

“THE NEW MATH OF GRACE”

Matthew 20:1-16

Christ Community Church-Daytona Beach 4/23/2023

Intro: **Apology Sound-Off Line.** Two hundred people a day call.

Everywhere you go, people are looking for grace. And many just don't know where to find it.

What is grace? Love in spite of our failures and sins. Favor given freely to the undeserving. Grace is at the very heart of God.

I. Human beings have a hard time with grace.

Immediate context:

- **Chapter 19** – The rich young ruler: “Teacher, what good deed must I do to get eternal life?” (**vs. 16**)
- He thought he could earn salvation by his works instead of through faith in the work of Christ.
- Simon Peter (**vs. 27**), “We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”
- In other words: “Look what we’ve done, Jesus. What will we get because of what we’ve done?”

Both of these interactions are about people who thought of relating to God through **merit** instead of grace. (Also note that Jesus welcomes children earlier in Chapter 19. Children are people who don't have anything to offer. The disciples don't think children deserve Jesus' attention—another example of their mistaken way of thinking.)

That's why Jesus tells this story in **Matt 20: “The Story of the Generous Landowner.”**

Summary: This landowner needs some work done in his vineyard. So he goes to the town square five different times during the day and hires groups of men to work in his vineyard. Some of them start right when the whistle blows at 6 a.m., others at 9 a.m., and others at 12 noon, 3:00, and 5:00, an hour before quitting time. And when 6 p.m. rolls around, the landowner pays all his workers the same thing: one denarius, the typical wage for a day's work back then.

Doesn't your heart go out to the guys who started working at 6:00am? They expect a day's wage for a full day's work. But the landowner goes down the line and gives one denarius to all the workers, even those who put in just one hour of work.

Vs. 11 says when that original group of workers received their pay, “they grumbled at the master of the house.” Wouldn’t you?

Vs. 12 – They say to the master, “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.”

“That’s not fair!”

Modern-day analogy: College students in organic chemistry all getting an A, even those who slacked off and didn’t study. Wouldn’t you grumble about your professor? Slackers shouldn’t get A’s.

But see, that’s Jesus’ point. In his economy, you do get a free lunch. You get what you don’t pay for. Grace is free and undeserved. The love of God is not something you work to get, it’s something you simply receive – free of charge.

- Gk. word for “grace” is “**charis.**” Charity. Gift. Something you’re given, not something you’ve earned.

Something in us wants to say, “No! Grace is wrong! That’s not right!”

Illus.: Saving Private Ryan. In the final scene, when James Ryan, now an old man, kneels down at the grave marker of the man who saved his life, and says to his wife, “Tell me I’ve lived a good life. Tell me I’m a good man.” He couldn’t just receive his rescue from death as a free gift... he had to earn it by living a good life.

Grace is alien to us. It offends us.

- It was offensive to the Jewish religious establishment. The scribes and Pharisees, who were listening to this story, knew the implicit message of this story: that the kingdom of God isn’t just for the Jew (the 6:00am crowd), **it’s for the Gentile as well**—those who came late to the party!
- Salvation is a free gift to the sinful, the broken, the failures, the undeserving. And the Jewish religious leaders couldn’t stand that idea.

There’s a Pharisee inside all of us. Embedded deep in our hearts is the belief that we’re special. We work hard. We have the right theology. We believe the right things. We vote the right way. We’re on the right side of the aisle. We raise our kids God’s way. We go to church. We give 10%. Surely we’re closer to God than other people.

We often think like Simon Peter, “Lord, I’ve done this for you! I’ve done that for you! What will there be for me? I worked really hard for you today, God. This is going to be a 12 denarii day!”

And when we see others who don't work hard, who don't have the right theology, who don't raise their kids like they should, being loved and blessed and used by God, just like the workers in **vs. 11** we grumble against our Master, who has every right to give or withhold his blessings as he sees fit.

II. God delights in giving grace to sinful human beings.

God loves to give grace to 5:00 people. He loves to give grace to outsiders and strangers and failures. It's part of his nature.

- **Jn 1:16** – “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

Think of the people Jesus hung out with the most: fishermen who often stumbled in their faith... tax collectors who were despised by the people... women who had no voice and were disrespected by society... the poor, the sick, the lame, the blind, the deaf... widows who were without means... lepers who were unclean... children who were looked down on by adults... prostitutes whom the townspeople wanted to stone to death.

Grace upon grace upon grace.

God is the generous Master who pays people for work they don't do. If you're a believer in Jesus, then you are one of those guys hired at 5:00 in the afternoon (or, more like it, 5:59pm). It wasn't because of anything you had to offer God that he brought you into his family. God saw you in your sin and misery and had compassion on you. He loved you in spite of you.

