

# “The Game of Zero Sum”

Psalm 145:1-8  
Matthew 20:1-15

June 27, 2010

*“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?” (Mt. 20:14b-15).*

Jesus defines and demonstrates a far different God than the one we competitive mortals have created and lived with. In God’s economy grace and judgment pair up to create a non-zero sum world.

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Good morning class. I trust that all of you have read today’s assignment – so let’s just begin discussing its ramifications on macro-economics. Oh, you didn’t read today’s case study? You were ...

Look, if you think you will be getting your MBA, here at Fuqua just because I’m a nice guy, think again. This ain’t the Divinity School across the Quad! All right, for those of you who had more important things to do than your business homework, we’ll all go over the case study together.

**Roberto Mondavi owns a vineyard.** And it’s been a very good year. The grapes are rich and fullbodied, and the day of harvest has arrived. So Mr. Mondavi gets up early, showers and shaves (he’s a clean shaven man!), and at 6 AM he heads down to Callistoga to hire some labor to pick the grapes. Unfortunately, all of the growers in the Napa Valley are having a good year and they too are looking for help, so Mr. Mondavi must pay a premium wage to get the people he needs. He ends up paying \$200 a day for each picker that the job requires.

*(A hand up)* Yes, Ed? No, \$200 per day is not a ridiculous wage. Back in Jesus’ day a denarius was a day’s pay. A dollar a day might be OK for the King James Version, but this it’s 2009. Mondavi determines to offer \$200 a day. And remember, it’s his vineyard, OK?

Anyway, Mondavi loads his crew into his pickup and heads back to the vineyard. The harvest is good and the grapes are very ripe. Mondavi quickly

sees that he needs more hands if he's gonna get the work done before dark. So, at 9:00 he hops into his pick-up and back to town he goes. And he makes the same trip at Noon and then again at 3 PM – all to hire additional pickers. He tells them that he will pay them what's right - top dollar to harvest the grapes. With each trip he adds about a half dozen laborers to his cost factor but it's critical he get as much of the harvest in before nightfall.

A couple hours before dark, Mondavi realizes that the job just isn't going to get done unless he brings in even more pickers. So he drives back to town one more time. By this time the only people hanging around the labor pool are the usual group of losers that nobody wanted to hire earlier: the ones too drunk from partying the night before to get up early enough for a decent job. What the heck, thinks Bob Mondavi. So he shouts, *"Hey, you guys! I've got work for you. Out at my place. Top dollar!"* What the heck, they think. It's only an hour before dark. We can make a few bucks – enough to keep the party going. "Let's go!"

**OK class, what do you think happened when old man Mondavi dropped each successive group off at his vineyard, outside Calistoga?** You're right! Each successive group asks the guys who got there first, *"What did the old man say he'd pay you? \$200 bucks! Oh Mama!* These guys may not be able to handle trig or standard equations, but they all can do long division. *Let's see \$200 divided by .... Wow! That means that the ones who got here at noon will be walking away with \$100 bucks. And those fellows who just got here, let's see ... they'll get about \$15 bucks. Not bad for just an hour's worth of work."*

At the end of the day, when all of his grapes were safely stored away, Robert Mondavi was a very happy man. It was a wonderfully successful harvest. All the signs point to '09 being a superb vintage. So to celebrate he decants, and enjoys, a bottle of his premier Select Label Chardonnay, 1985. He is feeling very good as he hands out the pay envelopes, beginning with those shiftless losers who got there last. As he walks away, the last guy he hired, the one with three-days beard and a scar on his cheek, (the one who smelled like hadn't showered for days) opens his envelop and starts counting, and he counts ten twenty-dollar bills. What's his reaction? What does he do?

**(Yes?)** No, Mary, he doesn't turn around and say, *"Uh, excuse me, Mr. Mondavi, but I think you made a mistake."* He's outta there as quickly and coolly as his legs can take him. But that night the whole town knew that everyone who had worked for Mondavi that day ... everyone of them had received the same pay – regardless of how long or how little time they had spent in the vineyard.

