

Series: **The Scandal of Grace** – week 2 of 11

CDOBC – beginning on 9/10/17

Today's Title: **"Grace is Unfair"**

September 17, 2017 - Matthew 20:1-16

OBJECTIVE: To help people understand the blessed and outwardly unfair grace of God.

Opening Prayer

Illus. *"It's unfair!"* My wife (Kim) has a brother (Tim) who is 10 years younger, and ever since I met her, I have heard her declare this to her parents. "It's unfair!"

"It's unfair: you bought Tim nicer clothes than you bought me!"

"It's unfair: you bought Tim a nicer car than I had!"

"It's unfair: you were easier on Tim than you were on me!"

Our entire culture puts great value in 'fairness' and 'getting what you deserve'.

"The early bird gets the worm."

"No pain, no gain."

"You get what you pay for."

"Get your money's worth."

"No free lunch!"

"You deserve it."

One of the current political phrases we often hear today is a demand that a certain group must "Pay their fair share!"

The problem you eventually run into is this: Who defines what is fair?

Antonio Salieri was a composer who was not only gifted, but devout and earnest in his desire to excel. He worked tirelessly to write music which was worthy in the praise of God. Antonio followed all the rules - and his work ethic was flawless.

One of Salieri's fellow composers was not at all as distinguished as he was. He was lazy, sloppy, and probably couldn't even spell 'devout' or 'disciplined'.

Yet, it was clear to everyone, that this immature frat boy - known by his last name: Mozart - had no regard for dignity or manners, he was incredibly selfish and wrote music with the intent to seduce women instead of praising God, yet God had blessed him with twice the ability of Salieri. It's said that Salieri was furious that God would give Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart so much more talent. Mozart was so undeserving...it wasn't fair!

Fairness.

Turn to Matthew 20

In the final 7-10 days before Jesus was crucified, He was teaching - being questioned by those who genuinely wanted an answer and by those who wanted to trick Him and discredit Him.

After explaining that nobody can enter the Kingdom of God by their own efforts, the disciples asked Him, “Who then can be saved?” (Matt. 19:25).

Jesus says, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (vs. 26)

Peter then asks, “See, we have left everything and followed You. What then will we have?” (vs. 27)

In essence, Peter is saying: *Jesus - we've left everything for You - will we get what we deserve?*

One of the things the disciples struggled with was their belief that they should get what they deserved.

Over the years, this caused a few arguments among them as they would argue about who was the greatest disciple and who deserved the greatest place of honor in Jesus' Kingdom. For 3 years Jesus had been teaching and modeling how greatness works in His Kingdom - and He was trying to teach them the value of grace.

But grace is a foreign language in a world of fairness.

For religious people, morality and merit are at the top of the list.

Live the right way...look the right way...do all the right things - this is the life-view of the religious person.

A few chapters earlier (18:1-6), the disciples asked Jesus “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

You know they were all thinking, *“He’s gonna say I’m the greatest!”*

This obsession with being the greatest - being #1 - being at the front of the line and in the place of greatest honor - getting what they thought they deserved - these were the priorities for the disciples.

Their motivation for following Jesus - at least in part - was to attain a level of greatness for themselves - to secure their future in Jesus’ Kingdom. They were looking to Jesus and their place in His Kingdom as the best 401k plan going!

You see, throughout history, people have created a picture of what they think is fair - and if God doesn’t match the picture of what they think, they accuse God of being ‘unfair’. (They never seem to change their picture - but they accuse God!)

Throughout their history, Israel accused God of being ‘unfair’ to them (Ezek. 18:25). Someone else - whom they deemed as less worthy - receives more blessings in their life - and their conclusion was: God is unfair.

It happens today - a Christian experiences some sort of pain or trauma - a tragedy - and they begin accusing God of being ‘unfair’.

So, Jesus - in yet another attempt to teach the disciples a vital truth about following Him, tells them a parable.

Read 19:30 - 20:16

- Work-day started at 6 a.m. - ended at 6 p.m.
- Day laborers: very low on the economic stratus - unskilled - needed to work to eat
- A denarius - very generous wage - much more than a day laborer normally was paid - a denarius was standard pay for a skilled employee - standard pay for a Roman soldier
- Vineyard - very labor-intensive work - very hot that day (vs. 12)
- Leviticus 19:13 & Deuteronomy 24:15 give protection to the day laborer/hired worker

Leviticus 19:13

“The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning.”

