

Introduction

If you have your Bible with you, I want to encourage you at this time to go ahead and open it up to Matthew chapter 20; we are going to start in verse 1 here in just a moment. Guests, we are so glad that you are with us today. If you are new to our church, you're looking for a church home... or maybe you are a spiritual seeker trying to have questions answered... we are glad that you are here today. Would you do us a favor? Just take that card out of the seat pocket in front of you that says "Connect" and fill that out. Or, if you prefer a digital card, if you would take your phone, scan the QR code on the seat back in front of you, and let us know that you're here. We want to help you take your next step, whatever that is, so if you're online or in the room, let us know so that we can help you with that process. I'm grateful for that as well. One other thing I want to let you know about: I want to make sure that you know that we have had a great year in 2021, coming out of COVID and getting back to normal life. We are excited about the things that God has laid on our heart for ministry as a church to do in 2022. We would love to share that with you, give you a state of our church and our plans for the future. We would invite you... we would love it if you, your family, your friends... and would come and be part of hearing what's next for us. We are going to host four Vision dinners... two this week and two next week... and we would like to invite you to come and be part of that. There is no cost to you, but if you're interested in coming, please RSVP so that we can be sure to plan for you. You can sign up for that at HNW.org/vision. I look forward to being with those of you who sign up, so I want to encourage you to do that, and you can sign up immediately. I'm so grateful for those who have already done so and hope that you'll join us in that.

Before we jump into to Scripture today... Matthew chapter 20... let me give a brief introduction to the Bible. The Bible is divided into two parts: The Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament gives us a record of God's chosen people Israel and tells us about their need for a Rescuer... a Redeemer; they used the word "Messiah." Then whenever we get to the New Testament, we find out who the Rescuer/Redeemer/Messiah is. We find out that it's Jesus, and we find out that Jesus is not just a prophet or a teacher... not just a man... but He is, instead, God in flesh. We find out that He is born of a virgin, that He lives a sinless human life, that He dies on a cross as a death for us. All of our sin is placed on Him; He dies so that we don't have to face death. But then greater than that, three days later He is raised from the dead, demonstrating God's power over death and the promise of eternity with God for those who place their faith in Jesus. Those who place their faith in Him began proclaiming Him and the way that He taught to live because by His Resurrection, clearly, He proved that He was the Messiah. Those who began to live this new life... living out love, joy, peace, forgiveness... the things that are called the Kingdom of God in the pages of the New Testament... call themselves the "Church," the "Ecclesia", the "Called-Out Ones." So here we are together today, two thousand years later, the spiritual inheritors of those who heard that message proclaimed two thousand years ago. So today, we are ready to read from a biographer of Jesus. There are four biographies of Jesus in the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We are going to read from the first one, Matthew. Matthew recorded a story that Jesus told, and we are going to read that here today from the Gospel of Matthew. So, before we jump in to Matthew chapter 20, I'm just going to pray over us, and then we will read from the Scripture. If you would, let's pray, and then we'll jump into the Bible together.

"God, we pray today that we would hear from You, that the words that I speak would not be my words but Lord that they would come from You... Father, that we would hear from Your Word. God, for those who are far from You, I pray that they would be drawn close today as I lift Jesus high. Father, for those who perhaps are already close, that they would be challenged to live afresh in light of the things that are

spoken, and God that any who have yet to say 'Yes' to You today would do so... that they would decide 'Today is the day that I'm ready to follow after Jesus.' We pray this in His name. Amen and Amen."

Matthew chapter 20, starting in verse 1... Jesus tells a story:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the workers on one denarius, he sent them into his vineyard for the day. When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He said to them, 'You also go into my vineyard, and I'll give you whatever is right.' So off they went. About noon and about three, he went out again and did the same thing. Then about five he went and found others standing around and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?' 'Because no one hired us,' they said to him. 'You also go into my vineyard,' he told them. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, 'Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first.' When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius. So, when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: 'These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day's work and the burning heat!' He replied to one of them, 'Friend, I'm doing you no wrong. Didn't you agree with me on a denarius? Take what's yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I'm generous?' So, the last will be first, and the first last."
This is the Word of the Lord.

