

If I had to sum up every parable Jesus told about the kingdom of God, or as Matthew puts it, kingdom of heaven, I would say this: These parables are stories calling us to pay attention.

Jesus said, "Behold the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." And then to paraphrase Jesus, "Pay attention!! Glimpses of my kingdom are all around you. But you need to pay attention, or you will miss it."

These parables teach us that the kingdom of God is like many things. Jesus says the kingdom of God is like: A farmer sowing a seed, a man hunting for treasure, a woman kneading dough, a fisherman casting a net, a man forgiven a debt, and today we learn that the kingdom of God is like a generous man who owns a vineyard.

And our parable this morning reveals a supreme characteristic of God's kingdom. It reveals grace. We use that word grace a great deal but do we really think about what it means? If we really drill down and try to understand grace, we must admit, grace is hard to accept, hard to believe, and hard to receive. It shocks us because it is so not of this world. It frightens us because of what it does for sinners. It strikes at the heart of our sense of fairness and justice. It's scandalous.

So together let's look at Jesus' parable and learn about the nature of God's grace.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed (literally, when the landowner and the workers came to an agreement, they agreed that he would them) to pay them a denarius the day and sent them into his vineyard. Matthew 20: 1-2

This would have been a typical scene the days of Jesus. There were places where laborers would gather who were seeking work. They were unskilled at a trade and were likely at the bottom of the social economic scale. They worked from job to job, and there was no guarantee that of work what they were offered that day. They would gather at the first hour which would be 6:00 AM.

So, imagine yourself in the story. It's harvest time. The grapes are ripe. You show up in the village square, bright and early, dressed for work, lunch bag, and water bottle, and the owner comes by and without so much as an interview, a resume or a list of references, hires you and promises you a denarius for the day. The

landowner had offered you the same wage as a Roman Soldier would get. For those listening it meant a lot. No laborer would turn down a denarius for a day's work. It was generous!

The first hour flies by. The day is still cool. You work side by side with other hard workers, and you feel connected.

By about 8:00 AM you stop and stretch and look up from your row of vines. You notice that the sun is up and you know that harvest time in Palestine in the early fall, temperatures can reach 100 degrees or more. You have already spent your denarius in your head. Your family will eat well tonight, and some old bills will be paid.

"About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. (he found others who were without work) He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. vv. 3-5a

This time the owner doesn't promise a particular wage, but these workers trusted the landowner and knew that his wage would be fair.

So, it's now 9:00 AM, three hours later, and you notice a fresh batch of workers join, and although they don't know how to do the job as well and efficiently as you do, they learn quickly and it's not long before it feels like they have been there from the beginning with you.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' vv. 5b-6

"'Because no one has hired us,' (literally, we are workless. Jesus is saying these 5:00 workers were embarrassed, they were ashamed that they were not hired earlier.) 'He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' v. 7

So back to you working hard in the vineyard. At 9:00 you were glad to see a fresh batch of workers, but now you notice that another batch comes at noon, and another at 3:00 and the strangest of all another batch comes at 5:00, only one hour before quitting time.

And you feel what? Hmmm... a touch of resentment. They don't do it the way you do it. They don't understand the culture. They

are too eager. And you are sweaty, sore and tired and they are chirping away. No dirt under their fingernails, no sweat stains through their shirts. Who even shows up in the 11th hour into the shift? The heavy lifting is done, you have accomplished ten times what they could accomplish. You never attempt to talk to any of them. But you were thinking, our boss is an interesting guy... he not only seems to care about his vineyard, but this 11th hour hire seems to show that he cares about the unemployed. And you think, well if I was in charge, I wouldn't run my vineyard as he does.

At this point, the parable takes a dramatic turn. It's 6:00 PM, and it's time to get paid. There are two groups of workers: Those hired early who went to work after negotiating a generous wage, and those hired later who went to work trusting in what the owner feels will be fair and right.