**So what was the reaction?** The one's who were hired later in the day were celebrating. Those who worked all day were hightailing it back to Mondavi Vineyards, screaming their heads off. *“Is this anyway to run a vineyard? You gave those bums who only worked an hour the same that you gave us, and we worked all day in the sun! It’s not fair!!”*

*“Hey! Stop right there!”* Mondavi responds, *“Who made you the bookkeeper of my vineyard. You agreed to work for \$200 a day, didn’t you? You worked the day. You got \$200. So what’s your beef? If I want to give somebody who worked fewer hours than you the same thing, why are you concerned? Why is your nose out of joint? Did I cheat you? This was a great harvest. I’m having a great time. And out here at my place there is no such thing as first and last. At the Mondavi Vineyards everyone is treated generously. How dare you begrudge me my liberality. Go have a glass of wine in the tasting room, and get over it!”*

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**OK class, think hard. What’s going on here?**

*(Hand To Ear)* I think I heard one of you say that this story is a lot like that one about the no good prodigal – that there is something unfair about treating those don’t operate by the same rules not only equally, but generously. That we live best with one another when we all play the same game and understand the rules of that game.

Good insight! So what game is being played in today’s case study? In economic theory it’s a matter of the laborers in the vineyard functioning under the rules some have called *“the zero-sum game,”* while Roberto Mondavi chooses to operate out of a *“non-zero sum”* model.

You’re all business majors, so you know the difference, right? A system of operation can properly be called **zero-sum** when a participant’s gain or loss is exactly balanced by the losses or gains of the other participant(s). If the total gains of the participants are added up, and the total losses are subtracted, they will sum to zero.

Cutting a pecan pie for instance is zero-sum, because if I take a larger than equal piece of the pie I reduce the amount of pie available for others.

Beefing about another person's pay, when the one beefing is in fact generously remunerated is not only operating under a zero-sum model, he's essentially not recognizing and enjoying his own portion.

By contrast, **non-zero-sum** describes a situation in which the interacting parties' aggregate gains and losses' is either less than or more than zero. All the members of a soccer team are operating in a non-zero sum environment because what benefits one benefits all, and what hurts one hurts the entire team.

Zero-sum games are *competitive*. Non-zero-sum games are *cooperative*.

**To the eyes of those of us raised in the world of competition**, it's easy to see the unfairness of the vineyard owner's behavior, because we live in a culture that measures everything on its merit. We are always trying to balance the books; to make sure everyone is treated fairly; and to be darned sure than no one takes advantage of us – even if something doesn't affect us directly. If you don't work as hard as I do you don't eat. If you can't produce something you have no value. In our culture those of us who "have" have a deep-seated disdain for people who "have not." How often have you looked critically at grocery basket paid in part (or in full) with food stamps? God knows that much of what is driving the ill feelings toward those with less is a mean-spiritedness that resents anyone having something they haven't worked for.

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So what do you think about this parable (oops! case study?) Is the point of it that generosity directed to one is most often understood as unfairness to the other; that God's love is heaven to one and hell to another? That is certainly one way to look at it if the rules of the game of life we play is zero sum. We all know people who refuse to join the party if they feel that generosity is being extended to people who don't deserve it.

But another way to view this case study is that that score keeping and balancing the books have no place in God's Way.

**Someone once said that if the world could be saved by bookkeeping, God would have stopped at Moses – there would be no need for Jesus.**

The law was OK, as far as it went, but all that a thousand years of legalism proved was that, “*no one is righteous, no not one.*” (Rm 3:10). In Jesus Christ, God gave up his job as an accountant, and closed the books forever, gathered all of our IOUs and nailed them on a cross.

**(Hand To Ear)** You say that if word got out, and surely it would, that Mondavi was paying his laborers that way – an overly generous flat rate regardless of hours - he would ruin the whole system of labor in the valley?

I'll answer your question with a question: If you had the opportunity of working for Mondavi would you take it? Of course you would! And don't you think that seeing the relationship between extravagant generosity and the response it engendered, other land owners would begin altering their relationship with their laborers from one of pure competition to that of cooperating teamwork?

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This wonderfully intriguing story/parable/case study describes the God we know through Jesus Christ as being far more generous and expansive than we can imagine; that in God's economy everybody wins, there are no short-straws or long ones; no winners at the expense of losers. **Zero-sum is the game we play, it's not the one God calls us to play.**

Our human proclivity to gain advantage at the expense of another is at the core of our rebellion against our Creator. God's salvation (God's shalom) isn't predicated on where one is on any pecking order created by any game that creates winners and losers – rather Shalom is God benevolent, gracious, extravagantly generous gift to all.

“Peace I leave with you,” our Lord said, “My peace I give to you.  
I do not give to you as the world gives.  
Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”  
(John 14.27)

“And he said, ‘Let anyone **with ears to hear** listen!’”  
(Mark 4)

Class dismissed!!

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Note:

The adaptation of “The Laborers in the Vineyard” was itself adapted and taken from a sermon by William Willimon, Duke University Chapel.