So, today... October 31st... we all know what this day is, right? It's the day when probably a few of us will maybe eat a little bit of candy. Anybody out here like Reese's? Do I have any Reese's fans in the room? Yeah... got a couple of Reese's fans... Sue Brehm, you raised your hand... come here and get these Reese's. Just because you raised your hand, you get some. This is why you come to Church, so the Pastor will give you candy. (Laughter) There you go... I'll hand it to you right here, Sue... there you go. You're a little embarrassed about this happening right now? Do you want to talk about it? (Laughter) Okay, good. Thank you, Miss Sue. Give a hand for Sue everybody. (Clapping) So today, people may be knocking on your door and ringing your doorbell, hoping you'll hand you candy. But... it's also another day. It's the day that many of us don't know about. Did you know that the word "Halloween" is actually a contraction of "All Hallow's Eve," and it is the day before November 1st, All Saints Day... a day that Church has celebrated for years to remember the dearly departed faithful who have gone before us in the faith? But it's also a day that we celebrate, maybe not always explicitly but it's definitely important... if you've ever showed up at Houston Northwest and wondered, "What makes HNW different from other churches?" Maybe not just HNW specifically but churches like ours. Why is it that some are very formal, liturgical... why is this one a little more relaxed... a little different? What is it?

We're going to talk about that today because October 31st is also a day known as "Reformation Day." Reformation Day is a day that we remember, in Church history, as a day that an Augustinian monk and priest named Martin Luther went and nailed 95 theses to a door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany... and we'll talk more about that here in a second. Just because I like to use bad-dad jokes... here's a meme showing Luther nailing 95 Reese's to a door... almost as good as theses, but there you go. I know it's lame... I'm sorry; I couldn't resist though. So why did Luther do that; why do we even care today? I want us to jump into this passage, and I want us to see why this matters. I want us to remember and understand what makes our church distinct.

Let's look at this passage. In this passage, we have day laborers... men who go and they work in the vineyard for a landowner, and they work an entire day; others work part of the day and some work one hour. At the end, all are paid the same amount... a denarius, which is a coin that was agreed upon as one day's wage. That was the payment that was given regularly for day laborers... a denarius. I want us to look at this passage and see three things that I think matter for us today.

1. The Danger. (vv. 10-12)

First of all, the danger. I want us to talk about the danger that was prevalent in the Church many years ago and the danger that can sneak up on us again today. Before we get into that though, I want to just jump into a little bit in the Scripture to help us understand.

Years ago, when I lived at home with my folks, my dad... many of you know... was a plumber, so as his son I had the opportunity to help him on a number of occasions. One of the things I didn't know as a kid... but I found out... was that in my town where I grew up there was a place where day laborers would congregate early in the morning, and they would wait there hoping that they would be hired for the day. So, if my dad ever had a job that was large, we would drive to that place; most of the time he was without me, but every now and then when I was with him. We would go there, and he would hire however many extra hands he needed for the day to get the job done. They would agree on whatever the wage would be, they would hop in the truck, and then we would go off to go get the work done. You can see that some things just don't change, right? I don't know where that spot is in Houston or in this part of Houston, but I can guarantee you, there is a spot like that here in our city... maybe several spots... and it was just like that in the Bible. Did you notice the landowner went to this place in the marketplace, and he was there to hire laborers for his vineyard? We notice that, in this, they have a certain expectation. Most of them were paid... in today's world, most workers are paid by the hour... and in that day, it was a day's wage of a denarius for a day's work. The assumption that most day laborers have would be that the more you work, the more you would get paid. It makes sense. If you work three hours you get paid this; if you worked six hours you would make twice as much. Because we are accustomed to the concept of that the more you do, the more that you're paid. But in verses 11 and 12, these guys who were paid at the end are angry. We read in verses 11 and 12... *When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: "These last men put in one hour..."* they said, *"...and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day's work and the burning heat!"* Basically, they said, "How can you treat them the same as you treated us; we did way more." Honestly, I can understand why they feel that way. I mean, they did do more work. Shouldn't they earn more? This is a story not about real monetary, tangible economics but about real Kingdom economics.

