

Semicontinuous
Exod. 16:2–15
Ps. 105:1–6, 37–45
Complementary
Jon. 3:10–4:11
Ps. 145:1–8
Phil. 1:21–30
Matt. 20:1–16

God, the Lousy Bookkeeper

Goal for the Session *Adults will discover God’s strange sense of equality and consider how they might promote that vision in their own lives.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 20:1–16

WHAT is important to know

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Lewis R. Donelson

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WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Kathryn D. Blanchard

God’s standards of justice and value are consistently presented in both the Old Testament and New Testament as alien to human standards, but God’s people are expected to behave according to these alien standards, neither demanding their rights nor begrudging others’ good fortunes. There is of course potential for abuse of such teachings, perhaps to uphold an unjust status quo in which oppressed persons are admonished to wait patiently for their reward. It is clear that a responsible theological reading of this parable tends toward radical equality in the church, in which all are equally near to receiving God’s gracious reward.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn

The landowner begins by giving everyone in the story work. Each of the laborers is unemployed and each is given work to do with the promise of pay. This parable essentially is about the generosity of God. This parable reminds us that God is a lousy bookkeeper and invites us to transform our pride, envy, and hardness into joy by admiring and celebrating God’s astounding generosity. This parable calls us to look at ourselves honestly and lovingly, as God looks at us. It invites us to turn to let go of the stuff of our lives that keeps us from being joy-filled and grateful people.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Charles L. Campbell

Those who worked the longest must watch everyone else get paid the same as they do. Their complaint does not simply concern money; it goes much deeper, to what the money represents. It takes us beneath mere economics to the spirit that underlies so much economic competition—a spirit shaped by the metaphors of winners and losers, superior and inferior. This parable calls us to envision God’s new order and expose the spirits of the old. Such unmasking and envisioning may interrupt the presuppositions that hold people captive and help create the possibility of something new.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Matthew 20:1–16

Focus on Your Teaching

Today's lesson may be difficult for some in your group who are deemed successful according to our culture. Society tells us that we work hard for what we earn and that we deserve it. Those who do not work deserve their lot. In this parable God's sense of generosity flies in the face of the values many of us live. Think about who might attend this session and how they will respond. Try to focus the lesson more on the main point, which is God's generous response and how we might imitate it in our lives rather than spending all our time criticizing our culture.

Generous God, may your Spirit work through me to proclaim your radical grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- pens
- paper
- board or newsprint
- markers
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 1, 2017

For Responding:

- option 1: paper, pens
- option 2: copies of Resource Sheet 2
- option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 1, paper, pens, trash can or paper bag

Bible study is essential for our lives as disciples. So is practicing community. Even if your group has met for years, make sure time is spent getting to better know one another. Adapt this first activity for your group's needs.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Spend the first few minutes of the lesson getting to know one another better. Tell everyone to find a person he or she either does not know or knows less than others. Once participants are paired, tell them they have one minute for each of them to tell the other what their favorite movie of all time is. Repeat the process and ask participants to find someone else. Ask them to tell that person what their favorite job or task has been in life so far.

Invite a general review of the last two sessions on forgiveness. Ask what participants remember and what they have thought about during the week regarding the lessons. If the last two weeks' sermons have touched on the same Scripture, how did it resonate with your discussion in class?

Explain that today's theme is another parable told by Jesus. It is not about forgiveness, but rather about God's generosity.

Say this prayer or provide one of your own:

Merciful God, our lives are so busy and interrupted that we often go with the flow and do not reflect on what we are doing. Open our hearts to hear your message about your ways and how we might follow them in our daily tasks. Amen.

Because of Matthew's Jewish roots, the circumlocution (an indirect way of expressing something) "heaven" is often used in the place of "God" to show respect for the name of God. While other Gospels use "kingdom of God," Matthew uses "kingdom of heaven."

EXPLORING

Tell the group the Scripture today is Matthew 20:1–16. This parable is often called the Laborers in the Vineyard. Encourage your participants to act out the parable as you narrate it. (If they absolutely do not want to act, they may still represent the characters from their seats.) Assign parts to the various characters in the parable, who are: a landowner, five sets of laborers (first group, 9, 12, 3, and 5 o'clock groups), a manager. Tell each laborer group they are to put themselves in the mindset of their particular group.

Read aloud the Bible passage as the groups act out verses 1–7. Before continuing, say: "Let's say the first group began at 7 a.m. and quitting time for everyone was 7 p.m. Let's also say the daily wage is \$10 per hour. Before I continue reading, calculate what you think you have earned depending on how many hours you have worked."

Now continue reading and acting out verses 8–16.

After acting out the verses, give each group a few minutes to discuss the following two questions among themselves:

- ✪ How did you feel about your pay and what others were paid?
- ✪ Can you name a similar situation you have experienced in life? How did you feel?

Bring the participants back together for a brief discussion to report their discussions.

Continue working in these same small groups. Have them read Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 20:1–16) and the Scripture passage again. Each group should then write a one-sentence summary of the meaning of the parable and a one-sentence description of God's kingdom. After a few minutes bring them together and report to the entire group again. Make a list of the characteristics of God's kingdom on the board.