"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.' v. 8

So, the foreman calls up the workers who just showed up last to collect their pay first. Wait, shouldn't you get paid first? First come first serve, right? That's the way it's always been done in business. And not surprising, Jesus turns it around, "last come, first served." Well, you are a little annoyed by that. And then you see what these late arrivals are paid.

"The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. vv.9-10

Though you were there first, and you worked the hardest, he has the gall to put in your hand a single denarius. The natural thought was if the owner gave them one, you should stand to gain a bundle. But you received the same pay. ALL the workers received the same pay.

Is this parable so far good news to you? If you work hard, if you are the early bird, you get the same wage as someone who only works an hour. Your reaction depends on whether you are used to being first or not. And it depends on how much you think you are owed.

Who can't understand that perspective? You work harder you should be rewarded more. You should be valued more. I was standing in the Safeway line, only one register was open. Eventually, the assistant manager came out to open up another check stand. Would he dare to say, "Hey all of you people and the end of the line, you are next. You people at the front of the line get to the back of the line." If that happened, I would certainly question whether to keep buying my food there. The longer I have been there, the more I have contributed, the more I expect. I earned it. I'm owed it. And owners of businesses get that.

But here is an owner who doesn't get it.

When they received it, they began to grumble (actually it's an imperfect tense, it says they continued to grumble) against the landowner. These 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.' vv. 11-12

Now think about what the late arrivals and the early birds think about their boss. To the late arrivals, he is the most generous boss ever. To the early birds, he is the stingiest boss ever because they worked longer and harder and felt they deserve more. In verse 13-14 the owner responds to the grumblings of the early birds.

"But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. (And he is right. At 6:00 AM it was a generous wage from a generous boss. But at 6:00 PM it's a scandal that must violate some labor law. He was entitled to more.) Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. vv. 13-14

This parable isn't about business practices. It's about something much more. The key is back in verse 8. It's the owner's instructions to his foreman, "pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first ones." This seems crazy to us. Some of you are thinking, "He could have avoided all the fuss and fuming had he had the common sense to start with those who came first. They'd be one their way, happy and none the wiser. And there would be a growing chorus of thanksgiving and praise for the generous owner as each group was paid."

But he flips it. He starts with the last guy and pays him in full in view of everyone. It's a process that can't help but create envy and bitterness.

But couldn't that be the point? This parable is an invitation to give thanks not for wages earned, but for the nature of the owner.

Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." vv. 15-16

The kingdom is about generosity on a scale that the world has never seen and cannot understand. The world's generosity is always about earning. It's always tied to a bonus or stock option. Behind all forms of worldly generosity is the idea that I actually have this coming to me. You tip your food server who bent over backward for you. You tip your driver for being on time and keeping you safe. That's how we think: I put in extra effort on the project and I expect to reap more of the profits. And that is what makes grace so scandalous.

This story is not about us. This is an owner-centered story. It's about his right to be generous to whoever he wants, his nature

to bring in the least among us, and his goodness, not ours. If we think of this parable as about us, about our rights about what we are owed, we will likely end up embittered.

Look at what he says, "Or are you envious because I am generous?" The word translated generous is good. It means inherently good. Goodness in and of itself. Goodness that doesn't ebb and flow based on circumstances, or mood or whether we picked grapes for 12 hours to earn his goodness. Jesus is saying, God is good. God is generous.

And the other word in verse 15 is translated as envious. It's a compound word *ophthalmos poneros*. Literally "the evil eye." Are you giving me the evil eye because I am generous and good?

Your evil eye reveals your soul. And it's a soul full of envy. Your envy blinds you to my goodness and generosity. If you miss seeing my generosity and goodness, it will embitter you instead of bring you joy. So, stop, look, listen, and learn and don't miss my grace to you.

Grace Reminds Us that God's Favor is a Gift

Remember the problem in this parable is not a stingy boss. The problem is the scandal of a gracious and loving owner of a vineyard. One of the most harmful sins we can commit as God's children is taking the grace of God given to us for granted.

Grace is a gift. Remember that God dispenses gifts not wages. In fact, Paul a champion of grace only mentions wages in the context of our sin earning the wages of death, but the gift of God we cannot earn is eternal life.