Before we really get into the biblical portion of it, though, I want us to take a break and head over into history. This is actually where we begin to see how our church is different. I'm going to speak in broad generalizations, so please don't use your textbooks to come and to challenge things because I'm going to speak very broadly. But I want you to understand that this mindset had worked its way into the theology of the Church in the Middle Ages, and what was that theology? That the more work I did, the more God would love me. That's really what Jesus is teaching on here... that many people believe that the more we do for God, or the sooner we come to faith in God, then the more that we'll get. Two theological concepts had worked their way, because of this, into the Church in the Middle Ages; I just want to talk about those two concepts. One of those was a concept of purgatory. Now, purgatory is not found in the pages of Scripture. Purgatory was a theological concept that the Church taught at that time which basically was this: After someone dies, they go to a waiting room, so to speak, and in that waiting room they are awaiting

their reward to go into heaven to union with Christ, but they can't have it until they have been completely purified at their residual sinfulness. So, they have to wait in this waiting room until they have been cleaned up. Apparently, this was not a pleasant thing to be in purgatory. So, in this teaching they added another teaching called "indulgences." They said, "Now, here's the great news. You don't want your loved one to have to hang out in purgatory a long time, so what we want you to know, then, is that if you will just pay a fee, then your loved one can get out of purgatory quickly." So, this was this great fundraiser for the Church. "You know, so-and-so is in purgatory right now, but if you give us a hundred bucks then they can go ahead and head on into heaven" ...or whatever the fee was. There was actually even a saying in the Church in the Middle Ages: "When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." They were taking advantage of their authority to teach this. Now, you might be thinking, "How could folks fall for this? Why didn't they just read the Bible?" Ahhh... they didn't have any. They didn't have a Bible in their language, and most people didn't even own a Bible period because books were incredibly expensive, so they wouldn't have the opportunity. They had to trust folks like me to stand up and to say, "This is what's in the Book." If someone in authority in your church says, "This individual is in purgatory and you need to give this amount of money," they believed them. This led to a theology that was not a faith-based theology but instead many people believing... "Yes, you should believe in Jesus, but you should then add onto it extra things so that your time in purgatory is minimized. How you are received by God is based on how good you are." This is the danger. The danger then, too, is that we can fall into the same mindset today. We think, "Well... I don't believe in purgatory or indulgences." Sure... but have you ever subtly caught yourself thinking, "I've been in Church a long time; I probably am a little bit better than those pagans." Or have you ever caught yourself thinking, "Because I've grown in Church, I'm someone who is entitled to a little more of God's love or favor or grace." You see, it's a different form... it's not purgatory and indulgences... but it's easy for that mode of thinking to creep into our mindset, even in the Church, because we are so accustomed to every other area of life being tied to a transaction. You give this... you receive that. Most of us think of God in terms of transactional relationships. "If we give Him this... then He'll do this in return." This is the danger that we have in our minds today, and that was certainly turning into false doctrines in the Church in those days. This was the danger.

2. The Rescue. (v. 9)

So, then the rescue comes. Look at verse 9... *"When those who were hired about five came..."* (so five being the end of the day) *"...they each received one denarius."* So, in other words, they received the coin (a denarius) for a full-day's wage, even though they had only worked one hour. They were paid the same as the people who had worked the entire day. You're probably thinking, "This vineyard owner is going to go out of business." Bad business practices, perhaps, but it is Kingdom economics. It's the policy of the Lord, this is why grace is scandalous because God gives us more than we could ever earn. Some of us think, "I've been working for God and with God long enough that I deserve a little extra grace, a little extra love, and the scandal of this parable is this: Everybody gets **all** of God's grace. Everybody.

