

Don Follis  
July 5, 2015

Two weeks back I preached on Luke 15. This is the famous parable of the Prodigal Son. I called my sermon “The Parable of the Generous Father.” I noted briefly that this father might be buddies with the landowner in Matthew 20, to whom we turn our attention this morning. I’ll give you my punch line now. In both parables we are struck with the amazing grace of the father in the one and the landowner in the other.

Christianity is supremely a religion of grace. In his book, “What’s So Amazing About Grace,” Phillip Yancey points out that part of our problem is in the nature of grace itself. Grace is scandalous in that in the end grace says that no one is too bad to be saved. Grace also says that some people may be too good to be saved. That is, they may have such a high opinion of themselves that they think they don’t need God’s grace.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard strikes at the heart of our sense of fairness and justice. In the parable, a landowner goes out early in the morning to hire people to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. Now, I have read that working the grape harvest was demanding and hectic. So, the initial workers agree with the offer, knowing that it will be a full day of work.

The wage they agree on is a denarius. This was the wage of a Roman soldier, which I think meant a lot to those hearing this parable for the first time. Being a Roman soldier was not the most glorious or prestigious job but it was higher up the social ladder than the common laborer. As such, the promise of a denarius to these workers would have been fairly generous. The equivalent wage today would be maybe around \$55.

We soon discover this landowner needs more laborers to get the job done. “About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour, he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’”

The phrase “I will pay you whatever is right” in verse 5 shows us that these workers no doubt trusted the owner as a man of his word. While the owner does not promise a particular wage, these workers seem to know it will be fair.

Let me put the Jewish workday in context for you. It began at 6:00 AM. This was called the first hour. The third hour began at 9:00 AM, the sixth hour began at noon, the ninth hour began at 3:00 PM, and the eleventh hour at 5:00 PM.

The parable takes a dramatic turn at the eleventh hour. At 5:00 PM, when the work on most farms would have been winding down, the owner hires the final laborers for the day. At this hour, potential workers pretty much have lost hope of being hired for that day. But something is

going on here. This landowner seems to be interested in not only his Vineyard but the unemployed folks looking for work.

So we see that there are two groups of workers: those hired early who went to work after negotiating a wage; and those hired later who went to work without a contract, choosing to trust the goodness of the master.

The day comes to an end finally and well, it's time to pay the workers. "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'"

I would think payment might be "first come first served." Not in this story. And, well, not with Jesus. He turns it around – "last come first served." "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. When those came who were hired first, what happened? Well, we know don't we? They expected to receive more. But each of them also received a denarius, the wage they had in fact agreed to. But when they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'"

Clearly, these early workers were upset that the landowner had made the other workers equal to them. "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the men who were hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'"

The word "friend" here is for a casual companion. The man being addressed as friend may be spokesman of the group. The owner then clearly states, "...I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree to work for a denarius?" Before 6:00 that morning, they had "agreed" with the owner on a price for their labor. At that time 55 bucks was a fair, generous wage for their work. Both sides had lived up to their end of the bargain.

Jesus then brings the parable to its end. "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." What jumps right at us? In the kingdom of God, our perceived position makes no difference because God shows no partiality. In God's economy, things are often just the opposite of what we expect.

Here are 4 considerations as we drill down and look at what God is saying to us from this parable ...

1. Grace reminds us that God's favor is a gift. The "problem" in this text is not the injustice of a mean and cruel landowner. The problem is the landowner's generosity. Verse 15 asks the question, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

Is not the charge of unfairness grounded in the assumption that the extra pay the early workers now wanted was pay they coveted, that they feel they deserved, rather than in their love for justice?

When I was a boy a woman in town hired me and a friend from my church to till her garden, by hand. In turn she would give us money for a church mission's trip we wanted to go on. It turns out we couldn't work at the same time, eerily like this parable. I worked in the morning turning up three-fourths of the garden. I could even have done more, probably the entire garden, but I thought, "I'm not doing the whole thing." My friend came in the afternoon and tilled about one-fourth of the garden. I thought she would have other jobs for him. She didn't, but she gave the same amount for our mission trip. She gave it to the church on our behalf. Wow. That still bugs me. Verse 10 says that they expected to receive more. I told my mom my friend got his way paid by doing little work. She merely shrugged, and said, "Son, it's a gift not a wage."

