

Grace in a Wage-Based World

Matthew 20:1-16

Intro

Tough Passage: Fun to read a commentary and see the note that “many scholars consider [this passage] one of the most difficult parables to interpret” (e.g., interpretive colonoscopy, etc.).

Birth Order: Having three kids it's fun to notice how you raise them differently (you might have noticed that the force is strong with our youngest). The first child (absolute quiet for a nap, homemade baby food, etc.). By the third child (Gaffigan, drowning and someone hands you a baby). The younger kids, by virtue of being of their birth order, get access to some things earlier. Eventually the oldest feels “it's not fair; why do they get to do that.”

What is Fair?: Is it fair that God loves a lifelong church-goer and a deathbed convert the same? Is it fair that God loves a bright eyed toddler and a death row inmate the same? Is it fair that God gives some a life of wealth and others a life of poverty? Is it fair that God gives some extraordinary talents and others an ordinary life?

God is both fully just and wonderfully generous. As his disciples, we trust his fairness and delight in his generosity.

¹ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² 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.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Summary: This parable is connected to the previous scene (γάρ) which is made clear in the summary statement in 20:16 (“So the last will be first, and the first last”), a clear callback to 19:30. Jesus is teaching on the values of his kingdom and this parable is an illustration of this

particular value (e.g., last/first). He's a master preacher (situation, thesis, illustration). This parable is only found in Matthew.

- This is a parable (meant to make a point but don't press the metaphor too far), tells a straightforward story with a surprising result.

There's a **master** with a **vineyard** who is hiring laborers to work in his fields (somewhat surprising that the master is doing the hiring himself rather than a manager). Different groups of workers are described in this story (sunrise to sunset: first thing, 3rd, 6th, 9th, and 11th hours) and the circumstances imply differences in their abilities, competency, and value as workers,

- The **first** group is hired first thing in the morning (6am). These seem to be the early-rising, eager-beavers. They get up early, they are the first to be chosen to work. They agree to work for a day's wage (denarius).
- The **second**, **third**, and **fourth** groups (9am, noon, 3pm) are described as standing idle in the marketplace. They have not been hired to work. Is it because they came too late to get the job? Were they less desirable workers? The master still comes to them and offers them a job. Unlike the first group, who agreed on a set wage, these trust the master to give them whatever is right. They're just happy to work and make any money.
 - Ever met someone who loves their job? It's kind of annoying because most of us are just "working for the weekend" (as the song goes).
- The gulph between the various workers is made clear specifically in the **last group** who are hired at the eleventh hour (5pm). It's one hour from quitting time. This phrase spawned the idiom "eleventh hour" (last possible time before it's too late; last moment; squeaking by).
 - They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' What a beautiful picture of the grace of God: we're standing around, no one wants us, we've missed our opportunity and yet God invites us to work for him.

When quitting time arrives, it's time to pay each worker. True to the point of the story, the master starts paying the last workers to arrive first. *But this makes sense*. He can pay them a smaller amount than those who worked the full day. In fact, the **first group** is thrilled to see the **eleventh hour** workers receive a denarius (a full day's wage). You can imagine that they're expecting to get more (mowed my neighbor's grass as a kid, expecting money in a card, and just got a card).

- Then the moment arrives for them to get paid and they realize they get the same amount as the other workers. Of course, this is what they agreed to work for (so the master is keeping his promise) but it just doesn't seem fair to them because they worked so much longer (as much as 11 hours more)! They did 90% more work for the same amount of money.

Meat of the Interaction: ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last."

Who Is This Illustrating?: Who is Jesus illustrating? First disciples versus the last disciples? Jews versus the Gentiles? Deathbed conversions? Children versus grownups (this passage)? Pharisees versus “sinners” (a la Luke 15)?

1. The Fairness of God ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² 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.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go.

Feels Unfair: Why does this feel unfair? A union leader would vehemently protest this type of treatment of workers. Humans can’t detach the idea that reward is supposed to be based on work. We can’t help but be hopelessly pragmatic (pragmatism is a great danger in the church today; when money, attendance, and “results” get in the way of godliness, discipleship, and character).

- Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? But it is actually fair. These workers agreed upon the wage. If they didn’t want to work for that amount, they didn’t have to.

Is God Unfair?: I’m reminded of the story of John the Baptist in the Gospel of John (chapter 3). John’s disciples come to him, seemingly jealous that Jesus and his disciples are baptizing and winning more converts than John. In that amazing exchange, John tells them that they have no reason to be questioning God because *everything they have is from him*.

- “John answered, ‘A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven’” (Jn 3:27).
- There has been more than one occasion where a child of mine, who pays no rent, does no grocery shopping, hasn’t cooked a meal, scheduled an appointment, etc. has claimed something I’ve done is unfair.