When I graduated from college, I had an undergraduate degree in Bible; I wanted to go into ministry. There was a little Baptist Church in Breckenridge, Texas. PS... Breckenridge, Texas, does not look like Breckenridge, Colorado... (Laughter) ...in case you're wondering. I went to go serve at Lakeside Baptist Church; Lakeside Baptist Church had a great motto: at the time, we were "The Lord's lighthouse on the lake." It was me and Joy and 32 retirees. I do not know why they hired me; I didn't know anything. This was in the days when pastors would preach Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. I ran out of things to say after about three weeks. (Laughter) It was pretty bad. I was just trying to read books, all week- every week, to come up with something new or fresh to say, as I was trying to figure that out. One of

the things that I loved about being the pastor in Breckenridge was that since my congregation was small and the town was small, I would go and visit all of my congregation pretty much every week. So, I'd load up in my gold Saturn... if you remember Saturns... and I'd load up in the Saturn and I'd drive around and I'd go visit folks. There was a woman in our church... her name was Darlene... and Darlene didn't get to come to church very often because she was married to Derwood, and Derwood was in poor health. So, I'd go to their house, and I would visit them. The problem, though, was that Derwood really thought that Jesus, Church, God, religion was an entire sham; he wanted nothing to do with it. But Darlene wanted me to come by and see him and see her, so I would come; I'd sit in the living room, and Derwood and I would have conversations. Sometimes it was very polite; other times he would cuss me out and kick me out of his house. Which was fine. He would tell me, "Never come back," and then I'd come back the next week and he would be happy to see me again. It was what it was. But after about a year or so, Derwood got very, very ill, and when I came by on Tuesday to see him, he had been taken to the hospital. So, I went to the hospital to see Derwood. I sat by Derwood's bedside and visited with him. I said, "Derwood, I know that you're tired of me talking to you about this, but I want you to know that even though you have rejected Him this entire time... you've rebelled against Him... you've said 'No' to Him. Despite all of that, if you would say 'Yes' to Jesus right now that after you pass away..." It was agreed; he wasn't going to make it much longer. "...God will receive you into His Kingdom... into eternity. Would you be interested in that?" And Derwood, the man who'd cuss me out and kick me out of his house... looked at me, tears in his eyes and nodded "Yes." Derwood prayed to receive Christ that day and died a few days later. And I stand here today telling you that Derwood received the full reward of heaven on the day that he drew his last breath. I share that with you because you might be tempted to think that a guy like me, who's been in ministry since he was 19... would get more of God's grace than a man like Derwood who kicked against the goads until his final breath... but you would be wrong because the one who gets paid at five, gets paid the same as the ones who started working at eight in the morning. The payment of grace is the same. This is the rescue that goes against our temptation, our mindset, to believe that the more work that I do for God then the more that God will love me because the great scandal of grace is that God will never love you more than He does right now... He will never love you less than He does right now. He gives you **all** of His love... always. The Scripture says it... "Nothing... nothing can separate us from the love of Christ." There's not a single thing that you could do, there's not a single thing that could happen, there's not a single thing that you could think, there's not a single thing that someone else could do to you, there's not a single world event that could happen... there is nothing on this planet, in this universe, that could ever, ever stop God's love from flowing directly to you. Nothing... because Jesus did everything you need to receive that love. It is all on you.

Now, these theological ideas that I referred to earlier... purgatory, indulgences, etc... as they began to work their way through the Church in the Middle Ages, there were certain members of the clergy who began to be disgusted by these practices. And because of that, they began to take notice, and they began to protest in different way. If you've ever noticed where the word "Protestant" comes from... the Protestant Church has that word "protest" in it for a reason... because those churches sprung out of different leaders in the Church in the Middle Ages, protesting against what was happening in the Church in those days. So, our Church today flows from that tradition that started back earlier in the Middle Ages where we exist as a Church that protested against some of those teachings that took place hundreds of years ago. Now we could go through a lot of different names here... I don't have time to do all of them... but a few of the folks, you should know these names because these are influential people in our Church. Number one: John Wycliffe. John Wycliffe translated the Bible into English and in the 14th century walked around with a group of believers known as "Lollards"... that was a derogatory term for them... and the Lollards

