

God's Economy

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 20:1-16

I called this sermon “God’s Economics.” I did that with some hesitation, because my knowledge of actual economics is small. I have a layman’s knowledge of economics as practiced by scholars and policy makers. So I want to start by being clear about what I mean with that word. I’m not talking about economics on the level of national policy, I’m not thinking of economics on the level of state government, or even city government, I’m thinking economics on the level of the household. Household. That’s the root of the word economics. The English word ‘economics’ comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*. Oikonomia means household. The whole discipline is named after the household. So originally to talk about economics was not about Gross Domestic Product or Federal Reserve fiscal policy, it was about taking care of your household. What are the values in your household? How does your household prioritize its resources? How does your household spend its money? Those are economic questions. When a teenager sits down with Mom and Dad and works out a budget balancing spending and saving and giving, they are practicing economics at the most basic level. And when you understand economics this way it’s not hard to see how you might call God an economist. Because God is a householder. God is a Father. He has a family. He takes care of that family. And within his household there is a certain way of doing things, a certain economy. How does God do things in his household? What are the ways of His kingdom? What kind of economist is our Lord? Well, let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time there was a wealthy Christmas tree farmer out in Ada. His name was Theo. Theo had a bit of a problem. It was the end of November - the beginning of the Christmas rush - and he needed to get his trees down as quickly as possible so that they could be shipped off to market. Theo needed an instant labor force and so he went down to Calvin College and put up an advertisement: “Wanted for the Friday after Thanksgiving. Tree cutters. 15 dollars an hour for a twelve hour day. Expect hard, rewarding work.” In no time he had himself a workforce: broad shouldered Dutch boys from Zeeland. Sturdy Iowa farm girls. These were strong people, people whose ancestors built dikes. The Calvinistic work ethic burned in them like an unquenchable fire; pretty much an employer’s dream. When Friday came, things went well. The morning passed and his recruits were cutting trees faster than Paul Bunyan. But Theo wanted still more trees down and so he drove down to Rivertown Crossings Mall. And there he went up to all the young people he saw who looked like they were just hanging around and he told them about the work. “Come on down. I need more people. Just hop in the back of my pickup and we’ll be there before 1 o’clock.” And, sure enough, at one o’clock he came back with a truck full of fresh help. At about 3 o’clock, a couple of hours before the workday was supposed to finish, Theo realized that he still needed more laborers. He went back into town, this time down to Pekich Park on the corner of Division and Cherry. There he found a whole lot of adults just hanging around. “Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?!” he asked the men and women there. “People don’t generally hire people like us,” They said. “Come on with me!” said the master and he put 10 of them in the back of his pickup and drove them to the job site. By the time they got there, there was only an hour left in the workday.

When the time came to be paid, the master started with the latecomers. And to their surprise each of them got a check made out in their name not for \$15, but for \$180 - a full day's pay!!! The same thing happened to the half day workers! By the time the time came for the sturdy Dutch Calvinists to be paid, they were just about shaking with excitement! You have to understand one thing about Dutch people. They are very good with numbers, especially numbers that have dollar signs in front of them, and so, when the foreman handed them their checks, their expectations were pretty much set. If those latecomers got a 180 bucks for an hour's work, and they worked 12 hours, they should get 12 times 180 dollars – more than 2000 bucks! But when the foreman put the check in their hand, they looked down and saw \$180. Hank Vandersma, an accounting major from Zeeland was the first to speak up. "Uhh.... Excuse me... Sir? There appears to be some mistake. We worked the full day and you payed us the same as one hour crew! That's not fair!" The Master would have none of it. "Listen Hank!" he said, "You got what you expected. A good day's wage. Why should you care what I do with my money? Or is it my generosity that offends you? Now take your money and go on home." There it is. There's a little picture of God's household economics. It's an economics of radical generosity to surprising people.

And as I consider God's economics here, I find myself asking a simple question: Could you run a business this way in the 'real world'? If you ran a business like the master in this story, would you experience long-term business success? Probably not. If you paid your one hour workers and your half day workers a full day's wage, you would be creating terrible incentives. Economics is about incentives. Economists know that people act based on self-interest, and they will change their behavior depending on what incentives you give them. For example, my daughter is in Ireland right now. This week she sent me a video of the Irish countryside; beautiful shots of these green fields and rugged hills. In the middle of these green fields you would see square white cottages, and strangely enough, many of these white cottages have no windows. Beautiful scenery all around, but no windows. Why no windows? Well, back when the British controlled Ireland, they issued a window tax. You got taxed per window in your house. Guess what people did? They built cottages without windows. That is how economic incentives work. So...when you pay your 5 pm workers as much as your 6 am workers, what are you incentivizing? Do you think your 6 am workers are going to show up at 6 am the next day? You'll be lucky if you see them by noon. They'll probably start sauntering in mid-afternoon, work an hour or so and then hold out their hand for payment. That is the incentive you create when you pay people this way. No business person here (and we have lots of them) would ever run their business this way. This is normal economics in the 'real world'.