Deuteronomy 24:15

“You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the LORD, and you be guilty of sin.”

The people in the parable represent:

Jesus is giving us a parable - a story which tells a spiritual truth - a truth about the Kingdom of God - about salvation.

The homeowner (“Master of the house”) = God

The vineyard = the Kingdom of God - heaven

The laborers = believers

The workday = time

The evening / end of workday = eternity - entering heaven

The wage = eternal life

The foreman = Jesus, who will reward His own

Now let's dive into the meaning of the parable.

There is equality in the Kingdom of God *19:30; 20:16*

Equality is not 'sameness'. In the Kingdom - in heaven, everyone is not the same. We are not all wearing the same clothing - not all playing a harp.

There will be great diversity in heaven (Rev. 7:9-10) as each person retains their individual uniqueness in the perfected state of our heavenly bodies.

Equality is not 'sameness'.

Jesus begins the parable with this maxim:

"...many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Many believe this was a popular proverbial saying - one which Jesus repeated often.

It's meaning is quite simple.

In one context, it refers to those who are willing to serve - willing to be last in line - willing to let others have the best seat at the dinner table. In Jesus' Kingdom, humility is a primary value.

But in this context, it's meaning is simply this:

Everyone is on the same level.

As the end of the parable, everyone receives the same wage.

In the Kingdom of God, nobody is better than the others.

As Paul wrote in **Galatians 3:28**

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”

In other words - in God’s Kingdom Jews are not better than Gentiles - those who are free do not outrank those who are slaves - men are not superior to women.

In Christ - all believers have full forgiveness - and full status as God’s children.

Full status as God’s children means we have all the promises of Abraham’s offspring (Galatians 3:7).

Remember...He’s teaching His disciples who were looking at life through the lenses of fairness and privileged status.

As Jews, they would have thought they were in the front of the line in the Kingdom - everyone else would be less important and receive less honor.

Jesus corrects their false baseline belief before He even begins the parable - and says, *“Everyone is on the same level - everyone crosses the finish line at the same time!”*

God is generous and keeps His promises 20:2-7

His generosity is seen in the wage paid to the all-day workers.

For the workers hired in the beginning of the workday, a denarius was a very generous wage. This is why when he goes out at 9:00, 12:00 and 3:00 he doesn’t have to

say what he will pay those workers. The workers already knew - word like this travels fast - this was a very generous man and if they work for him, he will be generous with their pay.

At the end of the day, he pays the workers, beginning with those who worked the least amount of time, and ending with those who put in a full 12-hour day.

(“The last will be first, the first last” - is also seen in the inverted pay order - and the same pay for all).

The drama or tension in the parable is in **vs. 10-15** - as the workers are receiving their pay.

The surprise is in **vs. 9** where the generosity of the owner is most obvious: 1 hour of work = 12 hours of pay!

But **vs. 10-15** is where the drama and tension surface.

Those hired first have watched all the workers who didn't work a full day get paid - and they all received a denarius - and the end of **vs. 10** tells us they're expecting a huge paycheck!

But like the others who worked less hours...they also received a denarius.

This doesn't seem fair! You should get paid based upon your work - and this group certainly worked more than the others.

This attitude carries over to the spiritual realm. Those who have walked with Christ for many years - can feel

resentment toward the ‘Johnny-come-lately’s’ in the church.

“This is my church!”

“This is our church and we’re not going to adjust or change to accommodate the new people.”

We need to be careful on this point because we might be tempted to feel resentment toward those who begin attending when we open the new spaces. Feelings might rise to the surface in your heart, and you might begin thinking:

“I’ve been here for 15 years, serving, giving, faithful through many years - and all of a sudden we have some new buildings and all these people show up and act like they own the place!”

None of us can imagine thinking these thoughts - or embracing these thoughts - but I share this as your pastor to alert you to the possibility!

Sometimes a person can feel resentment against God. They are faithful for years, but God doesn’t bless them in extraordinary ways. Then they see someone who is new to Christ - who has lived a long-life of sin, and after very short time of being a Christian God backs up the dump truck of blessing onto their life!

