

***Grumbling About Grace***  
**A Sermon on Matthew 20:1-16**  
**Proper 20**  
**September 20, 2020**

**Introduction**

Evangelicals place more emphasis on grace than mainline Christians do. Part of the reason is that mainliners perceive that talking about grace leads to quietism, accepting the way things are until God changes things.

I am preaching to myself here. I don't talk about grace enough. Grace and quietism don't necessarily go together. Grace can and should lead to action.

Today's text is a parable about grace, even though the word grace never appears in it. I believe it spurs us to action.

**First Move: Grace in the Marketplace**

The Jesus Seminar colors this parable bright red, meaning that they believe it likely originates with the historical Jesus. The first and last group of workers do not get what they expect. The reversal of expectations is characteristic of parables that originate with Jesus. Jesus surprises us.

Matthew puts a frame around the story. He begins, "The kingdom of the heavens is like . . ." He ends, "In this way the last will be first and the first last." The frames color how Matthew wants us to interpret the parable. Let's leave off the frames and look at the parable itself. That will leave us with Jesus' original parable.

We should try to avoid reading the parable allegorically. Don't presume that the master of the vineyard is God and that the harvest is the last judgment. That makes us identify immediately with the master and it distorts how we hear the parable. Jesus' parables were intended to resist categorization; they have multiple possible meanings that we are supposed to play with.

The first half of the parable takes place in the marketplace. The head of the household goes out to the marketplace at the break of daylight to hire workers for his vineyard. It doesn't say what time of year it is. It could be harvest time in the fall. It could be planting time in the spring. Those are the two times that a vineyard would need extra workers.

The head of the household is not unusually wealthy. Large vineyards had live-in slaves who worked at the vineyard year round. This vineyard has to hire workers

who sold their labor by the day. Another sign that it is not a large vineyard is that the master himself goes into town to hire the workers instead of sending his manager to do it.

Day laborers expected to be paid at the end of the day. Deuteronomy 24:15 says: “You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, because he is needy and urgently depends on it.”

The master agrees with the workers that their pay will be a denarius a day. That is not a lot, but it is reasonable. It is enough to live on and not much more. It would be what we call today a living wage, enough to keep you just over the poverty line.

The master goes out again around the third hour. The day starts at 6 a.m., so the third hour is 9 a.m. We don’t know why he goes out again. Did he have enough workers? Was he going into town on other business? We don’t know. He sees other men who had been standing in the marketplace. Here the translation makes a difference. Most translations say they were idle. That is a judgmental word. It implies that the workers were lazy—they would rather be hanging out in the town square than working. It can also be translated more literally, as “without work.” That is neutral. They didn’t have any work to do, perhaps by choice, perhaps because no one would hire them.

The master does not work out a wage with them. He says, “Go into the vineyard and I will give you whatever is righteous.” Some translations say just or fair, but Matthew uses δίκαιος. It is the adjective form of the noun for justice or righteousness. We remember from the Sermon on the Mount, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of the heavens.” The master says that he is righteous.

The men must want to work. They go to work in the vineyard without knowing what the wage will be. Lazy people don’t do that. Desperate people do. It reminds us of the Great Depression, when men would go to the factory gates every morning looking for work, but there wasn’t enough work to go around.

The master goes out again in the sixth hour and the ninth hour. That would be at noon and 3 p.m. He finds more men in the marketplace who want to work. They, too, go into the vineyard without knowing what their wages will be.

Around the eleventh hour, just an hour before sundown, quitting time, the master finds others who also had been standing without work. The master asks them, “Why have you been standing here the whole day without work?” They say, “Because no one hired us.” This shows that “idle” is a bad translation. These are men who want to work to support their families but there is no work for them.

The master says, “You, too, go into the vineyard.” He doesn’t say anything about their pay. These men will work for whatever he will give them.

## **Second Move: Justice in the Vineyard**

The second half of the parable takes place at the vineyard, where the workers are getting paid. When it becomes evening, the master asks his manager to pay the men, starting with the ones who came last. This is unusual. Ordinarily the ones who came first would get paid first. Apparently the master wanted the first ones to see what he was paying the last ones.

The ones who came in the eleventh hour were each given a denarius. We don’t hear anything about the ones who came at the third, the sixth and the ninth hour.

The first ones, when they came, got the idea that they would receive more. It was probably based on their understanding of justice.

The first ones each received a denarius, the same as those who worked only part of the day. They started grumbling against the master of the vineyard. The Greek emphasizes that the ones who *received* were grumbling. It makes them sound ungrateful.

The first ones said, “The last ones worked one hour and you made them equal to us, who endured the burden of the day and the heat.” They were grumbling because the master treated everyone as equal. Everyone was looking for work and got just enough to feed their families for the day. The first ones are grumbling because the master found them earlier in the day than the others.

The master picks out one of them and says, “Fellow, I am not being unjust with you. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take that which is yours and go.” The master believes he has been just with the first ones; he has paid them the wage they agreed on.

The master singles out one of the fellows who was complaining and sends him away. The others might expect to come back tomorrow and get more work,

The master asks, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” Does it bother you that I acted graciously toward the men who came later in the day? The master also acted graciously to those who were hired first by giving them work to do.

