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Good News For Grumblers

By Ron Allen

A Day in The Life of Mom

My mother raised six children. You could tell this was a strain on her by the way she kept laying out ground rules for us to obey. This was her way of keeping us under control; her way of retaining her sanity.

Ours was not a wealthy family. We ate good home cooking, but treats were rare. Now and then, Mom and Dad would rent a house by the sea and we would have a family holiday. Mom would always preface those occasions by saying something like this: "While we are on holiday, everyone will make their own bed in the morning. The girls can help prepare meals; you boys can clean up, because I want a holiday too.

There will be no fighting. If there are any fights, or if you don't do your chores, there'll be no ice cream for anyone." No ice cream! That was what we went on holiday for; to have ice cream which we never had for the rest of the year. No ice cream was a depressing prospect—like a hanging, or something worse. So, we made a covenant with Mom. "We'll be good."

For the first few days we kept our word. There were no fights, and we all helped so Mom could have her holiday too; but one afternoon when both parents had gone for a walk on the beach by themselves, we forgot and began to fight. By the time our parents returned to the house there was chaos and violence. "What did I say? What did I warn you about?" Mother was upset. No one replied. We all knew: No ice cream!

The next day, Mom was taking her mandatory afternoon holiday nap. Dad accompanied the six of us to the beach. On the way back, he paused at the store and bought us all ice creams; seemingly oblivious to Mom's solemn words. Good old Dad. We walked home lost in joy. Nearing the house, we noticed Mom standing in the doorway staring at us. She looked menacing. Ignoring us, she hurried Dad into the bedroom and we could hear her in there berating him for making her look ridiculous. "What's the use of me teaching the kids to be responsible if you go and do something like that?" Mom was mad. She reckoned Dad had ruined her system for keeping order. Meanwhile, we could still feel the cool pleasure of ice cream sliding down our throats, and we could not bring ourselves to feel as badly toward Dad as she did.

An Unconventional Boss

My mother's disillusionment on that day is similar to that of workers in a story Jesus told in Matthew 20:1-16. A landowner hired men to work in his vineyard. Some he hired early in the morning, and they agreed to work all day for a denarius. Some he hired at noon and others he hired near day's end. When the landowner came to pay his workers, he paid all of them what he had agreed to pay those he hired first. This meant that some who had worked for only a short time earned as much as those who had worked all through the day.

When the workers who had done the most work saw what had been done they began to grumble. "*You have made them equal to us*" (verse 11), they said. They felt let down by the landowner. Like my mother, who felt she had been undermined by Dad's careless indulgence of ill-behaved kids, these workers the landowner had trivialized their effort by rewarding equally men who had done far less.

By any assessment, the landowner in Jesus' story is unorthodox. If we transpose it to our own times, where labor and capital are engaged in a never-ending arm-wrestle, few would see merit in the landowner's actions. Whereas corporate bosses weary themselves to keep wages down, this landowner was eager to pay well. Further, he seemed interested in hiring as many workers as possible. Even near the end of the day, he was back at the Job Center speaking to men who were still waiting there. "*Why aren't you working?*" he questioned. "*Because no one has given us any work,*" they replied. "*Come and work for me,*" he said (verses 6&7). Here was a boss who cared more about getting people into employment than keeping wages down. Here was an entrepreneur who would not fit well in our economic system. He would upset both Labor and Capital.

The Last Will Be First

The undisciplined generosity of the landowner is the theme of the story. Every detail emphasizes it. The concluding sentence parallels the last verse of the preceding chapter (Matthew 19). "*The last will be first.*" The intended lesson of the parable is thus emphasized. The landowner represents God. His way of doing things overturns all our rules and methods.

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EDITORIAL . . .

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free...” (Galatians 5:1).

What an attractive announcement! Yet most people experience bondage of one kind or another. Even in the ‘free’ world, our liberties are far from absolute; they are heavily proscribed. We enjoy relative freedom to pursue our goals, acquire property, live where we choose—but only within a plethora of government regulation.

In the developed world, there is increasing awareness that material freedom is not freedom’s complete meaning. Often those with the most disposable income, the most homes, motor cars, and the most spare time for cultural pursuits and personal amusements, are nevertheless dogged by the knowledge that they are their own prisoner; they can never break through the walled barrier of their own skulls which cage them permanently in a consciousness which is boring and unfulfilled. With all their heart they believe in freedom, but they never experience it.