Facilitate a brief large-group discussion on concrete situations in the participants' lives where they see some of these characteristics lived out.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Envisioning Godlike Actions in Your World** Tell participants to draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. Title one side "Un-Godlike Actions" and the other side "Godlike Actions." Invite participants to work in pairs to think of their home, work, church, and social lives and list specific examples of situations in which people are treated according to social values of competition and greed (Un-Godlike Actions). Also have participants record specific instances in which they have seen generosity practiced in the "Godlike actions" column. Suggest that the godlike actions may be a reaction to situations of injustice listed in the first column.

**EASY
PREP**

After a few minutes, ask pairs to read their lists of “Godlike actions.” Discuss:

✿ What is one godlike action you might practice in your own life?

- 2. What Can You Do?** In his book *Exodus from Hunger*, David Beckmann tells the story of Gyude, a young African man who lives to help build God’s generous vision of an abundant life for all. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Gyude’s Story) and instruct participants to read the story and then think quietly about how Gyude’s story connects with today’s parable about a generous God. Then, encourage them to spend some time thinking and writing about how they might use their resources and opportunities to practice the sort of generous living found in the kingdom of God.
- 3. What Do You Need to Let Go?** Have a volunteer read the “So What?” section of Resource Sheet 1 out loud to the group. Repeat the last sentence: “[The parable] invites us to turn to let go of the stuff of our lives that keeps us from being joy-filled and grateful people.” Invite participants to spend a few minutes to make a list of “stuff” (attitudes, things, practices) that keeps them from being joy-filled and grateful. After a few minutes gather in a circle and invite participants to rip the pieces of paper into tiny shreds and throw them in the trash can or a paper bag you can recycle. Say this prayer or one similar:

God of new beginnings, your new order exposes the emptiness of our present one. Make us the joy-filled, grateful people you need and help us live into a more generous way of living. Amen.

CLOSING

Have the group gather in a circle. Invite brief reflections of what they learned in today’s lesson and any practice they will try and put in place during the week.

Then instruct participants that they will affirm each other’s call to work in God’s kingdom by passing the invitation to the person on their right until all have been invited. In turn, say to the person on your right, “[Name], you are called to work in God’s kingdom.” When everyone in the circle has had a turn, close in prayer:

Gracious God, you call all people to come and work in your vineyard and leave none standing idle. May we hear your invitation and joyfully proceed to do the work you set before us. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 for October 1, 2017, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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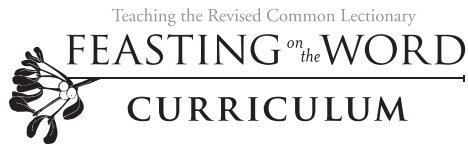
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September 24, 2017

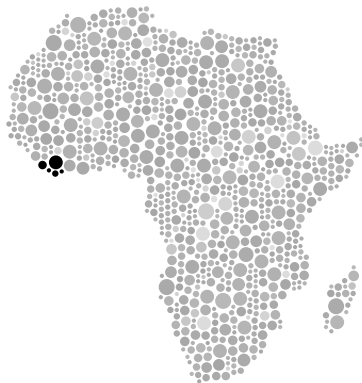
God, the Lousy
Bookkeeper



Adult
Resource Sheet 2

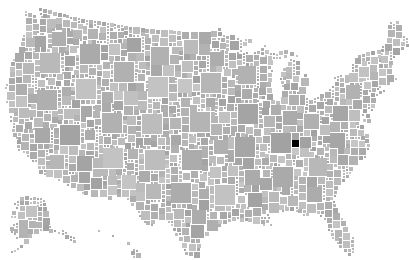
Gyude's Story

Gyude Moore grew up in Liberia (in West Africa) and came to the United States for college. He is living out a promise he made as a teenager.



Gyude (pronounced JOO-day) was fourteen when civil war broke out in Liberia. Once his family had to flee to the Ivory Coast and his newborn baby sister died, too weak to make the journey. Gyude's voice still breaks as he describes his mother's grief and his own powerlessness. His mother didn't cry until late that evening in the refugee camp. She tried to muffle the sounds of her grief so she wouldn't wake the other children. But Gyude heard her.

That is when he made his promise. He swore—to himself, to his mother, to God—that if he survived the war he wouldn't work for social status or wealth just for himself and his family. Instead he would fight the causes of poverty and war, the conditions that led to his sister's death and his mother's suffering.



Gyude believes that God has taken him up on that promise. Through a miraculous set of events he was able to come and study at Berea College in Kentucky. There, he joined an Oxfam America training program for young leaders of activism against global poverty. After college, Gyude joined Bread for the World's staff as a grassroots organizer. He recalls his first visit to Capitol Hill. "I realized that when I was in Africa, I accepted things that happened to me like I accepted the weather. But suddenly I was here, talking to some of the most powerful people in the world, trying to influence the economic policy of the most powerful nation in the world. In that moment I went from powerless to powerful. Often, U.S. policy has a greater influence on us in Africa than we have ourselves."

Gyude did assist his family back home while he lived in the U.S. In fact, many in his family hoped he would stay and continue to financially help them. Yet, Gyude returned to Liberia to serve on the staff of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first woman head of state in Africa. He helps write some of her speeches and one of the two projects he tracks is on the availability of low-income housing.

—Paraphrased from David Beckmann, *Exodus from Hunger: We Are Called to Change the Politics of Hunger* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 122–25.