

¹"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷" 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' ⁸"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' ⁹"The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²"These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' ¹³"But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

SIDEWAYS

A few weeks ago, Dr. Mike Litman stood at our Beautiful Savior Academy and shared about virtual reality. He told us how you can put these on, shut out the rest of the world, and, through carefully created film scenarios, be able to visualize places and people like you never have before. He talked about being able to see a football game from the perspective of a player – being able to travel around the world while sitting in the comfort of your own living room, riding a roller coaster, flying in a hot air balloon. Amazing kind of stuff.

I have tried virtual reality, and it took me to Rome, Italy, where I looked around and saw things almost as if I were there. The Coliseum, the old city, the Vatican. Now, in truth, as most of you know, I have been to Rome and Vatican City, and I can say without question that virtual reality is no replacement. The things you touch and smell – the sounds you hear. They can't be fabricated. Nevertheless, I won't kid you, the experience was pretty amazing, and certainly would help you get a sense of the city if you couldn't get there in person. Have any of you ever tried it?

One of the keys to the success of this experience, however, is shutting out the rest of the world. That's why you have these. Because the minute your peripheral vision connects with reality – the minute you can look sideways and see where you really are, is the minute you lose the magic.

So, today I want to say that I wish God's people could have a set of these when it comes to our relationship with Him and the blessings He has bestowed upon us. I wish we could put on a set of these and replay the warmth and beauty of our homes from year to year, the joys of being connected to our family, the foods we've eaten, the sights we've seen, the fun we've had. I wish we could put on a set of these and re-live the best moments of our lives – our baptism, our confirmation, our wedding, the birth of our first child. I wish we could put on a set of these, and walk into our best family vacations, the laughter at a family birthday party, the joy at a big job promotion. I wish we could replay our conversations with loved ones who have passed away, touch base with a friend who lives far away, and enjoy even looking at ourselves in younger days and remembering how we made it through a particular circumstance.

And maybe those aren't all great. Maybe there's even some hardship or difficulty. But to be able to fast forward, or backward and see how God was with us, how He loved us and served us throughout every day – well, I think it would be fantastic.

But most especially, in hard days when we are struggling to see God at work in our lives, I wish we could put on one of these and walk before the cross of Jesus Christ, and experience in a very real way how God loved us so much that He sent Jesus to go there and do that so that we might be saved.

Because, you see, if we could see that, and only that, maybe we would be truly content as we journeyed onward. Maybe we would find the peace and joy in seeing how God has worked in our lives, bestowed countless gifts upon us, and managed to lead us toward the goal of eternal life with generosity, kindness, and love.

But here's the problem: it's so easy, without a set of these, to look sideways – to glance at the guy next door, the woman at the club, the coworker, the old classmate, the TV star, the athlete, the fashion model, and say, "Hey, wait a minute. Look at his life, look at her body, look at his house, look at her salary" and become negative, sour and dissatisfied. It's so easy to look sideways and see things that you want - that you don't have – experiences you've wished for, that didn't pan out. And there's always someone out there who has more, who's done greater, who is seemingly smarter, seemingly more successful, seemingly more blessed than you.

Glancing sideways and comparing ourselves to the people around us, has a way of being used by the Tempter, to highlight the negative, the inequities, the unmet wishes, dreams and desires. Looking sideways so often seems to enhance jealousy, envy, lust, covetousness. And suddenly instead of rejoicing in God's love and God's blessings, we find ourselves emotionally taking a balance and choosing to weigh ourselves, always, against others whom we deem to have a better life than we.

Glancing sideways is at the root of today's parable from Jesus. Here is a generous employer who chooses to hire people who need a job. The people he hires first are very happy to have a job and they are looking forward to getting their generous pay. And each person he hires, in turn, is glad that they have been given the opportunity to earn their wage. All is fine with the world. Everyone is happy.

But then it happens. As the employer is having the workers paid, they look sideways to see how much money was received by those who were hired at the last hour. And when they see the generous wage, they presume that the employer will honor them commensurate with the amount of hours they worked for him. So they are expecting that they will get double, triple, quadruple or even more than those later workers got. To be honest, a fairly reasonable assumption, don't you think?

But the employer doesn't do that. Instead, he chooses to give everyone the same amount. And that's when the jealousy starts to flow. "Hey, what? This isn't right. This isn't fair. If we had known then we would have chosen to work less hours, to put in less effort, to somehow equalize the wage."

But the employer essentially reminds them that it isn't really about what they do – its about his generosity. His wage to everyone was generous and kind. After all, he didn't have to give them a job at all. He could have just let them sit there. But he doesn't. Instead, he takes care of them in the way that he chooses. And however He chooses, since He is being generous with them from the outset, is up to him.

And that's the way it is with our God. He has made us and we are His. And when we fell from His grace and chose to run our own way, He sent His only Son to bring us back. And that Son did it ALL for us. He was obedient when we were not. He was faithful when we were not. And in the end, He gave all that faithfulness and all that obedience to us as a free gift, while He Himself endured the punishment and justice that our sin demanded.

So how He chooses to dole out His blessings and His gifts is up to Him. If He wants to consider the faith of little Hattie (who is being baptized tomorrow) the same as the faith of 95 year old Ethel Petersen and offer them both the same gift of eternity based on Jesus' death for them -- even though Hattie's faith hasn't been tested or proven -- well, that's up to Him, because neither Hattie nor Ethel deserves it. And if He wants to bless Brian Mosemann with the ability to play the organ and not me – we still are both blessed to be in relationship to Him and will share eternity together. And if Bill Gates is blessed with billions and Bob Jones barely has enough to get by – well, maybe Bill is blessed by sharing his gifts and Bob is blessed by receiving.

You see, God never promised to dole out His blessings and His gifts in a way that seems fair to us; nor can we ever say that we have the right to judge what we have been given or the turns our lives have taken based on some standard of fairness that we can create. No. In fact, God Himself utterly defies that kind of thinking by sending Him who deserved nothing but praise unto the place of ultimate shame. Was that fair? Absolutely not. And, by the way, it is also not fair that sinners like us should receive an eternal reward.

Fair in the eyes of the world, God did not promise. But God DID promise that He will supply our needs according to His riches in Christ, that He will watch over our lives and cover us under the shelter of His wings, that each one of us can be sure of the free gift of eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ because it is not based on what we have earned, but according to His mercy.

If only we would stop looking sideways and thinking that God ought to act according to our standards. That everyone ought to have equal earnings and equal hardships, equal stature and equal intelligence, equal potential, equal amounts of friends, equal experiences in life, equal strength, equal reward.

Would these help? Maybe. They might stop us from looking sideways and help us focus on our relationship with God. But if we only focus on us and our relationship to God and forget about everyone else that doesn't seem like a good thing.

So maybe it's best to use this. That is, to ask the Holy Spirit to let the message of His love and His kindness as expressed in these pages, so fill us with gratitude that the only reason we look sideways is not to compare ourselves, but to see where God wants us to serve and to see others who can be part of a team, using their God-given talents, resources, and gifts, to make a difference here in the world.

That's what the Church is, my friends. God's people not looking to be equal, but to serve one another – even as He first served us. God's people not looking for honor, but to love one another – even as He first loved us. And we take our collective gifts, and we take our collective talents, and we take our collective resources, and we band together to worship Him and to shine with the light of His grace wherever we go.

No need of this. Just a need for Him, in our lives – moving us away from the sideways glance of jealousy and closed fists of greed and unto the upward glance of faith and the open hands of generosity.

God grant it to you, for Jesus sake. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.