Occasionally, they meet someone who seems to be living in profound liberty. They show signs of being thoroughly at home with themselves and with their setting. They have an interior peace. An encounter with such a person is always inspirational. It refreshes the imagination of the observer with hints of possibilities in freedom yet to be had.

In the long march of human generations, never has there lived One as free as Jesus. He is definitively the Free Man. Everything about him intimates a soul at peace with itself and with all that happens. With him there is no ‘chafing at the bit’,

no irksomeness, no restless tedium, no frantic wishing. Unlike the rest of us, Jesus would never be heard echoing Mick Jagger’s sentiment: “I can’t get no satisfaction.”

Jesus is not burdened with some grievance or potential grievance. While his disciples vex and chafe under the weight of their conflicting ambitions, Jesus moves through life like a river deep; purposeful and calm. Even in Pilate’s courtroom, his spirit and demeanor give the lie to his shackles. He is more at liberty than his captors.

Friends and cynics alike agree that Jesus is the highest example of personality the world has seen. Freedom is the more credible in conception since we have witnessed its possibilities in him. Many refined intellects today, would have us believe that Mankind will enter into unalloyed freedom when it finally sheds the constraint of belief in God. On the contrary, Jesus demonstrates that liberty lies not in human autonomy. He was free—not from God, but in God.

*My heart is weak and poor,
Till it a Master find.
It has no spring of action sure,
It varies with the wind.
It cannot freely move,
Till Thou hast wrought its chain.
Enslave it in thy matchless love,
And deathless it shall reign.*
-George Matheson 



Pastor Ron Allen

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When it came to paying his workers, the landowner started with the last-hired and worked back to the first. God’s ways are not our ways. Considered from the point of view of the three groups of workers, there is a descending scale of emphasis on their role in the contract between employer and employee. In the case of the first group, there is negotiation and agreement (verse 2). When the second batch arrives for work there is no agreement; just an acknowledgment by the landowner that he will pay them what is right (verse 4). The last are hired without any agreement of mention of rights. They are told to go to work—that’s all.

Just as there is a diminishing emphasis on the employee’s

part in settling a work agreement, there is indication of a corresponding expansion of emphasis on the landowner’s role, to a point at day’s end, at which those hired have virtually no part to play except obey the landowner. He dominates the scene. Everything is eclipsed by what he is, what he says, and what he does. The workers stake their all on the kind of person the boss is. To their joy, they find out that he is generous. *The last will be first.*

The Trouble with Grumblers

While the eleventh-hour employees rejoiced in the landlord’s treatment of them, the first-hired group was less than impressed. They “*grumbled against the landowner*” →



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(verse 11). They were not unhappy with what they were paid; they were unhappy that the others had been paid the same. They were aggrieved that the landowner, by paying those who had worked only one hour the same as they had earned, he had “made them equal to us” (verse 12). The landowner’s generosity to the late-comers had ruined everything. It questioned their value. It made their long hours in the sun seem less important.

The grumblers are like the older brother in Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son. He was miserable because his father threw a party for his delinquent brother. He would not join in the celebration, and reminded his father that he had been loyal and responsible.

The trouble with the grumblers is they think a great deal about what they do and how much they have done, and too little about the mystery and beauty of God’s magnanimity. Our work, our projects and achievements are not nothing, but their importance pales when compared with God’s actions and accomplishments.

Michael Henchard, the prosperous merchant in Thomas Hardy’s novel, hired Donald Farfrae to manage his corn business for him. Farfrae turned out to be a good investment. He made his boss wealthy. However one day, Farfrae had a forceful difference of opinion with Henchard, and from that day on, Henchard’s attitude cooled toward his man.

In time, Henchard’s disaffection with Farfrae ripened into hatred. He started to belittle him in public; criticize and condemn him. Farfrae was bewildered, but he responded to each of these insults with good humor—though he did decide to leave and start his own business in opposition to Henchard’s.

Great success followed Farfrae, while his former boss descended into bankruptcy. Instead of savoring his triumph, Farfrae went out of his way to try and help his old master. He gave him work, sought to set him up in another business, and supplied him with free lodgings. Each of these large-hearted gestures was met by Henchard with deepening bitterness. He simply did not know what to do in the face of such persistent kindness.

Finally, he decided to fight Farfrae, whom he easily overwhelmed; but again, Farfrae refused to hold a grudge or seek reprisal. In the end, Michael Henchard simply refused to live in Farfrae’s world. He could not endure the humiliation of his good will.

Farfrae marched to the beat of a different drum and Henchard found it intolerable.

What Kind of World?