proclaimed the problems in the Church, wanting to reform it. Or Jan Hus... or, for us Texans, "John Huss." There's a statue of him still in the main square in Prague where he helped reform and lead reform and stand up against corruption in the Church before they killed him. Or we could talk about Martin Luther; we already mentioned him earlier. Martin Luther, Augustinian monk, who said, "These indulgences are nowhere to be found in the Bible." So, he wrote 95 theses... 95 sentences... that he then nailed to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31st, 1517... 504 years ago today... and he did that to say, "These indulgences are not biblical, and we should reject them." His followers... by the way... he never wanted to start a new church; he wanted to reform the Church. That's why it's called the Reformation. But eventually he was kicked out, so he started a new Church called the Lutheran Church... you've heard of that before. We could talk about John Calvin, French theologian and pastor, who tried to start, in his mind, a version of the Church which paid attention to the Scripture. So, he started, in Geneva, Switzerland, this town that was intended to faithfully model what the Scriptures taught, so we have a denomination today known as Presbyterians, and a group of theology that flows out of his teaching called Reform Theology. You've probably noticed I didn't mention the Baptists yet. Guys, I hate to break it to you; we're not really pure breeds in the Reformation world. We're mutts... it's okay. We are sort of influenced by the Lollards in England... John Wycliffe's group. We are also influenced by some Anabaptist teaching that flowed out of Germany and Thomas Munster. We are also influenced a little bit from the Reform theology that flowed out of Calvin's stream. But still, even though we're not "a pure breed" in the Reformation, we're still a Church that exists differently because we say, "The things that mattered in the Reformation... in the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries... still matter today, and so we're protesting against those things until the Church is reformed. Our church is a little different. It doesn't mean that we don't see these other individuals as brothers and sisters. It just means that we are saying, "This matters," and we need to hang our hat on that.

So, all of this upheaval known as the Reformation that went back to these original sources had five things that they talked about. They used five Latin phrases... sometimes known as the "Five Solas." "Sola" the Latin word for "only." They would say, "Sola Scriptura" which means "Scripture alone." We don't get the knowledge that we need for salvation from tradition, but we get it from the Scripture alone. They would say, "Sola Gratia," which is Latin for "grace alone" or "saved by grace. They would say, "Sola Fide" which is "by faith alone." They would say, "Solus Christus" which is "by Christ alone." And they would say "Soli Deo Gloria" which is "to God's glory alone." They would say those five things. What we read in Scripture alone we find out that we are saved by grace, through faith, by Christ, to God's glory... all those things alone are the things that save us. It makes our Church different, and it's the things that we hold fast to today that we continue to celebrate and say, "These things matter to us even today."

Now why do we care? What's the upshot? The upshot of all of this was as those Reformers began to read the Bible... many of them in their native tongue for the first time... they discovered a theological concept that they had never heard before, and that was the concept of grace. Grace being the thing that you could never earn... grace being the thing that you would never be good enough to receive... grace being the fact that even though you could never do anything to earn it... grace being the fact that you would never be good enough to deserve it... God gives His love anyway. That is what grace is.

3. The Legacy. (v. 15)

Which leads us then to the third thing in this passage I want us to notice... the legacy. Look at verse 15 (this is the landowner speaking): *"Don't I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I'm generous?"* I love that phrase. You see, God is generous. And the Reformers began to notice

that a lot of the preaching and the teaching of the Church of their day was about behavior, about works, about earning things so that then you could spend less time in purgatory, so that you could then get more of God's favor, and they began to recognize, through parables like this one in Matthew 20 and others, that God gives all of His grace of all of His people because that's who God is. They found out God wasn't vindictive. God may be just but He's not vindictive because God is a generous God... and it blew their mind.

I love this quote from Robert Farrar Capon... I've read it before, but I love it: "The Reformation was a time when men went blind, staggering drunk because they had discovered in the dusty basement of late medievalism, a whole cellar full of 1500-year-old, 200-proof grace—bottle after bottle of distillate of Scripture, one sip of which could convince anyone that God saves us singlehandedly. The Word of the Gospel, after all those centuries of trying to lift yourself into heaven by worrying about the perfection of your bootstraps, suddenly turned out to be a flat announcement that the saved were home before they even started. Grace has to be drunk straight—no water, no ice, certainly no ginger ale; neither goodness nor badness nor the flowers that bloom in the spring of spirituality could be allowed to enter into the case."

