

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Children of God: The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...”

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Genesis 27:30-40, Matthew 20:1-16

The kingdom of heaven is like this:

Jane is starting up a new tech company. Totally out of her garage, Steve Jobs-style. But she wants a team to work with. She's not really the go-it-alone type, and a startup needs a variety of variety of talents to make it work. So she recruits some smart and energetic recent college grads. They all agree on a compensation package, nothing extravagant, but certainly enough to get by on. Their agreement also includes a guarantee that when the company goes public in three years each of them will be granted a \$100,000 bonus. These promising young people are ready to start their careers, to work their way up in the world. The idea for the company seems promising, and the compensation is comparable to what their peers are finding elsewhere, so they sign on and get to work.

A year later, there have been some bumps in the road, and the work is getting hard. Jane has gotten a good deal on some office space in a hip but seedy part of Detroit, and there is more work to do than they can possibly keep up with, especially if they want to go public in two years. But the workers Jane hired stick with it, so Jane decides to add a few people to the team to share the load. She explains to the new team members that they will be paid enough to live on. She also tells them that they are hoping to go public in two years, and if they do, she'll give them a fair bonus for their contribution.

Another year in, the company has had its ups and downs, now has three floors of office space in Troy, and development is really going places. Everyone is working crazy long hours, and it feels like they may be close to breaking out. In this hopeful spirit, Jane once again brings more people on board. The new hires understand that if the company goes public, they'll be compensated fairly, but again, no specifics are discussed. Things go so well that this hiring scenario is repeated a couple of months later.

But by the end of the year, things are looking much less optimistic. They really haven't found the right market for their product, their expenses have ballooned, and their investors are running for the door. They've got just a little capital left for one last push to try to make a go of it before the sun sets on this whole enterprise. Jane goes out once more to try to bring a few more people on board.

It's slim pickings in the employee market these days, and it's hard to find people interested in coming to work on a sinking ship. One of the company's first employees, however, connects Jane with a few friends he went to school with who have been looking for work since graduation. He assures Jane that they were all just as smart and energetic and motivated, but the job market has just been really lousy for the last few years, especially for people with no experience. Their resumes are great, they interview well, and they're skilled and well-educated and ready to work. But they just haven't gotten picked up yet. They might just be desperate enough to help Jane with the 11th hour push to make this thing work. She makes them no promises, but tells them there is work if they want to do it. Going off of the logic that it's easier to look for a job when you have a job, the last group of employees dive in and give it their all for the last month of the year.

By some miracle of market forces, something clicks at the last minute, and the company goes crazy, practically overnight. Within weeks, there are multiple buy-out offers, the company goes public, and Jane's company is instantly worth billions.

She calls her staff together to share the good news. Addressing the employees who have only been there a month, she thanks them for joining in the last-ditch effort, and she gives each of them a \$100,000 bonus. They are thrilled and

grateful. And everyone else starts to get excited. If Jane is so lavishly generous with the last group to be hired, clearly the bonuses will only get bigger for those with a greater investment of time and loyalty and hard work.

When Jane addresses those employees hired on in the last couple of years, she thanks them for their service and dedication through good times and bad, and she gives each of them a \$100,000 bonus. While those who have been in the company less than a year are happy to get such a grand bonus, there is grumbling from those who have been in the company longer. Didn't Mike deserve more for his innovation? Didn't Andrea deserve more for all the extra-long hours she worked? Didn't Carrie deserve more for the brilliant ideas she had that saved the company more than once?

Jane ignores their chatter and addresses the first employees of her company. Everyone is waiting with baited breath now. These are the people who first took a chance on Jane and her dream. These are the people with the most time and energy and talent invested in the company. They are waiting to see what lavish rewards Jane has in store for them and plotting their first expenditures. Maybe the trip to Italy they've always dreamed of and never had time or money for. Maybe a home in the fashionable part of Birmingham. Maybe just blow it on something fun, like that hot new Corvette. Or maybe they'll end up with enough money to start up a company of their own.

