

Grace and the Crazy Businessman

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Matthew 20:1-16

'For 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 market-place; 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 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.'

Is God fair? We certainly know that life is not fair, so we look in hope to Christ and the Kingdom of God. There we find mercy, justice and grace. Amen! But do we find fairness? Does God treat everybody fairly, that is, evenly and equally? The answer to this is surprising, and is addressed in Jesus' Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, which I think should really be entitled, the Parable of Grace and the Crazy Businessman. Like all of Jesus' parables, these brief and odd stories are full of surprises, so prepare yourselves for a bumpy ride.

It all starts normally enough. A wealthy businessman went out to hire laborers for work in his vineyard. One might suspect that it was harvest time. He went to the marketplace where men would gather looking to be hired and gathered a team of

workers. It was a standard kind of deal. *After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.* Work days were long in that time. They began with the sunrise around 6:00 a.m., and finished near the sundown at 6:00 p.m. The standard wage for a day's labor was a denarius and this was the agreed payment. Jewish law required that workers be paid that same day at the conclusion of their labor. Up to this point the story is quite ordinary, but then things began to take a strange turn. Three hours later, at 9:00 a.m., the businessman saw other potential workers standing idly in the marketplace, and he hired them too. Perhaps this was not such a strange thing to do, but it became most unusual when he returned to the marketplace and hired workers at noon, 3:00 p.m., and then at 5:00 p.m. with only one hour of work remaining in the day! It would seem that so late in the day one could hardly gather the workers and orient them to the work before the day was over! Did he really need all those workers, or was his heart full of compassion for these unemployed men? This was a different kind of businessman who would soon prove himself to be *very* different, for as the long day's work came to an end, he paid them all the same amount! Pay was given first to the last hired. *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.*

As one would expect the protests came without delay. *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.'* Or to abbreviate: "This isn't fair!" Theirs was a normal human response, and I suppose few of us would have reacted differently. It should also be added that Jesus is not teaching a lesson on how to run the business end of a vineyard! This businessman seemed ready for their complaints and responded with some very thoughtful points. First, he pointed to the original agreement which he was fully honoring. They had agreed to a denarius and not one worker was being shortchanged. This could not be argued. Next he stressed his freedom to spend his money as he desired. *Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give 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?*

Parables are stories which often confront us with a question, and this one concludes with a most startling one. *Are you envious because I am generous?* I love the Revised Standard Version's rendering of this verse: *Or do you begrudge my generosity?* One would presume it safe to say that they *did* begrudge his generosity, except perhaps for those hired at 5:00! Why wouldn't these workers be glad for the latecomers and the boss's generosity? They were not be happy because it just didn't seem fair!

Why do we begrudge such generosity? In examining the story and one's own heart three obvious reasons for such resentment quickly appear. This ugly trinity of discontent begins with **self-justification**. As fallen human beings we all naturally have a sense of fairness, and an accompanying sense that we are right and good. As

we look around us, we see all kinds of unfairness, and we readily spot faults in others, but looking inward we are quick to identify ourselves as fair thinking, good people. Our Old Testament lesson is from the Book of Jonah, and here we find a deeply disgruntled prophet who fits the human profile quite well. He was sent to preach repentance to the Assyrians—the nation which destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and threatened to do the same to Judah—and could not bear the thought of something so obviously unfair. By his natural way of thinking this was a wicked nation which richly deserved destruction. The story ends with this wicked nation repenting at Jonah’s preaching and being spared God’s punishment. Jonah was nearly apoplectic with horror and anger. God just isn’t fair!

God’s grace has a way of upsetting the fairness applecart in a big way. Rather than make life more fair, grace often does the opposite! Why should such a wicked nation be blessed with forgiveness? Grace can also be offensive to our sense of personal righteousness. As “good people” who have worked hard to be that way it seems so very unfair for blatantly evil people to be freely given God’s favor. “After all we’ve done!” In Jesus’ day he faced the Pharisees who were legalists, that is, they believed that one could make themselves fully pleasing to God by following the law’s every detail. This is a very human centered religion with no room for grace. In our human pride we keep falling back into the myth that we are basically good people with the power to redeem ourselves. We may not follow Jewish law as the Pharisees did, but we can easily fall into their mode of thinking. Jesus wants us to have *nothing* to do with such misguided behavior!

The next source of hostility toward God’s grace is **envy** and **jealousy**, and oh how we all need to confess our sin! We often and easily react negatively when those around us do well. Stereotypically we think of women as having the corner on this market. I am told that in women’s circles, the thinnest one is usually resented. We men may chuckle at this, but we are by no means immune. I recall my earliest years in the workforce. As a young apprentice or assistant in the shop I would be assigned to work with a particular journeyman, who more often than not would explain to me that they were the only one in the whole shop who really knew what they were doing. With this kind of mentality, it is no surprise that we bristle whenever another’s achievements seem to outshine our own, and how tempting it is to find fault with those who we fear may surpass us. We could be rejoicing with those who seem to stay sleek and trim, or are showing real skill, or receive a bonus in their day’s pay, but jealousy comes much more naturally. I am pleased to report that there were journeymen who rose above the games of envy, and most of these were devout Christians. And having chalked up a victory for our team, I should also confess that we pastors can easily be given to jealousy among our colleagues!