Grace alone; this is what saves us. As they discovered this grace, they wanted everybody to know it. You don't have to be good to get God's grace; you just get it. You don't have to work hard to get God's grace, you just get it. God did it all in Jesus Christ, and that's the centerpiece of the Reformation. It's hard for us to understand grace sometimes. I've got an illustration I want to use to help us understand grace. I've got a volunteer out here in the crowd... so, Benjamin Myers, would you come up here and join me on the platform? I appreciate it. This is my friend Benjamin. Can I get a round of applause for Benjamin here... (Clapping) Alright, Benjamin; let's hang out right here. So, Benjamin... how old are you now? "Nine." Awesome. Do you like candy? Yah... good. We're going to pretend like this is the last Reese's peanut butter cup in the world. Have you heard about the supply chain problems in the world? (Laughter) So we're going to pretend like this is it... this is the last one, and I've been saving it for Reformation Day to enjoy. So, I've set it on my table... this is worth, I mean, that this point, thousands of dollars. So, I set it on my table, and I went over to do something, and you saw it and you stole it... good... (Laughter) let me ask you a real question. If your parents found out that you stole something, would they punish you? Yah... they would? Would they send you to your room or something like that? Probably... I won't ask too many questions, so we don't get into too much trouble here for the Myers... alright... good job. You can take that candy with you. Everybody, let's give a round of applause to Benjamin... (Clapping) Good job. So, here's what I want us to understand. If Benjamin stole the last Reese's in the world and there was punishment, nobody would think twice about it. If he ate those and I couldn't get them back, then you would say, "That was worth thousands of dollars... he deserves to be punished." We would call that justice. Yah... that's why we have a justice system, right? People hurt other individuals, they break laws; they are punished... and rightfully so. That would be justice. Then there's mercy. Mercy is different from justice. What's mercy? Mercy is when Benjamin comes to me and says, "Hey, I stole this from you, but I shouldn't have; I feel bad about it. Then you say, "I'm not going to punish you. Even though you deserve it, I don't punish you." That's mercy. But what's grace? Grace is when not only do you not punish but you give a gift. A quick way of thinking about it: Justice is getting what you deserve; mercy is not getting what you deserve. Grace... getting something far better than what you deserve. So, do we deserve justice? Yeah, that's what the Bible says. The Bible says, "We were dead in our transgressions." The Bible says, "We were enemies of God..." The basic picture that's given us is that every person in this room, including me, has offended God's holiness and righteousness so we deserve punishment. And the Bible says that that punishment is death. There's a verse in the Book of Romans that says, "The wages of sin is death." Every person in this room

deserves death... but God, being rich in mercy, doesn't want anyone to die. In fact, the Bible says that God desires none to perish. He wants everyone to have eternal life with Him, so He goes on a cosmic rescue mission. God wants no people to be punished, so He takes on flesh as a human. This is Jesus... and Jesus then dies. And when Jesus dies on the cross, He takes all of your sin, my sin... all sin past, present, and future... and puts it into His body, and when He dies, He pays the penalty for that sin. So, in other words, Jesus dies so that we don't have to... so we don't have to face punishment. That's mercy. So, God shows us mercy through the cross of Christ. But He doesn't stop there, does He? No. He gives us grace. What's grace? He says, "Not only am I going to not punish you with death, not only am I doing to forgive you, but I'm also now... I love this... I'm going to give you eternal life. And on top of that, I'm going to let you rule and reign with Me into eternity and to participate in the remaking of the world. And not only that... until eternity comes, I am going to place my Spirit in you so that you can live with peace, forgiveness, justice, love... all of these things in your heart; you can live that reality out here and now. I'm going to impart my Spirit into you. So, do we deserve any of that? No. What we deserve is death, but what we get instead is mercy and then grace. And as the Reformers begin to read this in the pages of the Bible, they said, "Everybody needs to know this because so many people are convinced that they have to earn God's love, when instead the scandal of the Bible is that God gives it freely. Every religion... listen to me, Church... every religion in the world is a karma-based religion. Every religion. It doesn't matter what they are; we can list them off, and this is what they all teach: You do "X" and then you get whatever the outcome is... you make God happy... however they would define that in their religion. The shocking truth of the Reformation was this: We can't do anything to make God happy. The Good News: God is already happy because He has already done everything needed to make Him happy in Jesus Christ. So, every religion in the world is based on karma except for Christianity; it's based on grace. This is why Christianity is different. So, you say, "Well, Christians do good things all the time; are they trying to earn God's favor?" No. Christians do good things now because we are not trying to earn God's love. We have discovered God's love on us, and now that love serves as a sort of headwaters... a fountainhead from which all of our love and our actions flow. We live the life we live because it flows from the headwaters of God's grace. Once you discover that you were supposed to be executed and instead you get made a prince, you might act a little different. This is what God has done in Jesus. And this is why we live differently. This is what makes the Gospel so real.