It’s His Vineyard: One point of the parable is easily overlooked is that the vineyard belongs to the owner. He’s the employer. He is hiring. He doesn’t owe these guys a job. He is offering and they are accepting.

- God doesn’t need us or owe us anything. The fact that he chooses us is a gift. “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn 15:16).
- God is not obligated to play by our rules. *He’s the owner of all things*. As a result, there’s no tension between his complete fairness and his generosity.
- Don’t judge God by your feelings or perception. You don’t know enough to know what is right or best. If you knew what God knew you’d do what God does.
- To believe in God’s sovereignty is to understand that **because of who he is, he can do what he wants**. He can dispense mercy as he pleases.
- We have small minds and act in small ways when we try to limit God to our vision of fair play.

We take all that we’ve been given from God and we walk around with pride. We think, “If God gave it to me, it’s mine. Look how smart, funny, athletic, hard-working I am. But God gave that to

you. **When you understand that everything is from God, no tragedy can rob you of joy, identity, or purpose.**

Value of Work: Part of the problem is when we reduce work to simply a wage rather than an opportunity to worship. “The tragedy of a wage based life is that it blinds us to the presence of grace in our own life. It can make us resentful of grace, goodness, and beauty in the life of another. It separates and isolates us from others. Eventually we set up standards and expectations not only for ourselves and others but for God. That’s what happened to the first one hired in today’s parable. They saw themselves as different from and more deserving than the later hired. They grumbled against the landowner saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us.’ The truth is they are not that different from each other. Neither group owned the vineyard. Both groups needed a job and both groups were chosen, invited in, by no effort of their own doing.”

Luke 15: Think of the elder brother in Luke 15. He didn’t work for the father out of love or desire but in order to *get* an inheritance (essentially the same problem of the younger brother asking for his inheritance when he ran off).

Do We Really Want God to Be Fair?: We devalue God’s call and reward when we think because we showed up at 6am we deserved to be hired (didn’t deserve it); a lot of our success is a function of our personality, culture, experience, upbringing. We all like to think we pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps. But who gave you the boot? Or the muscles to pull?

- We don’t really want God to be fair. I’m worse than I imagine (but loved more than I hope).
- **A feeling of entitlement from God is a killer to your worship of God** because it’s all a gift from him. What would it look like to approach God with thankfulness rather than demands?

Be honest, what do you really deserve? From your heart. The Bible says our “righteousness” is “filthy rags.” Our best is not only insufficient for salvation but condemns to punishment.

- Do we really want to rely on our ability to get it together and keep it together? If you could earn your salvation, you could lose it (and you would). God doesn’t give us what we deserve (e.g., death), God takes the death we deserve on himself so he can give us what we don’t deserve (his righteousness). **Divine grace is infinitely superior to human goodness.**
- **Wage-based** thinking toward God focuses on our effort but **grace** reveals God’s extravagant goodness. When we try to earn our rewards from God, it’s like trying to pay with the wrong currency wondering why it doesn’t work? It’s like trying to pay your credit card bill with monopoly money. It’s insufficient. Only God’s grace can cover the debt we owe.

2. The Generosity of God I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’

Scarcity Mindset: Why do we get upset when God blesses others? Why do we think we deserve that blessing? Do we think God is going to run out of blessings to go around? Gospel thinking is contrary to a scarcity mindset. God's blessings aren't rare or in short supply.

- What is scarcity thinking? God has already helped me too much. I can't go to him when I sin *again*. He never runs out of provision, strength, care, or compassion. His love and generosity knows no end (which is why it is often so shocking to us).
 - The workers **begrudge** the master's generosity because they don't think these other's deserve his graciousness and they don't feel like he's being gracious to them.

Whose Kingdom?: The way things work in **my** kingdom (generous with who I want to be generous). So, when someone is generous with **their** time and stuff in a way that I don't like, it shouldn't be a problem. Why? E.g., want people to like our music, movies, etc. (validate our opinion). Why do we get mad at the generosity of others? It doesn't affect us? We get mad because we want more or think we know better. We think we know better than God!

Reward: There really are rewards for following Jesus. Don't be afraid to revel in the rewards of the gospel. But be careful that you identify as valuable and rewarding what God identifies. What are the rewards this gospel has persistently spoken of? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt 5:3-12). Reward? Kingdom, comfort, reign with Christ, satisfaction, mercy, see God, belonging in God's family.

- **The greatest reward of the gospel is God himself** (e.g., Jn 17, eternal life is "knowing God and the Son"). "Religious people obey God to get things; gospel people obey God because they know God" (Keller *paraphrased*). "Religious people find God useful, Christians find God beautiful." If your obedience to God is contingent on him giving you what you want (the car, the house, the relationship, the career, the health), then you're not worshipping God, you're (trying) to use him to get what *you* want. You're actually worshipping yourself (you're at the center of your little kingdom).