Of course Jesus knows this. Jesus knows how the real world works. Jesus knows that his listeners will say, "You can't run a business that way!" But that's the point. Jesus is trying to shake us up. Jesus knows that we have been formed by a world that operates according to the merciless rules of conventional economics. That's a world where you assume people will act out of self-interest. That's a world of locked doors and encrypted passwords, that's a world where you expect people to take advantage of you. Jesus knows all about this 'real world' but Jesus is not proclaiming this 'real' world, he's proclaiming the Kingdom of God. And in the Kingdom of God there is a different kind of economics, and that is the economics of Grace; that's the kind of household the landowner is running, a household of Amazing Grace. On this Kingdom farm you don't get what you deserve, you get more than you could ask or imagine. On this Kingdom farm, it's not about keeping track of who deserves what, it's about blessing people. On this Kingdom

farm it's not about holding on to what you have; it's about overflowing in love. On this Kingdom farm the first are last, the last are first, and life is eternal.

The Economics of grace is real too. In fact the economics of Grace is more real and more ultimate than the economics of self-interest. Read the Bible and you will see that every time the story of our salvation advances, it is based on the economics of grace.

It starts on the very first page. The creation of this world is based on the economy of grace. God did not make this world as an investment strategy. He was not looking for return on investment. It was an act of grace and love; a joyful extravagance. And you don't have to read the book to see the truth of that; just look around in a Michigan Spring! Biologist Lewis Thomas has written about the song of the thrush. He acknowledges that most scientists analyze the bird's song and conclude that the sounds are just mating messages and warning calls. The song of the thrush is just old economics. It's self-interest and survival. But Thomas listens to a bird singing in his backyard and wonders if there is more going on.

He writes: "The thrush in my backyard sings in meditative, liquid runs of melody, over and over again, and I have the strongest impression that he does this for pleasure. Some of the time he seems like a virtuoso practicing in his apartment. He starts a run, reaches a midpoint in the second bar where there should be a complex set of harmonics, stops, and goes back to begin over, dissatisfied. Sometimes he consciously seems to be improvising sets of variations. It is meditative. It is a kind of music. And I cannot believe he is just saying 'Thrush here.'" The scientists aren't wrong: The song of the thrush is a mating call and it is a warning device, but it is more than that! There is *an extravagance* about it, there is *a beauty* to it that goes way beyond basic communication. The song's beauty is more than we deserve. It is a witness to the generosity, the economics of grace, inherent in creation.

The economics of grace is behind the call of Abraham. The economics of grace is behind the rescue of Israel from Egypt. The economics of grace is behind the story of Moses and Jacob and Samson and David. The economics for grace is behind the story of Peter, and the story of Paul. All these guys are 5 pm workers whom God gives a full day's pay. They are all knuckleheads saved by grace. And of course, most important of all, the economics of grace is at the very center of the story of Jesus Christ our Lord. His coming at Bethlehem was undeserved grace. His life and ministry was an outpouring of grace. And of course his death and resurrection is an overflowing fountain of grace, and all our hopes depend on this fountain. Our hope is not that we will work so hard in his field that the Master will look at us and say, "Wow! Look at him go! What an exceptional talent! We need that man on our kingdom team! Sign him up!" No. We are all five o'clock workers...with bad work habits...and spotty employment records, but while we were still sinners, Christ died for us and gave us grace upon grace upon grace. There is nothing more 'real life' for me and for you than this economics of grace that is ours in Jesus.

I know that in this broken world, we need traditional economics. As we run our businesses and deal with broken people we have to be careful and discerning and vigilant, and sometimes even suspicious. But I want to come to the end of my week and look back, I don't want suspicion and vigilance to be the story of my week! I want the story of my week to be the economics of grace.

I talked earlier in this sermon about how there's no way the landowner's business model would ever work in the real world. I said that the workers would never bother to show up in the morning and work a full day if they knew they could show up mid-afternoon and get paid. That's not completely true. There is one situation in which a person might show up and work a full day on the farm even when they knew they'd get paid the same for an hour. That's if they really

loved the work. If a worker really loved the master, really loved being with him, really loved learning his ways. If the worker really enjoyed the work of this farm, and believed in the mission of the farm, that worker would show up joyfully at the crack of dawn regardless of how the payment was structured. They might show up early. They might even stay late for the love of landowner and his community of grace. Love. That's the economic motive at the heart of the economy of grace, the love of God our Father that comes to us through Jesus our Lord. That's the motivation the Spirit is growing in my heart and in yours. It's the only motivation that will last. When Christ returns suspicion and selfishness will be gone, and there will only be love and grace upon grace upon grace.

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