

EXTREME SPIRITUAL MAKEOVER:  
“FROM ENVY TO GRATITUDE”  
Matthew 20:1-16

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The sun is shining and the sky is clear. As landowner Joe consumes his breakfast he knows he must, likewise, seize the day. My daddy called it “Making hay while the sun shines.” Joe might refer to it as “Making wine before the grapes rot.” Whatever the phrase, the focus is the same. Harvest won’t wait.

Joe finishes breakfast, climbs into his pickup truck and drives down Nolensville Road where day laborers assemble looking for work. Well, the time and place may be different, but the story is the same.

And sure enough, on the street corner, a number of early risers are ready to go. So, Joe hires them for the normal wage of a denarius a day. He comes back at 9:00 and hires more, and again at 12 noon, and once more at 3:00. Then at the bewitching hour of 5 p.m., one hour before closing time, he still finds stragglers on the corner, so he sends them to the vineyard to work as well.

Here our story takes a strange twist. At 6 o’clock quitting time, Joe instructs his foreman to pay the workers starting with the last hired and pay them first. Now you know something is going on in this story, that’s exactly the opposite of the way things would normally happen. The one hour workers receive a denarius, the normal daily wage for a laborer. Hopes rise in the hearts of the others. “We hit the jackpot today, we’ve been here three, six, nine hours. If he’s going to give somebody a whole day’s wage for one hour of work, think about what we’re going to make.” But when their turn comes to be paid, they too receive a denarius, even the 12 hour workers who have labored through the heat of the day.

Well, you can imagine the reaction. Grumble, grumble, gripe, gripe, complain, complain, who wouldn’t? It’s well — unfair! Unjust! Inequitable! If we applied this employment policy at BUMC, the EEOC, NAACP, IRS, and every advocacy group of United Methodists would be knocking at our door. What’s going on in this story? What’s the punch line? Here it is: “Are you envious because I am generous?”

Envy, that’s the spiritual makeover we want to work on today. Why is it easier to weep with those who weep than it is to rejoice with those who rejoice? I know we don’t want to admit that but it’s reality. It is easier to weep with those who weep than it is to rejoice with those who rejoice, especially for good upright people, church-going people, people who live a good life and try to do what’s right for the world.

At the core is this deadly sin that the Church fathers called ENVY. It’s a fundamental sadness at the good fortune of another. It’s a weird kind of sin. If you lust you might get happy for a little while. If you are greedy, you might enjoy

the money for a season. There is no joy in envy. We even look sick when we have it. So, the expression of being “green with envy.” You’ll never be happy as an envious person. Yet, it lies in the hearts and minds of fair-minded people, people like you and like me. Let’s probe a little deeper.

### **Envy runs in the family.**

Cain and Abel were brothers, the sons of Adam and Eve. Abel was a shepherd. Cain was a gardener. Cain offered some grain to the Lord. Abel brought a prize lamb, the best of his flock. God was pleased with Abel’s offering but rejected the offering of Cain. The pain of rejection was too much. A few days later, Cain coaxes Abel into the desert where the first murder in the history of the world takes place. Its cause? Jealousy, envy. It seeps around the cracks of the soul. It runs in the family.

Jesus told a story about a father who had two sons. One son, wrapped up in himself, rebelled, ran away, wasted his life in riotous living. Yet, at the end of himself, he came to himself, and realized he could go home and be a servant and be in better shape than he was on his own. He returned home. While he was still a long way off, the father spotted him, ran to meet him, threw his arms around him, put a ring on his finger, a robe on his back, shoes on his feet, and welcomed him home with a party. This, my son, was lost but now has come home again.

Great story, except that this son had an older brother. He was out on the farm working, as he had done all his life. When he heard the music and saw the dancing, he was angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out to fetch him, but to no avail. All the father heard was one long outburst of anger about how the son had slaved all these years and never even had a goat for a feast with his friends. Jealousy — envy — hatred — resentment. It runs in the family.

It runs in the Christian family. Grace is a wonderful idea until you try to put it into practice. Some of us have been Christians all our lives. We’ve hung in there through trials and temptations that were strong. We thought about quitting several times, but we just never quite got around to it. So the years have gone by and we have kept the faith. One day hopefully, we will finish the course. Is it really fair that we should wind up living in the same subdivision of heaven with some scoundrel who lived like the devil but repented on his death bed and accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior?

Phillip Yancey says, “Grace is scandalous, hard to accept, hard to believe, hard to receive. Grace shocks us by what it offers. It frightens us by what it does for sinners.” I suspect if we were truly honest some of us would not suggest that grace is amazing, we would say that it’s unfair. As somebody said to me just the other day, “You mean I have been good all my life for nothing?”

