

Proper 20 (25) - September 20, 2026

- Exodus 16:2-15 - Jonah 3:10-4:11 - Philippians 1:21-30 - Matthew 20:1-16

“First, last, loved”

Every day it was the same. Sam went to the empty field across the street from the gas station on the south side of town and waited for people to come by looking for day laborers. Sam had earned a living that way for years, working one day at a construction site, another at a house, another at a warehouse, and so on. Weekdays. Weekends. He was paid cash at the end of the day. He knew pretty much what his work was worth, so when a contractor would pull up in a pickup truck asking for workers, shouting how many were needed and how much they'd pay, he knew when it was the right deal or when they were trying to take advantage of him. He sometimes would take younger guys under his wing, showing them the ropes, teaching them to stand firm on what they're worth, and showing them by example what it's like to work with integrity, and come home with the money to sustain your family and the pride to know you put in an honest day's work.

He chatted with the other workers when the boss gave them a lunch break (you brought your own lunch to save money). Sam knew right away which of the young guys would cut it. He knew who was going to bail after a few days (even the ones who wouldn't make it their first 8-10 hours!)

The money wasn't great, to be sure. Sam and his wife Patty knew how to stretch a buck, though. They had figured it out somehow.

But then Sam got hurt. He fell off a ladder and sprained his ankle pretty good. Or at least that's what he told himself, that it was just a bad sprain and that it was not broken. He prayed it wasn't broken. They didn't have the money for medical insurance or an ER visit. And you can forget the boss pitching in for the injury even though it happened on the job. You fall? It's your fault. Who's going to make a boss do the right thing? No one.

Sam didn't go to work the day after he fell.

That following morning Patty re-wrapped the ankle tight, using a kind of homemade splint. They were lucky to have found a used pair of crutches cheap at Goodwill, so she got them ready for him.

Some pain killers with breakfast before dawn, and he walked on the crutches to take the bus to that empty lot. He figured the usual bosses knew his work ethic, and that would carry the day, even if he was a little bit slower at the job site for a few days (hey- not slower than some of the other guys he knew!)

The guys at the lot who knew him said they had been worried about him and asked how he was feeling. But then they started ribbing him for being an old man, for not knowing how to use a ladder.

When the first pickup truck showed up, Sam recognized the boss. He had done a lot of work for him in his landscaping business. He was a good and fair man.

But that day he didn't pick Sam. He got 5 other guys and they left.

Sam refused to be discouraged. There would be other trucks.

There were other trucks, and none picked him. By nine, he was left with a couple of actually old guys. Sam had never been there that late. The old guys said, "yeah, sometimes we don't get picked quick. Sometimes not at all."

By ten that morning, not even the old guys were there (two just left and two were picked up for a job).

Sam didn't want to call Patty (and Patty was sitting on her hands not wanting to text him to ask him how it was going)

Sam ate his lunch alone at the empty lot. Thank goodness for a tree where he found some shade.

He stayed there that whole afternoon more out of shock than hope, really. He was making plans for how to ditch the crutches after a couple of days. He would just have to stay home and they'd tighten their belts. And hopefully it really was just a sprain. "Gosh, I can't afford it to be broken!" Sam sighed.

Patty worked all day too, but it took both of them to make ends meet. How was he going to tell her? "What am I saying?" Sam thought. "Patty probably has already figured it out and is waiting for me to stop being in denial and just come home and heal up."

He saw kids walking home from school. "What time IS IT?" He thought of their daughter who had just started middle school that year.

It was getting late. Well, lesson learned. Let a few days go by and ditch the crutches.

He was heading to the bus stop when a pickup truck pulled up. It was the boss who had been there first thing that morning.

"What are you doing still here, Sam?" the boss asked.

Sam didn't say anything. He just balanced on his good foot, lifted and showed him the two crutches, but quickly put them back so as not to fall. He shrugged and gave him a pained little smile.

"Well, you can't stay here. Hop on in. Here with me, in the front."