There is no greater joy outside of knowing God. There is no greater purpose outside of making him known. There is no lasting satisfaction outside of his presence. The only life worth living, the only life that is truly alive is found hidden in the arms of Christ. **Everything else will leave you wanting more.** Christ *is* our reward.

- No one loses out following Jesus. It's a win-win ("live is Christ, die is gain," Phil 1:21;"all loss compared to knowing Christ").

Grace Changes Things: The gracious gift of the gospel is that none of us earned the reward of eternal life, it is a gift. We have not received God in proportion to our human effort but as a result of his abundant grace. **Grace changes the way we relate to God and others.** If we earn a certain amount of spiritual blessings based on our external behavior then we have some control over our salvation and there are limits to what God can ask of us. **But**, if all of it is by grace then there is no limit to what God can ask of us. **And that terrifies most of us** but it **should** relieve us. Because of grace, you can stop trying to manage God or earn his love, instead you can know and receive it.

- I've noticed this with abusive and controlling leaders. One man described such a leader this way: "He wanted [people] to trust him [but he] was not concerned with being trustworthy. He was concerned with controlling their perception of him. He wanted the [them] to love him [but he] was not concerned with loving them in safe and healthy ways. He was more concerned with his image than with his character." How often do we think we're fooling God in this way? We think we're manipulating him with some good behavior and a few prayers, like we've deposited enough in the spiritual bank that we can withdraw for a material blessing in the future when needed.

It's All Grace: If it's all by grace, then it's all dependent on God and not us. We say we want God's grace, but do we really? Or do we just want his grace when we mess up? **It's either all by grace or not at all.** And, **if it's all by grace then we have no excuse not to extend it to others.** When we receive grace then we spread grace.

- "For indeed, grace is the key to it all. It is not our lavish good deeds that procure salvation, but God's lavish love and mercy. That is why the poor are as acceptable before God as the rich. It is the generosity of God, the freeness of his salvation, that should permeate our lives" (Keller).
- The blessings of eternal life are the same for all: "some are not more saved than others."

If everything we have is from God, then we are called to use whatever influence, power, or status we have to generously serve others. In fact, a lack of generosity (not just money but time, reputation, etc.) is a sign that you refuse to acknowledge that everything you have is a gracious gift of God.

- The disciple should not be obsessed with obtaining more stuff (e.g., rich young ruler) but with using their life to reflect the grace of God.
- We can't be a people obsessed with influence, power, wealth, or status.

3. The Values of the Kingdom ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last."

How to Read a Parable: Don't dissect this passage too much. The values of the Kingdom of God confound the ways of the world and illuminates the heart of God. It is a reversal of human expectations. "KoH does not operate on the basis of commercial convention. God rules by grace, not by earning" (France). This parable is meant to be a mirror to our hearts, rooting out jealousy and works righteousness and producing a heart of thankfulness and a life of generosity.

Because of God's Grace We Value the Last as Much as the First: We recognize who we are and how we've been blessed. Don't begrudge the last ones in (cf. Jonah). We're glad that God

has invited us into his kingdom, welcomed us as his children, not worried about who got in when or how much of a reward they received. In fact, we want as many people to experience the riches of God as possible.

Because of God's Grace We Celebrate the Blessings of Others: There is no room for jealousy or comparison in God's Kingdom (or his church).

- Notice how the first laborers only get upset *once they see what the others got paid and when they got hired*. They are only upset when they compare themselves to others. If they didn't know when the others got hired or when they got paid, they wouldn't have complained.
- "Comparison is the thief of joy" (Teddy Roosevelt). Are you in for it God or for yourself? Are you serving God for recognition or for the kingdom (Paul, Phil 1, even with false motives, as long as the gospel is proclaimed).
- A kingdom-minded church has no place for personal prestige or comparison. A win for one is a win for all.
 - Pray for God to move *even* if it happens in another church.
 - I am called to be faithful with what I have and obedient in what God has called me to, not jealous of others.
 - We spend all our time comparing ourselves to others, worried whether or not we measure up, and we miss the fact that we should be comparing ourselves to Christ. And in that comparison, we actually don't measure up. When we realize we don't measure up we can rest on and receive his grace.
- Here's the truth: "people give as much grace as they think they need" (Christina Edmondson).

Conclusion:

God is both fully just and wonderfully generous and, as his disciples, we trust his fairness and delight in his generosity. God's grace changes the way we see ourselves and how we see others.

- Our **minds** can move from resentment to thankfulness.
- Our **hands** can serve God from a place of delight and obedience rather than obligation and drudgery.
- Our **hearts** can move from jealousy to celebration.