

For There is No Distinction    2023  
 Matthew 20:1-16                      Romans 3:9-21-28

Matthew 20:1-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Romans 3:9, 21-28 (New Revised Standard Version)

What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

There are many wonderful and uplifting passages in Scripture.

We all have our familiar favorites, the ones we love best,  
 beautiful stories that we enjoy hearing again and again,  
 that overflow with hope, inspiration and encouragement,  
**but this Matthew 20 parable, probably isn't one of them.**

Those of us who have been around the Church for a while  
 almost certainly identify with the workers hired early in the day,  
 rather than with the latecomers who worked only the last hour.

Most of you have worked hard and long serving at the church.  
 You have participated & served in programs, worshipped regularly,  
 and you have tried to be faithful for many years--

- so it just can't be right or God's will for slackers and latecomers  
to receive the same blessings, compensation and rewards as those  
who have worked diligently and faithfully endured, vs. 10~12

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received  
the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, '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.'

We live in a world where we learn at a very early age,  
to do the right things that earn our parent's approval,  
in school, hard work and study are rewarded with good grades,  
in scouting and the military you earn your rank and status,  
and we work to earn wages or salary from our employers.

If compensation and rewards are tied to effort and achievement,  
we consider that system to be reasonable, fair and just,  
**but that's not the case with this parable Jesus tells.**

When Jesus first told this parable,  
the religious authorities understood and taught that  
faithful efforts to obey the Laws and rituals of Judaism  
were what made a person acceptable and pleasing to God,  
and those who did not were outcasts rejected by God.

But while eating and welcoming sinners and outcasts of the Law,  
the ministry of Jesus proclaimed the Good News of God's Kingdom.

Jesus extended grace to all in opposition to the Jewish leaders.  
**Through this parable Jesus is teaching that God's kingdom is not  
something that we earn through human effort or accomplishment.**

Jesus proclaimed the Good News of God's Kingdom,  
**where it's all grace, and God does all the heavy lifting  
by reaching down to us, unworthy sinners and outcasts  
to all of us who can't seem to get it right on our own.**

That is the Good News, the message proclaimed by the early Church.  
The disciples and the earliest Christians were mostly all Jewish  
who followed and obeyed the Old Testament Laws and traditions,  
but the Good News of the Gospel then spread to gentiles,  
and many of the Church weren't sure about these former pagans.

Writing to Christians in Rome, a mix of Jewish and gentile believers,  
Paul reminded them, no one achieves salvation by their good works,  
but they all were dependent of God's grace alone, vs. 9

**What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and  
Greeks, are under the power of sin.**

Imagine that a cruise ship the sinks in the middle of the ocean,  
and there are only three survivors each bobbing on the water.  
One is an Olympic swimmer,  
another can swim some and the last one can barely swim at all.

The one who can't swim sinks, drowns and dies in just a few minutes.  
The one that can swim a little bit lasts maybe a few hours,  
but then that one too, sinks, drowns and dies.

The Olympic swimmer might last a day or so,  
but then even that champion swimmer also sinks, drowns and dies.

Regardless of their swimming ability, they all sink, drown and die  
**unless someone comes along who can rescue and save them**, vs. 22-25

**For there is no distinction, since all have sinned** and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his **grace as a gift**, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, **effective through faith**.

Paul's point is that all are lost sinners  
regardless of any good works, traditions or religious behavior,  
but depend entirely on God's gift of grace through Jesus Christ,  
and like those swimmers who drown in the ocean,  
our own efforts cannot heal or save us, vs. 27-28

Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith.  
For we hold that a person is **justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law**.

The parable in Matthew is meant to teach about the kingdom of God  
and to illustrate something about God's love and grace, vs. 1

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

It was included in Matthew to address a real situation and issue  
that was confronting the early church at that particular time.

Historically, when the book of Matthew was being written,  
the Church was growing dramatically and changing drastically,  
from a predominantly Jewish Christian church  
into an increasingly gentile Christian church ---

- and Jewish Christians who had had been there from the beginning  
weren't sure what to think of this influx of gentile believers  
these recent converts who were only now coming to faith,  
undeserving sinners brought into a relationship with God.

Both groups, old-timers & new-members are represented in the parable  
by the workers coming to labor in the vineyard at different times.

The first early morning workers are the original Jewish believers  
and those hired later in the day to labor in the vineyard  
are the gentiles who only later come to have faith in Jesus.

The parable addresses the feelings of resentment and umbrage  
felt by the old-timers toward these new gentile believers

The original Jewish Christians didn't see how  
all of these gentile Christians and former pagans  
could possibly be equally loved, precious and acceptable to God,  
or share in the same rewards as they themselves were expecting.

But Jesus intended to shock and disturb his listeners by teaching  
about God's extravagant generosity, that is available to all.  
God's grace and benevolence toward even the underserving,  
and that does not value one person more than any other,  
and such grace and blessings toward the unworthy and undeserving  
can feel and be offensive and troubling to those who work hard.