Like any gift, the only thing we can do with the offer of grace is to receive it gratefully.

Are we truly grateful for our salvation?

Notice that all the workers were grateful for what they were paid except for the very first ones. Do you see yourself as a 6:00 AM worker? Maybe you grew up in the church, been a Christian as long as you can remember and serve faithfully from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM. But understand, if you see yourself as a 6:00 AM worker and others as 5:00 workers this parable will always rub you the wrong way. The truth is we were all brought into the vineyard late in the day and paid generous wages we didn't deserve. If God gave us what we truly deserve, we wouldn't be here this morning.

What does it mean for some of us to get back to a grateful response for being invited into the vineyard and given the gift of life with Jesus for now and for eternity?

Grace Keeps Us from Thinking It's All About Us

Some of us here today have a nagging and painful feeling today. On the one hand, it's a feeling of superiority, of entitlement, of pride over what you have accomplished for Jesus. You are used

to being picked first. In fact, you likely have read this parable dozens of times and feel you know it so well.

What is our motivation for serving God?

This is the heart check so many of us need. It's isn't about us. It's about God. And he loves to give. I hope you can see that.

Others of us are here today, late in the game. Maybe self-conscious about how little you know about the Bible, maybe feel inferior to those you see around you. You don't feel useful and are shy to step up and serve. Remember it isn't about you. Serve our God full of grace who loved you so much, he came to you at 5:00. He didn't forget you; he called you to serve in his vineyard.

Grace Makes Us Equal to Everyone Else

The complaint in verse 12 fascinates me, "you have made them equal to us." They grumbled because they thought of themselves as superior. You can see the chain of events of the 6:00 workers. They coveted, and that led to complaining, which led to criticizing. If you struggle with coveting, with complaining, with criticizing, stop comparing yourself with others. In God's kingdom of grace, we are all equal. God has leveled the playing field.

Are we living our lives in such a way to be first in this life, or the next?

I looked through a list of celebrity deaths so far in 2018. Each of them were powerful and successful, whether music, business, TV or movies, or sports. On earth, they were among the first. Top dog, big cheese, the head of the pecking order, but in death none of that really matters. Eternity doesn't care about who is first in this life.

Are we jealous of the grace God gives others?

It's disturbing even offensive to us to consider that a dictator by the name of Manuel Noriega, or a serial killer by the name of Jeffery Dahmer might receive the gift of God's grace. Now only God knows what is true in a person's heart, but it's reported that both of these evil men repented and received Christ as their Savior from their sins in prison not long before they died.

It's scandalous to think that in God's kingdom of grace it doesn't matter how bad we were. How dare God extend his generous offer of 5:00 grace to anyone.

It's ironic, we all want God's grace for ourselves, but we don't always want to give it to others.

I read this week. "Be gracious to others. Your sin doesn't smell any better than mine does."

Grace Offers Us a Fresh Start

Do you think it's too late for you?

Do you think too much of your life has passed for God's grace to make a difference now? Do you think what you did earlier in your life will keep God from loving you now?

What were all those later workers doing at 6:00 AM? Were they irresponsible, were they lazy? Who knows? The scandal of grace is that it doesn't matter. The owner gave them what they needed. God will give you what you need no matter what time it is in your life.

The Christian life is a series of new beginnings. No one is first, and no one is last in heaven. You are not better than me, and I am not better than you. You are no worse than I am, and I'm no worse than you are. We're all covered by the grace of Christ.

At the end of Chapter 20, verse 16, he says, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

But back in chapter 19, verse 30 he says, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

He changes the order. The firsts and lasts and the lasts and the firsts blur together. It's as if Jesus is making a point that first and last don't matter so much in the kingdom of God. Grace isn't about finishing first. It isn't about finishing last. It isn't about counting at all. It isn't about keeping score. It's about having a do-over, a fresh start.

When we get to heaven, there will be no contest to see who was the most deserving of God's grace. 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 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 one of us will sing the loudest, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." Amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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