The third, and perhaps saddest reason for our hostility toward God’s grace is tied up with our **lack of compassion**. Why these late hires? This businessman seemed crazy to keep hiring so late in the day. Did he really need all those workers? The story

strongly implies that they were hired out of compassion for their sad state of unemployment! What would we see if we were that businessman strolling through that city square? At best we might think it too bad that so many could not find work, but we would probably console ourselves with the thought that tomorrow is a new day and that they will likely find work then. As a businessman he hired these many late comers at real financial risk. One simply doesn't run a business that way, but this man did. How much sadness we see all around us, and yet we pass by with little thought. How slow we are to generosity as we know that generosity involves financial risk. The businessman was filled with compassion and rejoiced to see men going home with a full day's pay. We look at the same picture, calculate the unfairness of it all and grumble with discontent. We are too far from God's heart.

So what is the moral of this story? How is Jesus asking to change our lives and attitudes? Perhaps the best initial lesson is to be glad and grateful for our portion of grace. As the businessman plainly explained, no one was cheated in this transaction. Those who worked all day were given a full day's wage. It did not seem fair to them, as others earned the same amount for less work, but they were not shortchanged! Our sense of human fairness leads us to keep score as we go through life, and this leads in tragic directions. Jesus told this parable with the Jews in mind, knowing that they would become jealous when in the near future Gentiles would come to receive salvation. The Jews had walked with God for several centuries while the Gentiles were complete newcomers. The Jews had worked and suffered for so long, but the Gentiles merely seemed to show up! It is often difficult for a believer who has walked with God for many years to rejoice when a new convert receives the same gift of salvation late in their lives. The ultimate expression of this is the thief on the cross who came to salvation in the closing hours of his wayward life. Or what of the Prodigal Son who was graciously fully restored as a son after years of a bad attitude and wild living, while his obedient and hardworking brother would receive that exact same gift of sonship. It did not seem fair and the older brother was filled with resentment. At many congregational meetings the ideas of newer members have been held in low regard and the refutation has been led by a member who begins their remarks with "I've been a member here for fifty some years, and...."

Before our hearts go wandering off along paths of score keeping and resentment, we do well to pause and give thanks for the gift of salvation which we have received. It is a gift. I did nothing to earn it. I have always recommended that we think back over our lives and trace the lines of God's grace in this pilgrimage. Others around me may actually be living charmed lives, but this should not detract from my gratitude for the love of Jesus Christ I have so graciously been given. An attitude of gratitude is essential for healthy Christian living, and we do well to take regular time of worship and devotion to keep that strong.

The next step may be just a little harder. We need to make a habit of being glad for other people's grace. When we find ourselves envying, rather than simply scorning

ourselves for such evil thoughts, we should try an exercise in gratitude for others. Perhaps Janice won the employee of the year award, and you feel that you have worked a lot harder and more capably than her. That may hurt. Talk to God about that struggle of jealousy and resentment. Then try praising God for Janice and all that she has done for the company. Pray for her wellbeing. This may be challenging work, but you will find your spirit changed by God's Holy Spirit.

We would also do well to remember God's great generosity. God's many graces given—the gift of salvation, and then the many gifts of skills and abilities—are more numerous than can be counted. Janice winning the award does not mean that the rest of the place is full of untalented clods! Let us be more diligent in noticing the gifts and special blessings which those around us have to offer, and let us live in the confidence that God has gifted each of us to be a blessing to the world. The vineyard workers were thrown into confusion regarding their pay. May confusion give way to joy as we remember that generosity which is at the root of this strange pay day.

This parable also reminds us that God is sovereign and does as He pleases. God is God! This is not to say that God is capricious, but God does as God desires to do, and yes, this can be quite mysterious. In our modern democratic age, we can too easily begin to think of God as an elected official who must act fairly as the public desires, and respond to our vote! God graciously hears and answers prayers, but God is also God and does as He has planned. We are God's servants, just as Christ came and lived as a servant, and must be quicker to trust in God's plan and to rest in confidence that God knows what He is doing. We would do well to meditate upon the businessman's words which are to illustrate God's thoughts: *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"* In earlier years it was common to hear people speak of a major event, often a tragic one, with the words, "for as much as it has pleased God...." We are God's soldiers in God's army, and a soldier's duty is to please their commanding officer. Let us learn to trust in God and to trust in God's plan.

In Jesus Christ, God has given us an amazing gift, the underserved blessing of salvation and life eternal. Who would have thought that God's generosity would cause such an uproar? I think of the matter of inheritances. When a parent dies, they leave their possessions to their children, other relatives and friends. Our parents owe us nothing. Indeed, we owe them! But ever so graciously we receive these undeserved gifts of an inheritance. Isn't it amazing how much resentment and family discord has been caused by inheritances?

God is not fair, at least by our standards of fairness. But God is just, and God is gracious, and that is a lot better than fair.