Sam looked at his watch. It was already 5pm.

"All I can do is hop, boss," he joked. "But look, it's already so late. I'm just going to go home and let this heal up and I'll be back at it in no time, you'll see."

"Nonsense. Get in."

"But what am I gonna do, boss?"

"There's plenty to do."

He didn't try to find any more excuses. That wasn't his way. He hobbled over to the truck on his crutches and headed to the worksite.

The guys who had been there all day were shocked when they saw Sam get out of the boss' truck.

"What are you doing here Sam? You come to supervise us?"

"I had to come to show you how to do things right," he joked right back.

Even with the crutches, he could manage several of the tasks, he was that strong, and if he got to a certain spot, there were things he could do balancing on one crutch or sitting on an old bucket.

The sun was starting to set. Sam had worked only a few hours, but it felt good to be there. No, not his ankle. That hurt a lot. Another set of painkillers wasn't really touching it. Gosh, he really hoped it's not broken.

The boss called the workers and told them it was time to wrap it up.

They lined up, and as it happened Sam was the first one to get to the boss.

Sam got his envelope with the cash, and he sat down to look at it. Honestly, he figured it would be just a few dollars. He despised the idea of asking for or getting charity. But on the other hand, he knew the boss was a fair guy. He was sure whatever it was would be right.

Sam didn't mean to say it aloud, really, but his surprise betrayed him: he gasped and said under his breath "A full day's pay!?"

A couple of his buddies near him heard him and whipped their head around, looked at him, and then looked at each other. They smiled widely in anticipation of what they thought would be MORE money than what Sam had gotten for a couple of hours of work.

Their smiles melted when they saw they got the same pay as Sam. They got the expected pay. The agreed upon pay.

All of a sudden his buddies weren't his buddies. They were mad at him. They made a big stink about working all day and getting the same as this guy on crutches! It was the young guys, but also the guys who should know better, they all complained. But the boss didn't let them get too far into their drama.

"Hey! How did I do you wrong? Isn't this what I pay you EVERY TIME you work for me?"

"Yeah, but..."

"But what? I can't pay Sam what I want to pay him? Is his family less hungry because he has a bad ankle? Is his electric bill going to be cut in half because he's on crutches? I mean, if you think he's got it so easy, here's a ladder you can jump from. Let's see if you're lucky and can also end up on crutches!"

"Boss, it's OK, they're just knuckleheads," said Sam. "You're really very kind and really you shouldn't have."

"Wait, so now you're also telling me what I should or shouldn't do?"

"No, I don't mean it like that."

"Well, good, because it's MY business."

No one spoke for a brief moment.

The boss broke the silence. "Anybody else want to tell me how to run my business? No? Ok then. Back on the truck. Let's go home."

Sam wanted to get on the back of the pickup, as he always did, but the others weren't in the mood. They called him names (teacher's pet --only worse --) and he ended up going up front.

Sam and the boss rode quietly for a while.

Sam was about to say something, when the boss interrupted.

"Listen Sam, I may not be able to do much, but I can do this. I may be the boss, but I am also a dad, and I've had my share of hard days at work and actually some injuries too. The

world doesn't stop for that. But if I can't treat you like I wish I were treated in the same situation, then what good is it to do all this?"

Sam wasn't sure what the "all this" meant, but he understood enough.

Sometimes fair looks different than what you expect. The guys in the back of the truck certainly thought this set up was unfair. Maybe it was, in a way.

But it was also fair if you thought about this from the perspective of a whole town, not just an old guy on crutches trying to earn a living. "We all pull together," Sam thought. "You have to. Otherwise, what good is it to do all this?"

Reflection questions

1. Think of a story when you were treated unfairly – that is when you were treated more graciously than the situation called for.
2. If Jesus says that the story in Matthew 20:1-16 is an example of what the Realm of God is like, then when what WILL it be like?
3. What is something you can do to treat those around you as the landowner: willing to give everyone a chance, and be generous with them?