Let’s be honest, the unmerited, unearned, grace of the Lord does not leave good church-going, right-living, honest folk amazed. It leaves us “green with envy.” May the Lord have mercy!

## **Envy runs in the workplace.**

I don't have to tell you envy runs rampant in the workplace. Its grumbling can be heard among the employees. I know, you try to keep salaries a secret. Let me tell you, they know. They've got it figured out just like these workers in the vineyard. They knew who made what, and the grumbling and the griping happens. "How come I'm not making more than they are? I know I agreed to a denarius a day but, good Lord, a man works only one hour and he gets the same. There's something wrong with that."

Joseph Epstein in his book on envy says academia is more heavily laden with envy than any other institution on earth. If you want to smell envy in the air, just visit Harvard, Yale, or Princeton.

Will Willimon wrote his most recent book on the seven deadly sins, talking about the sins of Christians. He said he had to write that book after going through the process of being elected bishop in the United Methodist Church. He said, "I saw these deadly sins practiced in new and deadly ways by myself and others."

Envy. It lurks around schools. It's in the market place where we compete with one another and wonder why we didn't get a better shake. Remember the old Jewish folk tale about two merchants who were always in competition with each other? One day God decided to put an end to such foolishness. He had an angel deliver this message to one of the merchants. The message went as follows: "I the Lord Almighty have decided you can have anything you want in this world — riches, wisdom, long life, children — whatever you wish, but on one condition. Whatever you get, your competitor will get double. If you get 10 million dollars, he gets 20 million. Understand?" The merchant thought a moment and said, "Would you be willing to make me blind in one eye?"

Envy. It seeps around in good people's hearts. That's why it is so deadly, the green-eyed monster. So, we need a spiritual makeover. The makeover we need is one of GRATITUDE, a deep abiding appreciation for life.

Gratitude is that deep abiding sense that I am blessed to be alive. Gratitude is a language we learn. Thank you. Gracias. Merci beaucoup. Kora doshi. Whatever the language, it is probably enough. David said in that psalm where he confesses his sin: "O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise." The mystic Meister Eckhart once said, "If the only prayer you ever pray is 'thank you' that it would suffice."

Saying thank you is more than good manners; it is a genuine expression of spirituality that touches the soul. Thank you, Jesus. Is that the language of your heart? You've been a rock in a weary land, a shelter in the time of storm.

Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus.  
Thank you for being there,  
when things weren't just right.  
Thank you for watching over me,

all through the night.  
Thank you, Jesus.  
Thank you, Jesus, for saving my soul,  
For taking the pieces and making me whole.  
I just want to thank you, Jesus.  
Thank you, Jesus, for peace from above,  
For undeserved presence and unending love.  
Thank you, Jesus.

Is that language on your heart? Is that thought on your mind when you wake up in the morning? Is your soul touched with the language of gratitude?

One of the advantages of being alive at 60 is the opportunity to gaze back over the years and see how you might have done it better. You learn a few things over the years. When I look back over my life I think I should have preached fewer sermons and written more thank you notes.

I think I would express appreciation as often as I define expectations. I think I would give praise as readily as I offer criticism. I think I would rejoice more readily at the success of others and be less cynical about the success of colleagues. If I had it to do over again, I think I'd live a more grateful life.

Have you learned how to say thank you? Does it bubble up in your soul? Does it flow from your lips? Can you even get through a worship service without being grateful? Thank you, Jesus. Gratitude is a language that we learn.

Gratitude is a LIFE WE LIVE. John F. Kennedy once said, "We must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words of gratitude but to live them."

I Thessalonians 4:18 says, *Give thanks in all circumstances.* Not for all circumstances but in all circumstances. Let me explain what I think that means. I don't think it means to give thanks for all circumstances. I think it means give thanks in all circumstances. I refuse to thank God for having cancer, but I pray to God that cancer will never take away my spirit of gratitude and thankfulness. I hope you understand the difference. Gratitude is a life to be lived.

I don't know where I found it, but I've had it a couple years and I'm going to keep using it. It's a little piece called "Anyway."

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered — love them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives — be kind anyway.

Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable — be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed over night — build anyway.

People need help, but may attack you if you try to help them — help them anyway.

In the final analysis, it's between you and God.

It never was between you and them anyway.

I started with a question and I want to end with one. Are you going to sell your soul to envy, or fill your life with gratitude?

Amen.