

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

September 20, 2026



GENEROUS

the wealthy's envy of equity

by Drew Downs

This week's gospel hits a lot of people hard. Jesus tells a parable of a landowner who pays everyone the same regardless of how hard they work. Jesus is telling us that God is measuring by a different metric than US industry does. And it culminates with a charge "are you envious because I am generous?" The opposite of what we hear from our wealthy, who charge that people who work for fair wages are really, secretly envious of their wealth.

Jesus doesn't just flip the script to make us think. This is about how God sees us and what Jesus teaches. That we are to strive for equity. That the ones coveting wealth are the ones hoarding it. In contrast to those titans of industry is this landowner who keeps hiring because more people need a piece of that pie. Because there is plenty of pie. And the virtue comes in sharing it, not holding it; in saving lives, not condemning them. Their envy is a matter of life and death.

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WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

A Breakthrough for Stolen Credit

Last week, I described our work as people of faith as being in the relationship business. That, unlike the promises of efficiency and productivity we see in AI hype and the market, we aren't supposed to be the fastest or most capable of anything to anyone. Our job is to be real with the people around us.

News this weekend that ChatGPT had solved a ninety-year-old math problem sent shockwaves through academia. And then the truth came out. Researchers were over 90% there, OpenAI stole the research, spent \$15 million on tokens running agents around the clock, all to make a startling claim that their LLM had solved the problem.

There are several ethics issues here, each of which could yet land OpenAI in court. But I want to highlight how much this moment doesn't fit with our values—particularly as the news of the discovery went bigger than the rules-breaking and the defense of using these “tools” to produce breakthroughs is too easy.

This isn't a case of a machine doing the work faster. It's a story of theft and stolen credit. It's also a story about how we use our resources and for what purpose. In this case, it wasn't for the glory of mathematics but to make a machine look good. If Sam Altman did this for himself, we'd call it hubris and selfish ambition.

Boosters might call my response anti-AI. Whether I am or not is not the point. I want for us to be conscious of our relationships, of our humanity, of the dignity of every human being. Is this an expression of Kin-dom of Heaven or the kingdoms of earth? That's the question I want us asking. Because that informs my thoughts about LLMs and how they're used.

With love,
Drew+

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FOR SUNDAY

Proper 20A

September 20, 2026

Collect

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with

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me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Reflection

I like to call this the most hated teaching of Jesus. I don't have any evidence. There are no studies proving my hypothesis. But this has to be the most difficult passage for Americans raised on meritocratic values to deal with. In part because it violates a quiet American code about compensation. The other part is that we might not fully comprehend what Jesus is trying to communicate.

The two main concerns for us in this passage involved the day's wage and the underlying nature of work. The landowner negotiates with the first round of hires for a day's wage, which we might think of as akin to a living wage in modern terms. This is less about a negotiation in which two parties are trying to maximize their benefit and more about ensuring security and livelihood. This is both generous and fair. Because the alternative is less than enough to live on. It would mean starvation and eventually death.

This, too, is where the nature of work comes in. Because the landowner keeps hiring. Not because of need at the vineyard, but because people need jobs. He is keeping people alive. And he keeps going out and marveling that there are people who need a job *because others aren't hiring*. The landowner's comment helps us understand that his contempt is for other landowners rather than the workers.

Jesus undermines our expectations for more, for special reward for harder work, for being the best at things here meaning special treatment from God. And Jesus keeps assuring us that God is good and fair and just. And our culture isn't.

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