Now friends, if it's a wage that we want from God, the Bible is clear. "For the wages of sin is death..." But, if we want to receive what God wants to freely give us, then the last part of this verse in Romans 6:23 offers us something far better than just compensation: "but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord."

2. Grace keeps us from looking down on ourselves. What about those who were not hired until 5:00 p.m. They watched and waited while the other workers were hired. They knew that they would probably not get paid that day – no food that night. All day long they were passed over like a little boy chosen last for kick ball.

But, this story shows us the Lord's passion for the forgotten. Usually the best and strongest were the first picked. These workers were the leftovers – perhaps the least skilled. Who in their right mind would pick them? Really now friends, let's tell ourselves the truth. What do any of us have to offer the Lord? Does He need our intellect? Our strength? Our money? Our good deeds? Our work ethic? Standing before God there will be no distinction between preachers and dishwashers.

Friends, we are unworthy. Not worthless, but unworthy.

3. Grace makes us equal to everyone else. The workers' complaint in verse 12 jumps at me. "You have made them equal to us." At 6am, the all-day workers don't complain about their wages. I presume they felt their pay was generous. Now, though, at the end of the day, they felt superior, having borne the burden of the work.

These first workers grumbled, showing their true selves. They didn't say, "You have put us on a par with the late-comers," Instead, they grumbled, "you have put them on a par with us."

They were not dissatisfied with what they themselves had received. They were envious of what had been given to the others. They emphasize that they bore the burden of the work in the sweltering heat of the day. Compared to these upstarts, who only worked an hour, these workers thought they were worth more.

Do we want God to give us grades so that we can compare ourselves with other people? It's tempting to think God has given us an "A" while others are barely passing the class. Indeed, the chain of events in the hearts of the workers could not be clearer. They compared themselves with

others. This then led to coveting and then to complaining and ultimately to criticizing. Friends, there is no thief to joy like comparison. Comparing yourself to others will steal your joy in nothing flat. God declares that in the economy of grace, we are all equal. Are we going to cut others some slack and treat other people the way we want to be treated because grace makes us equal to everyone else?

4. Grace offers us a fresh start. The Christian life is a series of new beginnings. No one is first. No one is last. I'm not better than you. You are no better than I. You are no worse than I am. I am no worse than you are. The grace of Jesus covers us all. I think that's why I think Jesus used such radical language in verse 16 about the first and the last. Look at what he says. "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." But I also want you to look at what He said in the last verse of chapter 19, in the verse immediately preceding this parable: "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Jesus changes the order. The first and the last, last and first ... all get blurred. Grace is not about finishing first. Nor is it about finishing last. It's about not counting at all. It's about not keeping score. It's about having a do-over, a fresh start whenever you turn your heart back to God. The first and last don't matter in the Kingdom of God.

Do you want a fresh start today? Do you need a new beginning? You can have one! Ask for it. It's that simple. The more you feel your need for grace, the better candidate you are to receive it. Hold out your empty hands and ask God for His grace. You will not be turned away. Though your sins are as scarlet, God says they will be white as snow.

God's grace is shocking, scandalous, unfair, because no one in this world would have thought of something like this. When we sinners get to heaven, there will be no contest to see who was the most deserving of God's grace because no one deserves it. There will only be one contest in heaven. When we look back and see what we were before, when we see the pit from which he rescued us, when we recall how confused we were, when we remember how God reached out and "hired" us into His family, and how he held us in his hand, and when we see Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us, the only contest will be to see which of us will sing the loudest, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." We will be singing alongside John Newton, the writer of "Amazing Grace," this slave trader turned preacher who said, "The most amazing thing about grace is that I will be in heaven at all." Amen.