Now... some of us are afraid to say "Yes" to the Gospel today, though, because we recognize the one trick in it... which is, even though God gives it totally for free, we recognize that it requires us admitting that we are jacked up. And most of us walk around at least trying to pretend like we have it all together. The way that Robert Farrar Capon, from the previous quote, I love this quote. He says this: "Grace doesn't sell. You can hardly give it away because it works only for losers... and no one wants to stand in their line." Losers... welcome. (Laughter) I'm a loser too. Losers for Jesus; that's the only way you get grace. You admit you're a loser. That's it. But if you think that you're too good for grace, then you'll never experience the love of God... because those who die are the prideful. Those who die are the ones who think, "I don't need that; I'm too strong for that." Those who don't experience God's grace are the ones who say, "I've got it all together." They are the ones that die by a thousand paper cuts or perhaps even a fatal wound as they reject the life given in Christ.

So today, I want to know if anybody here has heard this message and says, "I need that grace." This is what makes our Church different. This is why we preach from the Bible every week... Sola Scriptura. This is why we always end with an opportunity for people to follow Jesus because we are saved by grace through faith. The Bible says, "Not by works so that anyone can boast." In other words, we all sit here today recognizing that all of this came because of some people who went before us who read and translated the

Bible, and now we get to revel in the grace of God. Thank God we live in the era that we do; thank God that we get to revel in this grace but also that you today have an opportunity to respond. At the end of this service, we are going to open in baptistry. We have a man today who is going to be baptized. He is doing that to go public with his faith. Today, you... right now... if you've never said "Yes" to Jesus and you want to say "Yes" to Him today, you can get up from this room... you can walk right through these back doors, and you can go to the Connection Center, and one of our team members... a woman named Sandy... if you're ready to say "Yes" to grace today for the first time, you can be baptized. This is what baptism is... baptism is publicly saying, "I'm dying to my old life and I'm coming to a new life." This is not trying to get into theological polemics right now, but here's the thing: this sort of baptism is different than baptism as a baby... or christening. I want to explain why. Because, for me, I was raised in a tradition where I was christened when I was a week old. But I had a moment where I said, "I understand God's grace," and I chose to be baptized. Some of us today... we're like, "I want to do that." If that's you, then we would receive you. You can say "Yes" to Him today. Here in a minute, I'm going to come to the table. We're going to talk about grace. We're going to have baptism, we're going to symbolize grace, and if you want to join us at the table... if you've said "Yes" to Jesus... then you can come. If you want to join us in the baptistry because you've said "Yes" to Jesus, you can come. I'm just going to pray and I'm going to give you opportunity right now to decide if you're ready to say "Yes" to the grace given us in Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

"Lord, we thank you that You've given us grace, and God we ask that today, if there are any in this room who have yet to say 'Yes' that they would do so. If there are any who have been trying to earn their way, if there are any who have thought they were too bad, too broken, too dirty to ever be received, that today would be the day when they would say 'Yes' and God that we would revel in grace because of what You've given. And we pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen and amen."