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# When life is hard and God seems...unfair

## Matthew 20:1-16

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### Introduction

Our concept of God has a great deal to do with the how we speak and live. Our outward acts are expressions and extensions of our heart. As the Bible says, “the mouth speaks from that which fills the heart”. In his book, “The knowledge of the Holy, A.W. Tozer started off by saying, “What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us” (p.1). This is made plain from the Bible as we will soon see. This also was made plain (painfully so) to me some years back through the life of a troubled man.

### The life of a troubled man

He was doing all the right things. Undeniably, he had blown it in the past. But, after each counseling session, he would quickly apply the gleaned insights to his marriage. His wife, on the other hand, was not responsive. He tried confession and asking for forgiveness. He tried to be more conscientious at bill paying time. He brought flowers home and would keep the garage organized and clean. And yet, she was not willing to give herself to him. Weeks on end, we shed tears together. We prayed together. We sought the Lord in Scripture together. And at the close of counseling sessions, I would exhort him to a life of faithfulness so as to please the Lord.

He came to me one morning unscheduled. His eyes were sharp. His body stiff. I asked him to have a seat. He stood. He said, "It doesn't work". Nothing was making sense to me and so I asked him to clarify. He said, "It doesn't work". After brief conversation, I realized what we were up against.

This confused and angry man in Montana had a concept of God that was unbiblical. When things did not go according to his expectations, he began talking about things not being fair (“it’s just not fair...it’s just not fair”). His twisted thinking saw God as a type of boss in the sky. "I obligate God to give more because I give more" was the attitude. He knew that the moral will of God for his marriage was reconciliation. He thought that by working obediently for God to restore the marriage God was obligated now to pay out His grace to restore his marriage. It’s just the way it works. God cannot do it alone. He needs my help. I give my help. And God is to uphold his end of the deal. This misconception of God lodged deep in this man’s heart. It fueled anger when it appeared that God was unfair. This anger became audible through complaining and would eventually terminate his marriage (and perhaps even his faith).

### Transition

This morning we conclude our three-part series titled *...when God seems*. Today we will notice in a passage of the Bible what’s going on *when life is hard and God seems unfair*. Our aim in this series has been to help you endure through difficulty by faith in all that God is for you in Christ Jesus. As we have looked at the topic of endurance we keep coming back to the subject of grace. We will see today that *if we do not have a proper view of God we will not enjoy His grace*. And if we do not enjoy grace we will decry “that’s unfair” and will increase in grumbling and complaining. This is a serious condition and can only be remedied by the enjoyment of grace. To this end let’s pray.

## The Parable

## Matthew 20:1-16

The passage for this morning is found in the first book of New Testament; the Gospel according to Matthew. We will notice a parable to help us enjoy grace in Matthew 20:1-16. Please open your Bibles to Matthew 20:1-16 as we listen to Jesus tell this parable.

*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’*

*And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.*

*And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 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 a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”*

First, to understand the meaning of the parable it is important to note the context of the parable. In Matthew 19 we come across Jesus teaching a rich ruler that only by grace do we enter the kingdom. He taught this amazing truth in a provocative way. Jesus told the man to go and sell all he had and giving all the proceeds to the poor he was to follow him. Peter listened to this and exposing his heart he replied, “[well] we have left everything to follow you. What then will we have?” (19:27). Clearly Peter was operating off of a merit basis. He imagined a sort of compensation plan God gives whereby we put in more labor and we get out more benefits.

Jesus rebukes this theology stating a staggering promise. In essence, 19:29 says that God makes up for every "loss" a hundred-fold! We must understand that God is not doling out paychecks of blessings based upon what we have done. Now is there hard work to be done at home, in the local church and in our neighborhoods? Are we called out of laziness and into labors of love? Do we hear messages from the Bible calling us to sacrifice even unto death? Yes, beloved, this IS following Christ (cf. 10:24-39; 13:44; 16:24ff). But as you see with the rich young man: *the way into the Kingdom is the way of grace so also we are to see in this parable that the way to continue in the Kingdom is the way of grace.* (cf. Gal.3:1-9)

Peter, as it were, began looking at himself and then looking around at others. His understanding of God was skewed. Peter was wondering whether God would "pay" him enough for his work. The apostle was losing his bearings under the "burden of the day and the scorching heat" (cf. 20:12). Comparing apostolic sacrifice with anything else showed Peter that they really sacrificed. And now with this "mound of ministry-merit" he then was sensing that they were deserving of "a freight of favor".

To free Peter from a twisted thought that God's blessing is based upon our giving (i.e. a compensation plan), Jesus tells this parable. Perhaps today He tells this parable for your sake.

Now as you listened to the parable read it may have struck many of you as truly unfair. In the parable, the owner went out to hire workers. He hired some at 6am, some at 9am, some at noon, some at 3pm and lastly he hired some at 5pm. He then called them in from the vineyard to receive their wages at 6pm. The last group came first and received one denarius (wages for a day's work). Each additional group came and got the same. The last group who was the first group to start the day came expecting more than what they previously agreed on. They were surprised and angry that they got what they agreed upon. They thought that they should get more due to the greater amount of work they did.

In the strict context of labor relations they may have a point. When an employer wants to get a big job done and knows he does not have the wherewithal to achieve the goal he needs help. He hires workers. And the workers are to be paid for the work they do. If some employees work a 25 hr. work week and others work overtime there should be unequal paychecks given out. An employee should be paid in proportion to his/her work. That's fine for managing employment situations. But Jesus is not teaching on labor relations. He is teaching on God's grace and what goes wrong when we are not enjoying His grace.