“I’ve been walking in obedience all these years, but you haven’t blessed me or my family like You’re blessing them!”

“It’s not fair!”

vs. 11 - The workers “grumbled at the master of the house.”
“grumbled” in the Greek is: *egongyzon* (hey-gong-good-zo) which is an onomatopoeia - a word where the pronunciation matches/sounds like it’s meaning.

Complainers are a real pain.

I think of Moses and all the complaining he had to put up with for 40 years - and he had nowhere else to go! No other CEO openings were available - he had to listen to so much complaining!

Now I can understand why the laborers were complaining. They deserved more than the others - they worked more hours - and it was a really hot day (“scorching heat” - vs. 12).

If you only listen to their complaint in vs. 12, they make a pretty good case.

But they have no case.

The “master of the house” is being perfectly fair - dealing with them with great integrity.

vs. 13: “But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’”

Back at 6 a.m., when they were first hired - they were more than willing to be paid a denarius for a day's work. A denarius was a very generous wage!

He is doing exactly what he promised he would do - and what they enthusiastically agreed to.

“Friend” is a term in the Greek which is not very positive or flattering. It is someone who seems to be a friend, but they are only care about their own interests.

He confronts their grumbling and reminds them of their original agreement - a generous agreement and he has followed through with what he promised.

They have no grounds for a complaint!

In the Greek - “Take” and “go” (vs. 14) are commands. You get the idea the owner is frustrated by the accusation of unfairness.

He then asks 2 questions: (vs. 15)

1) “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”

2) “Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

If you think you deserve something from God...then you don't understand grace - you don't realize what you have already received is due to God's generosity - and you are critical of how God dispenses what is His to dispense!

A maturing Christian celebrates when God is generous to others.

A less mature Christian criticizes God or resents others who receive more blessing.

Jealousy toward others because God has blessed them more is sin.

We're told in **Romans 12:15** to "rejoice with those who rejoice".

We tend to see ourselves / identify with the workers who started at 6 a.m.

We think of ourselves as those who have been faithful for a long time - but we are the workers who showed up at 3:00 or 5:00.

We have joined the party late in the day.

Israel has been working since 6:00 - and the rest of us have joined in well after they started!

Salvation is about grace, not fairness 20:14-16

The parable is not about money - or fairness in employee / employer relations - it's about grace.

It's a picture of our salvation - and the generous gift of salvation given to each person who says "yes" to Christ.

God invites us to receive a generous gift...

We say yes...

He continues to bring in more 'laborers' who will receive the same gift that we have been promised.

When it's time to enter heaven - the Kingdom of God - no matter how long we've been in the family of God, we will each receive the same abundantly generous gift - eternal life.

In the movie "The Last Emperor", a young child was anointed as the last emperor of China. He lived a life of unmatched luxury. One time his brother asked him, "*What happens when you do wrong?*" The boy emperor replied, "*When I do wrong, someone else is punished*". To demonstrate, he breaks a jar, and one of the servants is beaten. With Christianity, Jesus reversed that ancient pattern: when the servants erred, the King was punished. Grace is free (to us) only because the giver Himself has borne the cost."

(What's So Amazing About Grace, by Philip Yancey, p. 67)

God does not reward us according to fairness.

We do not receive what we deserve! We receive so much more!

If salvation was based on fairness, nobody would get to heaven - nobody would have their sins forgiven.

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God." (Rom. 3:10-11)

God gives us grace - and His grace is not some sort of grandfatherly kindness, for it cost Him the exorbitant price of Calvary! (What's So Amazing About Grace, by Philip Yancey, p. 67)

Grace is His generous gift - given to each person who is called by Him and puts their faith in Jesus Christ.

Apply it...

Stop trying to earn your way to heaven...and accept God's grace to you!

Admit your sins

Believe in Jesus as your Savior

Commit each day to Christ

Celebrate God's generous grace to others!

Don't keep score

Don't compare your life and blessings to someone else's life and blessings.

Do - celebrate the generosity of God in their life!

Do - celebrate the grace of God in your own life!

God's grace is unfair, but it's unfair to God.

It's a generous gift to us...but it's unfair to God because He gives us what we don't deserve - He took our punishment!

God does not determine our salvation based on fairness... and all of us should be thankful He does not, for if it was based on fairness, none of us could ever be saved!

Close in prayer