

THE SCROLLS

Grace is Greater Than | Matthew 20:1-16

Life Lesson

God's grace is not based on human standards of fairness, effort, or comparison; it is a generous gift given according to His perfect goodness. When we understand that we deserve justice but have been offered grace instead, it transforms our hearts from entitlement to gratitude. True spiritual maturity is found not in comparing our blessings to others, but in humbly rejoicing that God is gracious to all who come to Him.

Examine Scripture

20 *“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the workers on one denarius, he sent them into his vineyard for the day. 3 When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He said to them, ‘You also go into my vineyard, and I’ll give you whatever is right.’ So off they went. 5 About noon and about three, he went out again and did the same thing. 6 Then about five he went and found others standing around and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?’ 7 “‘Because no one hired us,’ they said to him. “‘You also go into my vineyard,’ he told them. 8 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*

Is Grace Fair?

“That’s not fair!” These words almost never have to be taught. We see it in children who don’t get their way and cry, “That’s not fair!” or in students who get a zero for an assignment they didn’t complete and argue, “But that’s not fair!” Even when it comes to God, people often blurt out this phrase when they disagree with Him. This expression, or our attitude, doesn’t need to be learned; it’s part of our fallible, depraved thinking.

The problem lies in how we define “fair” and our assumption that God must be fair by our standards or concepts of fairness. Webster’s defines “fair” as “marked by impartiality and honesty; free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism.” This seems appropriate when referring to God; however, the definition also includes “conforming with the established rules.” The issue with this definition is that we want to decide what the “established rules” are. We expect God to act fairly according to our idea of fairness, rather than according to His wisdom, omniscience, and sovereignty.

Another way to define “fair” is as “conforming to what is just, good, or proper.” God’s fairness is directly connected to His justice. God is unapologetically just and righteous; therefore, He is also eminently fair. But do we really want God to be fair? Fairness would mean that God refrains from executing His justice on those who rebel against Him. It would mean God judges all rebels and sentences them to Hell. Fair would be that you stand guilty before God and receive your rightful punishment. He is certainly just and fair if He chose to do so! As Jonathon Edwards preached in his famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*: “The bow of God’s wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.” Fairness and justice is what draws the bow, but it is grace that holds the arrow! In other words, we truly do not want what is fair and just; we want, and desperately need, grace!

the first.’ 9 “When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius. 10 So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. 11 When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: 12 ‘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.’” 13 “He replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius? 14 Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you. 15 Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I’m generous?’ 16 “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

- Underline “landowner” in (v. 1) and write “God” above it.
- Underline every occurrence of “workers.” Write “Jews, Gentiles, Us, and future believers” in the margin.
- Bracket “I’ll give you whatever is right” in (v. 4) and write “goodness of God” above it.
- Bracket “I want to give this last man the same as I gave you” in (v. 14). Write “grace” above it.

Personal Notes

In our text, we have the Parable of the Vineyard Workers. At first, it may seem to be a confusing passage. It may even seem to imply that God is not fair or just. However, when we interpret this text correctly, it presents a beautiful picture of God’s grace.

Vs. 1-2

The parable starts with the familiar phrase “the kingdom of heaven is like” (v. 1). This is the typical way Jesus introduces a parable, and because it is a parable, we need to follow certain rules of interpretation. We have explored these rules thoroughly in our sermon series through the Gospel of Mark, but here are some reminders. First, parables teach one main point. In other words, you shouldn’t try to find multiple meanings; there is one main message being conveyed. Additionally, this main point is usually at the end of the parable; it’s the “gut-punch” at the conclusion. Another important hermeneutical rule for understanding parables is that they are not allegories. In other words, not every character or detail has a hidden or spiritual meaning. In addition, another rule for parables is that the character that receives the most text or attention is typically the most important.

For this parable, the landowner and the workers receive equal attention, yet the landowner has more speaking parts. Therefore, there is little doubt that the landowner and the workers are important key characters in the parable. In fact, in the structure of the parable, Jesus builds anticipation by making the audience think that the workers who worked the longest in the vineyard are the most important. However, the “gut punch” of the parable is that there is no difference in importance between any of the workers. Thus, it brings an interesting aspect to the symbolism of the workers. One does not have to overanalyze or spiritualize to see the representation of the workers.

Let’s start with the obvious: the landowner. The landowner represents God in the parable. He is the owner of the vineyard and the giver of blessings. The landowner even describes himself as “generous” (v. 15). So, God is the gracious, generous landowner who bestows blessings as He chooses. But what about the workers? Are they merely simple examples to illustrate God’s goodness and grace? Or is there more to it? Some scholars suggest that these workers represent the Jews, the Gentiles, us, and future believers who will come to faith in the last days. This interpretation is not far-fetched, considering the grumbling of the first workers who labored longer in the vineyard. Throughout the Gospels, the Jews were upset that Jesus spoke with redemptive language toward the Gentiles. The second group of workers represents the Gentiles who would come to Christ.