When life is hard and God seems unfair what do we need? For Peter, he needed the point of the parable. He needed his understanding of God corrected before he could enjoy His grace.

## The Point

Here is the point of the parable. God's giving is always and vastly out of proportion to our efforts. His grace is full, first-class and forever. We will never stop enjoying God's grace by getting to the end of it or by running out of time. It is premium. It is permanent. It is most pleasurable.

We see this point developed in v16-17 as we note the owner's reply to the complainers. In essence, he said, I am just. I am sovereign. I am generous. Because he is just they should take what's theirs and go. Because he is generous they should not be envious.

From this parable, you can see can't you that there is no room in the kingdom of heaven for those who resent God's generosity in someone else's life. It's as though they enjoyed the owner's generosity when it was on them. But when the owner wanted to be generous to others they grumbled and decried, "unfair". As Craig Blomberg in his commentary said, "Little seems more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals".

## The Principles

What are we to hear this morning from this passage? How are we to see God in light of this parable? Let's tease out some principles from this parable in order to see what Jesus teaches us about the grace of God. As we pay attention to the point of the passage we see two important truths about God's grace. We will then end this morning's message by noticing what hinders the enjoyment of that grace.

### **God's grace is free (v.7 = "Because no one hired us")**

The first aspect of grace we come to in this parable can be deduced from v7. *God's grace is free.*

Listen again as I read v6-7. "and about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, "why do you stand here idle all day?" They said to him, "because no one has hired us". He said to them, "you go into the vineyard too".

In the custom of the day migrant workers or day to day laborers would get up early in the morning and go to the market place; the hub of the town and wait for farmers to come and hopefully hire them for a day's work. In our parable with only one hour of the working day left the farmer hires yet one more group. Why? Was it due to too many grapes and not enough workers? Was the farmer concerned that the grapes would spoil on the vine if he did not get more help?

Are we to understand the farmer as having needs and the workers as meeting those needs? OR is this about the generosity of the farmer and the hopelessness of the workers?

(Preach on God as all-glorious and thus has no inner-deficiencies (shortcomings, lack) forcing Him to do something He does not want to do. He delights to show forth His resourcefulness (generosity) to and through “throw-aways”)

And so we note the first aspect of grace. It is free.

### **God's grace is sovereign (v.15 = “I wish to give what is my own”)**

The second truth about grace is found in v15. Take a listen to the farmer's response to a whiny worker as I read v13-15. “But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity”?

Here we notice resentment from the hard-working, sweaty, faithful employee. It's not fair, he says, to be treated as an equal to this loser. I should be given much more (or he should be given much less). Either way, what you do with what you own is not right. You should be stopped from doing what you do. You should give me more preferably or at least give him less.

Can the farmer's generosity be governed by this first worker? Should the farmer's desire to help the overlooked be stopped? The take away for us here in the parable is to sense the second aspect of grace found in v15. *God's grace is sovereign.*

(Preach on God as all-glorious and thus has no rivals or holdups which would keep Him from doing what He pleases)

### **But with an attitude of comparing or deserving we cannot enjoy it (v.12 = ...you have made them equal to us [comparing] who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day [deserving])**

Now we come to the point in the message where we explore why the first group does not enjoy God's generosity. It's time now to expose when they [and we] do not enjoy grace. Look with me at v12 and notice the attitude reflected in this verse. Backing up to verse 11 we read “and on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 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’”.

The last group in responding to the generosity of the farmer exposed themselves. The reader is now able to understand why the first group was not able to enjoy the grace of the owner. The flow of the parable's point looks like this:

God's grace is free. God's grace is sovereign. But with an attitude of comparing or deserving we cannot enjoy it.

#### **You made them equal to us**

The first group looked around and saw the throw-aways. Then they looked at themselves; their bronze, buff bodies and said snidely, “you made them equal TO US”. Notice the prideful comparison drawn up in v12. With this type of view of self one cannot view God accurately and one cannot enjoy his grace.

## Who have borne the burden...of the day

The first group also betrays an attitude of deserving. Here how they describe their efforts. They are the ones who have borne the burden of the day. They are the ones who have held up under the scorching heat. Therefore, they are the ones who should be favored over against the nobodies.

(Preach on the heinous view of God that would belittle him and exalt self)

God's grace is the basis for all blessings. To think we earn them is to have an inaccurate view of both God and self.

## Conclusion

To wrap up the message and rest it on your hearts...

here are some closing questions for your consideration *when life is hard and God seems unfair.*

- Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation?
  - Are you trying to work your way into heaven?
  - Are you treasuring something on earth more than Christ in heaven?
- Do you view yourself as a “somebody”?
  - Does God need you to get His mission done?
  - Does God recognize your worth in the completion of his mission?
  - Do you complain frequently?
  - Do you compare yourself with others often and come out lookin' good?
  - Do you deserve to be treated better due to all you've done?
  - If so then...
    - Repent of your high view of yourself
    - Repents of your low view of God
- Do you view yourself as a “nobody”?
  - Do you feel like a throw-away?
    - Do you know of your sin?
    - Do you know you possess nothing to attract God's favor?
    - Do you know that apart from God's free grace you are a goner?
    - Then...
      - rest in His sovereignty
      - relish His free grace
      - and readily carry out His will.