Jane thanks these first employees for their loyalty and hard work, and she gives each of them a \$100,000 bonus.

The room erupts in protest.

Didn't they deserve more for taking risks, for working hard, for sticking with the company even when it looked like it was failing? How could they possibly get the same meager bonus as those slackers who'd only been working a month? Those people couldn't get their act together to find a job for almost three years after graduation, and they get the same reward as those of us who got ourselves a job right out of school? This is crazy! Outrageous! Unfair!

Jane waits for them to quiet down and asks them, "Isn't this what you agreed to work for? Isn't this the deal we made? What is so unfair about paying you what was promised?"

Adam, one of the senior employees, speaks up. "You are giving them," he says, pointing angrily at the last group to be hired, "the same thing you are giving us. That is not right, it's not fair. They haven't been here as long. They haven't worked as hard. They haven't earned it."

"Yeah," pipes up another of the long-timers, "we deserve more. We made this company what it is. We jumped at this opportunity even though it was risky. We took this company from nothing and made it a success. We are...we are..."

"We're better than them!" interrupts another senior employee. "There, I said it, and you know you all think it's true. We got jobs right out of school instead of bumming around unemployed and living in our parents' basements for years. We worked long, hard hours when this company had no money, no office even, and these late-comers walked into this cushy office space with a fully-staffed operation and acted like they owned the place. And now you want to make us all equals? Well, we're not. We're not equal."

The room grows quiet, and no one is quite sure what to say. Even through the last difficult month, the employees had worked as a team, doing whatever needed to be done, helping each other out. They had genuinely enjoyed working with each other, and they were all proud of their work.

Now, the senior employees felt exposed. Did they all secretly harbor feelings of superiority?

The newer employees felt ashamed. Had they really earned their bonuses in just a month?

Jane took a deep breath. “First, I’d like you all to remember that all of this is my money. It is my company. I started it. I invested in it. I kept it going. I hired all of you. And I made a lot of money in the end. I can do whatever I want with what is mine.”

“The only thing I am required to do in order to be fair, in order to be just, is to pay you what we agreed on. And I’ve done that, haven’t I?” she said, looking at the senior employees. Begrudgingly, they nodded.

“So then, it’s up to me if I want to be generous to others. None of you received bonuses because of your hard work, loyalty, accomplishments, or seniority. None of you earned them. The first employees got a bonus because I chose to give you one, and you thought that was a fair deal when you were hired. The rest of you got a bonus because I choose to give it to you now. It’s my call. Are those of you who have been here longer really going to be jealous because of my generosity?”

The senior employees looked around. The bonus was radically unfair and perfectly just, all at the same time. It was unmerited and wildly generous. It didn’t fit into any reasonable economic model. No capitalist reward for the quantity or quality of their work. No socialist taking from the rich to give to the poor. Maybe it was communist? They weren’t sure.

No one had gotten less than they’d bargained for. They all had plenty. Not enough for fashionable neighborhoods, high-risk investments, or sports cars maybe. But they all had at least what they were planning on, and some had more than they ever could have hoped for. They all had enough.

It wasn’t about merit. It wasn’t even about equality. It just didn’t make sense.

Finally, someone spoke up. “Why did you do it?”

“Because it’s who I am,” Jane replied.

“I am just, and I am gracious. These two parts of my character live in irreconcilable tension. My corporate economics demand an equality so radical it isn’t fair, a generosity so expansive it isn’t equal. It leaves no space for division and competition, winning and losing, superiority and shame.

To work with me is to live in that tension, too. It is a tension that requires us to see the world through the lens of gratitude and sufficiency. Where we look for equity, we find generosity. Where we seek justice, we find grace.”

“But that’s not how the world works!” piped up one employee.

“No,” replied Jane. “You’re right. It’s not.”

The kingdom of heaven is like this.