There is a tension in the parable between grace and justice, between the free gift and the wages to which you were entitled. The Greek brings out the tension even more. The Greek word for *to hire* is μισθόω. Besides meaning to hire, it also means to reward or punish. The Greek word for *wages* is the noun form, μισθός. Besides meaning wages, it also means reward or punishment. The Greek words for hire and wages are words about justice.

The worker's sense of justice is offended. It is similar to the elder brother in the prodigal son. He has been working with his father all along, and he grumbles when the father throws a party for the prodigal son when he returns.

The problem is, we don't want grace. Paul Achtemeier, a New Testament scholar, says that we would rather be paid for what we deserve than be given something we have not earned. William Faulkner in his novels about rural life in Mississippi in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century uses the word *beholden*. His characters don't want to be *beholden* to anyone. Our culture sends us the same message: you have to work for whatever you are going to receive. An honorable person does not accept charity. American culture, especially Southern culture, is highly individualistic and competitive. We want to be recognized for our achievement. We want to be seen as winners not losers. There is no room for grace in it.

Grace offends us when it is given to someone else. How would society function if grace were one of our principles? We don't see it as grace. We see it as unfair. We have mandatory minimum sentences for criminals so that there is no possibility of grace. When the governor or the president pardons someone, we see it as corruption not grace. When the government gives aid to the poor, we think we are enabling the dependency of the poor. We cannot allow refugees to enter our country; they are fleeing violence and persecution at home but we have no place for them. They have done nothing for us and we fear they may be terrorists. We think of America First.

Parents and school teachers understand the problem. If you are generous with one child, the other children are going to grumble that you need to be generous with them too.

### **Third Move: Acting on Grace**

This is often understood as a parable about grace. The tradition reads the parable allegorically, which I asked you not to do. The tradition sees the owner of the vineyard as a stand-in for God, who is free to be gracious to whomever God likes. Another common interpretation is that the workers who came first are the original members of the church and the workers who are hired in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour are new converts to the church. It reminds the original members of the church that in the eyes of God they are no better than and no worse than the new converts.

Brandon Scott, my New Testament professor, agrees that it is a parable about grace. The master of the vineyard is gracious, even without being a surrogate for God. The grace lies in being given work to do. These were desperate times and all the workers received grace. There will be more work tomorrow. The first ones were ungrateful for the grace that the master showed them in hiring them.

The parable challenges to reconsider our understanding of grace. The workers should recognize that they have been extended grace themselves. By overhearing this story, we the listeners will recognize that we also have received grace.

Χάρις is the Greek word for grace. Χάρις is a gift, something that is done as an unmerited favor. In Greco-Roman culture, a powerful benefactor granted a favor to a client and expected something in return. The client was expected to be loyal to the benefactor, similar to the Godfather. Strings are attached to the gift. I do something for you; you do something for me.

Christianity removes the strings. The gift comes out of God's love for us. God chose Abraham out of love for humanity. Abraham didn't do anything when God first called to him in Ur of Chaldea. Mary didn't do anything when God chose her to be the mother of the Christ child. God is moved by nothing other than love to reach out to humans and enter into relationship with them. Even if humans stray from that relationship, God keeps trying to restore the relationship, as the father does when he sees the Prodigal Son return. Parents know all about this. No matter how many times your child screws up, you still love them.

Martin Marty, a church historian, says that grace, better than any other term, exemplifies the relationship of the divine character in action and the relation of the divine to human beings. For Christians, grace is what God looks like in action.

In today's Old Testament lesson, God hears the murmuring of the Israelites four different times. God notices the people. He understands that they are in need. To notice someone is to affirm that they are important to you. When you notice someone in need, you can't help but act on that need. God provides manna for their daily needs.

God has noticed each of us and called us into a new community, the church. Each of us can give testimony to God's call on our lives. Many of us stayed away from church for part of our adult lives and came back. God was not through with us.

We are all equal in the church; we are sisters and brothers in Christ. We also believe that all people are beloved children of God. Christians are no better and no worse than people who follow the other major faith traditions or people of no faith.

What are our wages? Evangelicals would say eternal salvation. If we redirect the focus to this world, our salvation consists of having our lives filled with meaning, having a deeper connection with God.

We are called to notice, just as God notices us. We are called to hear the cries for people who are suffering and act on them.

People of color are crying out today because they are tired of being invisible. Black men have been brutalized by the police for decades because white America has

not noticed. Even today, about 40% of white America does not hear the cries for racial equality. They talk instead about rioting in the cities. They continue to promote the stereotype of the black man as a criminal. They dismiss Black Lives Matter as a Marxist or a terrorist organization.

I believe we have a special call to reach out to our brothers and sisters in white churches who cannot hear the cries of people of color. Reach out to them in social media. Don't give up on them. Reach out to the police and the mayor's office. Make sure they hear the cries. Participating in the book study on *White Too Long* will give us other ideas about how to raise awareness of white supremacy. If you can't join us on Wednesday nights, you can read it on your own.

## **Conclusion**

Too many white Christians see a tension between justice and grace. They believe we live in a post-racial world, that there is no such thing as systemic racism, and that the acts of police violence against black men are isolated incidents. Justice for them means law and order, sending in the National Guard to end the protests. They grumble that African Americans are already getting justice.

The grace for us is that the scales have fallen, at least partly fallen, from our eyes. We can hear the cries of our black sisters and brothers and we can see white supremacy at work. The question for us is, will this grace necessarily lead to action?

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