Which world do you prefer? Do you hope for a world in which the decisive and prevailing principle is one by which each person is rewarded strictly according to their deserts; how much have they done? How little? Do you want the final and all-prevailing truth to be this: You reap what you sow; every man must have his pound of flesh; small achievers should be awarded small honor, large achievers should receive large honors? Would you wish for a world in which these were the controlling axioms so that no one ever was treated better than they deserved? Or would you rather live in a world drenched by the un-metered, unpredictable generosity of God?

I can recall bright, clear, crisp nights, during planting time on my Dad’s grain farm, the tractor growling away through the long hours. Looking up, I could see the morning star, staring brilliantly down upon me. Sometimes it was so bright I thought it shed the softest light on the earth. I thought to myself, “No one need ever get lost out here, with a star like that to guide.”

Then the sun would announce itself. The first radiant flares were suddenly visible on the eastern horizon. Straightaway, the morning star lost some of its luster. Presently, the huge red disc slid upward through the trees on the boundary line. Before long, it had swung clear of the land; the blackness of the sky dissipated, and the jewel splendor of the morning star—gone

altogether. “No need for it now, anyway,” I thought. “Now the sun is up.”

Do I want to find my way by the light of the morning star? Or would I prefer to live in the full light of day? If the dominating concern of my life is to make sure I get the respect I think I am due; make sure I am not demeaned when others are honored even though they haven’t done as much as I have—then I will always be a grumbler. I will never be content. I will always feel offended and wronged.

Far better for me to live in the sunlight of God’s goodness. Far better for me to accept God’s tendency to be generous; to rejoice in it so the grumbling will fade like the morning star to be replaced with joy and gratitude. And ‘the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.’



In Heaven and Earth At The Same Time

By John Bunyan

One day as I was passing into the field, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul: *“Thy righteousness is in heaven.”* And I thought I could see Jesus Christ at God’s right hand. Yes, there indeed was my righteousness, so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say about me that I did not have righteousness, for it was standing there before him.

I also saw that it was not my good feelings that made my righteousness better, and that my bad feelings did not make my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, *“The same yesterday, today, and forever”* (Hebrews 13:8).

Now indeed the chains fell off my legs.... Now I went home rejoicing because of the grace and love of God.... Moreover, the Lord led me into the mystery of union with the Son of God, and I saw that I was joined to him, that I was flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. If he and I were one then his righteousness was mine, his merits mine, his victory also mine. Now I could see myself in heaven and earth at the same time; in heaven by my Christ, my head, my righteousness, my life; and on earth by my own body.

I saw that we fulfilled the law by him, died by him, rose from the dead by him, and got the victory over sin, death, the devil and hell by him. When he died, we died, and so it was also with his resurrection: *“After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight”* (Hosea 6:2). This is now fulfilled as the Son of man sits down on the “right hand of the majesty in the heavens.” As it says in Ephesians, *“He hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus”* (Ephesians 2:6).

-John Bunyan: GRACE ABOUNDING TO THE CHIEF OF SINNERS. pp. 80-82. 



The Pattern of Grace

The great leap forward from the Old Testament to the New Testament can be described as a leap from the *external* observance of laws to the *internalization* of values, from the letter of the law to the freedom of the Spirit.

Jesus challenges us to transcend all laws, rules and principles, even the Ten Commandments in order to take full responsibility for our actions. Jesus challenges us to be free and judge for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. The ability to decide for ourselves when it would be appropriate to keep a law or a rule and when it would be not appropriate requires a great deal of personal freedom and responsibility.

Many people find this kind of responsibility quite frightening. They prefer to be told what to do, or they prefer to have absolute binding laws and rules so that they don’t have to take the responsibility of deciding for themselves. This is a very serious obstacle to progress in the spiritual life that quenches the Spirit of freedom.

However, the gospel does provide us with guidelines. It gives us Jesus himself as a model of true freedom, and it makes clear the values by which he lived. We can experience the freedom of the Spirit by learning to internalize these values and to live by them ourselves.

-Albert Nolan: HOPE IN AN AGE OF DESPAIR. pp. 101. 



Grace and Truth Came To Jesus

When Jesus said, “I am the truth”, he did not say, “I will tell you about the truth”, he claimed to embody the truth in his person. To those who wished to know the truth, Jesus did not offer propositions to be tested by logic in the laboratory. He offered himself and his life. Those who sought



truth were invited into relationship with him, and through him, with the whole community of the human and non-human world.

-Parker

Palmer 