When the gospel of Matthew was first written,  
Christianity was spreading out rapidly into the gentile world.

As the Church become more gentile, it was changing,  
and the more traditional Jewish Christians  
felt less comfortable and welcoming, and even wondering,

**former pagan gentile believers**

**were these**

**really loved and cherished by God, as equals?**

The author of Matthew applied this parable as told by Jesus,  
to that situation as a reminder that

**it is only by grace through Jesus Christ  
that any of us are made acceptable before God.**

As I thought about the teaching story in Matthew 20 this week,  
I realized that the inclusive nature of God's love and grace  
was not just an issue and concern of the New Testament.

When we hear this parable, for most of us it is a bit troubling,  
because we generally identify ourselves with the early workers,  
who feel offended & angry at the unfairness & injustice  
of equal reward to those who worked for only an hour,  
as it seems to reward and encourage complacency,  
as if our faithful efforts no purpose or effect.

But Jesus told this story from the view of the struggling peasant  
who knew what it is like to miss an opportunity of being hired,  
who may have trouble arriving early enough to be hired,  
and may spend the day fruitlessly looking for work,  
and who lives close to the edge, with the constant worry of how  
to provide for their family to have food for another day.

Those struggling at the low-end of the socio-economic ladder,  
they hear this parable as hope & promise, cause for celebration  
for they hear blessings in it, the gospel of God's grace.

Imagine the unexpected surprise and great joy of a full day's pay,  
and at the vineyard owner's unbelievable gracious generosity,  
for because that owner is gracious, my family gets fed.

**We assume, that if we do more work, then we deserve more pay,**  
but the struggling poor are focused on hunger and need,  
often beyond they ability or opportunity to earn ---  
**-- which is the way that God's grace works and is given.**

**God's grace is given in abundance, all the grace we ever need,  
either you accept and receive God's grace, or you do not.**  
**The misunderstanding that Jesus addresses in this parable,  
is that sometimes we forget that grace is entirely God's gift,  
it's God's love, always unearned and entirely undeserved.**

In the end all the workers have all received the same grace.  
But one group has known all day that they would feed their family  
while the other has worried, and were gratefully surprised.

In the story, early workers were able to rejoice with the others,  
as long as they assumed that they would be getting more.  
**But when greed and envy kicked in, their joy disappeared.**

**In the end everyone leaves with the same amount in their pockets,  
some, incredibly grateful and the others bitterly resentful,  
only their attitudes are different      thankful or envious.**

And what is the basis for their complaint and bitterness?

**you have made them equal to us**

which is the same reason that we struggle with grace.

When we tell ourselves, we deserve better than those unworthy others,  
that negates & denies our gratitude, and joy of God's gift of grace.

This grace that we welcome and affirm for ourselves,  
sometimes, we'd like to deny it for certain unsavory others –  
those we deem less worthy and judge less deserving than us.

Those who serve and work hard and long are especially vulnerable,  
that in arrogant pride, we may suppose God should be impressed  
by how wonderfully splendid and faithful and humble we are,  
that who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat,  
especially compared to those unworthy others.

In the Kingdom of God,  
no one is better, more loved and precious than anyone else,  
for all privileges and distinctions are vanished by grace.

**In the parable, Jesus calls us to think and rethink  
about how we feel about grace, especially toward others,  
and acknowledge our own need before we judge others,  
for it's our choice, gratitude for grace or a bitterness of greed.**

This parable is very special and very personal to me.

While working in the corporate world my faith grew & became fervent.

I seriously considered if God was really calling me into ministry,  
but dismissed the idea because I'd be getting such a late start.

I knew it was too late, my ministry too brief to make a difference,  
so it was not worth it and not enough time to accomplish any good.

When I voiced this reality, my concern and trepidation,  
to a wise and dear friend who pointed out this parable to me,  
and I saw the gracious invitation from God that it contains,  
and I think I really saw & understood it for the first time.

In the parable, all came and worked **when they were called**,  
and all received the same reward in the end, which is,  
**especially encouraging to those who are called late.**

How wonderful that even against human wisdom and reason,  
God honors and accepts our faithfulness and willingness,  
and not just the amount we accomplish in his vineyard.

God's economy --it's not based on the quantity or duration of labor  
**therefore, we are free to respond, whenever we are called...**

... for notice that the call to labor continues throughout the day ---  
always, more workers are needed, more are still being called  
even when there is little time left for useful labor.

This applies to all of us, for we are **all** called to serve somehow,

to labor in God's vineyard, in different ways and at various times,  
**for regardless of the specifics of time, context and task,  
all are equally precious and important to God.**

For as long as we live, we **can** usefully serve God in some way,  
within whatever and whenever of our particular life-situation,  
and that is the promise and grace of this passage.

Listen as Jesus says, "**I call you to work in my vineyard**"

And as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12:4-7

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God **who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given** the manifestation of the Spirit **for the common good.**