God operates by the new math of grace. Like it says in **vs. 16**, the last are brought up to the front of the line, and the ones who push and shove to be first in line end up being last.

Does it matter what you do? Do good works and obedience matter? Yes, of course. “Faith without works is dead,” says James. But your good works are a response to God's love; they are not the cause of God's love. God loves you not because of what you do for him, but because of what Jesus has done for you on the cross.

Perhaps better than any other single passage of Scripture, this story in **Matt 20** shows how amazing God's grace really is. We want to pull the master of the house aside and say, “Mister, you're being unreasonable. Don't you know you're throwing money away? Why in the world would you pay a guy a denarius for one crummy hour of work? It makes no sense. You keep doing that and nobody's going to want to wake up at dawn and come work for you. They'll all just show up at 5:00 in the afternoon if you keep doing business that way.”

And in a similar way, someone might want to take Jesus aside and say, “Jesus, you shouldn’t tell your followers stories like this. Don’t you realize, Jesus, if you tell them about grace, they’re just going to take advantage of you? If you tell them you give your love to people who do absolutely nothing to deserve it, they’ll just stop trying to be good Christians.”

But this is how grace works. The more you understand God’s free, undeserved favor, the more you’ll want to serve him. You’ll want to pray, and love others, and give, and go to church, and share your faith, and obey the commandments, and you’ll do it with a spirit of joy rather than fear.

Abraham Lincoln story: One day Abraham Lincoln went to a slave auction. He was appalled at what he saw and decided to do something about it. A young woman was brought to the auction block. The bidding began, and Lincoln bid higher and higher until he purchased her—he was willing to pay whatever it took. After he paid the auctioneer, he walked over to the woman and said, **“You’re free.”** “Free?” she said. “What does that mean?” “It means you are free, completely free.” “Does it mean I can do whatever I want to do?” “Yes,” he said, “free to do whatever you want to do.” “Free to say whatever I want to say?” “Yes, free to say whatever you want to say.” “Free to go wherever I want to go?” “It means exactly that; you can go wherever you want to go.” With tears of joy welling up in her eyes, she said, **“Then, I think I’ll go with you.”**

Grace transforms people who were slaves to sin into happy servants of Jesus Christ.

III. God’s grace calls for a radical response.

What do you do with the grace of God? Two responses:

A. **First, like the slave in the Lincoln story you simply need to receive it and go with Jesus.**

Maybe you have never actually said “yes” to Jesus’ invitation. You’re still thinking like the young man in the previous chapter: “What must I do to get eternal life?” Maybe you’re like Private Ryan: “Tell me I’ve lived a good life. Tell me I’m a good man.” Or maybe you think, “There’s no way God could love me. Not like he loves other people. I’m a terrible person. I’ve done terrible things. I’m nobody that God would want in his family.”

Matthew 20:1-16 proves that **there’s hope for everyone**. Nobody is beyond the reach and love of God. God’s love is infinite. It is high, wide, long, and deep. It reaches the last and the least.

If you're not a Christian, don't harden your heart toward God. Turn from your sins, ask God to forgive you and make you his child. If you're serious, he won't turn you away.

B. Second response: It should transform the way you treat other people.

Notice how Jesus begins the story: "For the kingdom of heaven is like...."

In other words, "I'm about to tell you what my rule and my reign mean for those of you who are citizens of the kingdom. I am a God who gives grace to people. If you're a citizen of my kingdom, then you will give grace to other people too, especially those in the family of God."

This is so important. Think about your church. You're a diverse group of people. Some of you are 6:00am people and some of you are 5:00pm people. Some of you have walked with God a long time and know the Bible well and are very involved in the ministry of the church. Others of you are new to the faith, inexperienced in the things of God, just learning your way around the Bible. Some of you struggle with one thing, and some struggle with another.

Guess what: You're all equal in God's eyes. **God loves you all the same.** There's no partiality with God. Whether you came early or late to the party, you're a new creation, you're loved by the God of the universe, and He's the only one whose opinion matters.

So, when you judge or complain about or ostracize or look down your nose at another believer, you're just like those self-righteous Pharisees who were so offended by this story. You are grumbling against God, who pours his love out sovereignly and indiscriminately on all who put their trust in him.

We're to be different from the world. The world is a place of winners and losers, red state and blue state, the powerful and the weak. To get a leg up, you have to rip into other people with angry tweets, critical FB posts, and mean words.

We are not those people. The kingdom of God is like **this...** "By this all men will know that you are my disciples," said Jesus; "if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35).

Christ Community Church, receive the grace of God; celebrate it; and spread it around.

Because everywhere you go, people are looking for grace.

And so are you.