthless by the end. Keep in mind that these were unskilled laborers, not professionals. Still, at the end of the work day they considered that exceptionally high level of pay was somehow beneath them.

Their shift in attitude toward that denarius – \$250 – came from witnessing the vineyard owner's continuous generosity. Throughout the day he kept hiring more unskilled workers, all the way down even to the last hour. The value of the denarius plummeted not because the early workers received less than they agreed to but due to their resentment seeing the

vineyard owner graciously giving the same to others. Overlooking their own status as unskilled laborers, they failed to appreciate the generosity that was to their benefit.

Now there is a crucial detail in the parable that may lead us to sympathize with those complaining workers. If he had wanted, the vineyard owner could have avoided the whole scene. He could have discreetly paid the early hires first, avoiding any knowledge of his generosity toward the late comers. Yet, intentionally, he made his generosity obvious, instructing the foreman to pay them in reverse order – remember, Jesus said nothing by accident.

Through this detail, the denarius became a wooden nickel to those early hires because the workers, witnessing the generosity of the vineyard owner, suddenly forgot where they would still be but for the generosity of the vineyard owner. It wasn't the value of the currency that had changed. What changed is how they reacted to the generosity of the vineyard owner. So the owner questioned, "Do you begrudge my generosity?" In the Greek language it's a more picturesque expression: "Do you have an evil eye at my generosity?"

Understand that this parable is not about equal pay for equal work. No! Jesus' point is much deeper, addressing a wickedness in the deep recesses of man's nature – one prevalent in each of us. Every day, you're compelled to witness the Lord's generosity toward others. It's evident when you see them driving a new BMW while you navigate your rattling 2012 Nissan Altima. God's generosity shines through in the grocery store, where others are purchasing prime cuts of meat and organic produce, contrasting with your 70-30 hamburger, bag of potatoes, and generic cookies.

Even the gated neighborhood with fancy homes you pass by on the way home serves as a stark reminder that your house needs a touch-up.

Yet, in spite of all these comparisons we engage in leading to grumbling on our part, the reality is that God has been generous to us as well. Your car may not be the latest model, but it still serves its purpose. Your budget might not allow for the finest foods, but you still have sustenance. Your home might not be worth a million dollars, but it shelters you and holds numerous blessings, not the least of which is the family members in it that so often become the very reason you get so heated. In other words, you have it pretty good, too. You just fail to recognize how good you have it.

Here, many would point you to others in distant lands who have it far worse than you do. I suppose there is some value in considering that, but comparisons to those in so-called third-world countries can set another trap. Having more than others, whether halfway across the world or down the block, doesn't negate God's generosity to them either.

See, it isn't about the quantity or the quality we attach to the good things we possess; it's about our attitudes toward God's generosity, particularly His grace and love. Often, we mistakenly view God as dispensing worthless blessings to us and more valuable ones to others, neglecting to consider that the far greater gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation are given equally to all.

Consider this: Would you prefer a freezer full of good beef or a Bible on your shelf? Would financial advice about the stock market outweigh the right explanation and understanding of one of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God? Does an

all-expense paid trip to the Superbowl sound more enticing than hearing the pastor read the words of absolution following our confession of sins? These questions reveal a part of us that does devalue God's most valuable blessings that are abundantly available to all while we elevate others that we rarely experience.

The challenge lies not in realizing what blessings we prefer but which we truly deserve. Despite our complaints about fairness, aging possessions, and an endless list of desires unfulfilled, the truth is that we don't even deserve the things we have, as demonstrated by our lack of appreciation and thankfulness for them. Yet, in His flawless goodness, we still receive them and many more good things God graciously pours out on us.

In this parable, Jesus points out the dark irony of someone daring to complain about overwhelming generosity from One who considers and specifically calls him a "friend." God's generosity extends beyond our comprehension, for not only does He open His hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing – giving them their food in due season – from eternity He decided to give His Son to ensure spiritual and eternal blessings for everyone.

Jesus, born into humanity without the stain of sin, demonstrated this divine generosity despite relentless complaints against Him for it. He was criticized for His miracles, from helping on the Sabbath, to healing Samaritans, to associating with those deemed socially unworthy. He didn't aim to make life more fair, either for Himself or for others. Instead, He sought to make things right by removing our sin and offering to us the hope of heavenly life.

To achieve this, Jesus endured unparalleled suffering, deprived of God's generosity and grace. On that day we call Good Friday, no denarius was put in His hand, but nails, He received no day's wages but an eternity of agony, and no weekend of rest we look forward to but three days in our death. The cost of divine generosity was profound. It required God's Son to give up what He deserved to give us what we have not.

Therein lies the value of divine generosity. Our Lord is the one who endured the heat and burden of God's justice against our sin while we receive the wages of His righteous work: forgiveness of all our sins and reconciliation with our God and Father. Jesus is continuing to uphold for us through the preaching of the Gospel this value of divine generosity so that all might open their eyes to the very good things that are available to us through Him. Regardless what you've expected or demanded from Him in the past, or have received or not received that didn't seem right to you, you can go forward today and every day with the priceless treasure of being a forgiven sinner through faith.

You know, that's really what the church is all about, too. God hasn't placed pastors and preachers into pulpits to tell you how you can have newer cars and bigger bank accounts, like them. He didn't call them to tell you how to improve your life so that you can be the kind of person that God just wants to give all kinds of expensive gifts to. Rather, they are supposed to act as His foreman: delivering to you that divine generosity that He streams from the cross and is poured out abundantly through the message of the cross.

Through the preaching of His Word He's calling you to His side to say: Friend, for whom the blood of My Son was shed, for whom He poured out His own life to give you life, I do you know wrong. I give to you abundantly above all that you ask or think."

Take, now, what is yours in Christ Jesus and go your way in peace and contentment that you are blessed beyond measure through the forgiveness that is in Christ Jesus.
AMEN!