Personal Notes

The last groups, those who work the least before the coming of the Lord (referring to us and those who come after us).

At the start of the workday, around 6:00 am, the landowner agrees to pay the workers one denarius (a full day's wage) to work a ten-hour shift (including breaks) in the vineyard. A denarius is a fair wage; it is the daily wage of a soldier. It is more than gracious for a good day's work. It shows the landowner's goodness and grace.

Vs. 3-5

At 9:00 am, the next group of workers was hired to go into the vineyard. This time, there was no agreement or wage offer. The landowner simply says, "You also go into my vineyard, and I'll give you whatever is right" (v. 4). Interestingly, the workers just went into the vineyard, fully trusting the landowner. Jesus provides no reason why they trust the landowner; there is no description of his character. However, there is complete trust that he will do "whatever is right" (v. 4). At noon, another group of workers was enlisted. Again, there was no negotiation. Just simple trust that they would be paid a fair wage. With it being later in the day, it is unlikely they expected a full day's wage. A half-day's wage would be completely fair. Yet, the landowner simply said, "Trust me. I will give you what is right."

Vs. 6-7

Now, around 5:00 pm, the last group is hired. They have been waiting all day for work. In fact, the landowner asks, "Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?" (v. 6). They reply, "Because no one hired us" (v. 7). Here is the grace and kindness of the landowner; he still sends them into the vineyard. The workday is nearly over. The first workers have been in the vineyard for eleven hours, longer than a typical workday. These last workers had less than an hour left to work. Surely, they did not expect much in wages. Again, anything is better than nothing.

Vs. 8-12

Again, the landowner does something unusual. He tells his foreman to call the workers so they can be paid. However, he gives a strange instruction: "Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first" (v. 8). Normally, you pay those who have worked the longest first, just in case there isn't enough money to pay everyone. This is the fair thing to do. But the landowner does not act fairly or justly; he acts graciously. He pays the workers who worked the least first, then pays the rest in ascending order.

Now comes the hard part. When the first workers, who had been in the vineyard for nearly twelve hours, found out that the

Personal Reflection

1. In which areas of your life do you find yourself demanding “fairness” from God, and how might this reveal a misunderstanding of His grace?
2. Have you ever compared your blessings, opportunities, or spiritual journey to someone else’s, like the vineyard workers? What does this reveal about your heart?
3. How does understanding that you deserve justice but have been shown grace alter your view of God’s generosity toward yourself and others?
4. Are you serving God out of gratitude for His grace, or are your motives sometimes driven by comparison, reward, or entitlement?
5. How can accepting the truth that “grace is not fair” strengthen your humility, gratitude, and willingness to rejoice when others receive God’s blessings?

Commentaries

Expositor's Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition): New Testament
Edited by Kenneth Barker

New Bible Commentary Edited by D. A. Carson

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others, even those who worked for only an hour, received the same pay as they did, they became confused. Surely, they expected to be paid more. However, they received the same amount: a denarius. They were furious. Listen to their complaint: “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” (v. 12). They wanted the landowner to be fair according to their rules and sense of fairness. Yet, the landowner responds with grace, not fairness.

Vs. 13-16

The landowner responds, “Friend, I am not doing you any wrong. Did you not agree with me on a denarius? Take what is 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 belongs to me? Are you jealous because I am generous?” (vs. 13-15). Here, the landowner reminds the workers that everything is his to do with as he pleases. If he chooses to act in grace, then why shouldn’t he? It is his money and his reputation. The landowner even asks, “Are you jealous because I am generous?” (v. 15). Jesus uses a common Hebrew idiom here; it is literally translated as “Is your eye evil?” This is where the term “evil eye” originates from. It describes looking with such covetousness that it becomes evil.

Then, Jesus concludes the parable with “So the last will be first, and the first last” (v. 16). This phrase is the gospel’s mantra. The gospel is never about being worthy; it’s not about effort. The gospel is not about fairness or justice; it is all about grace!

God is completely fair and just, but in regard to His treatment of sinners responding to the Gospel, He is gracious. We want fairness when we feel left out, but we need grace. We want justice when we feel wronged, but we need grace. All who respond to the Gospel are of equal value and guilt. Yet, God responds with the same amount of grace for all. When we accept this grace and live from it, we will stop comparing ourselves to others. We will stop seeking rewards and blessings. We will simply serve because, as wretched as we are, we continually receive grace. The Puritan Christopher Love wrote, “Grace is the understanding that God is a better savior than you are a sinner.”

Is grace fair? No! But that is what makes it grace!