

## **NEW TRUTH FROM AN OLD STORY 9**

### **“Fair, or God’s Grace: The Vineyard Workers”**

Susan and I enjoyed a good movie while on vacation last week. The Cinderella Man is the real life story of James Braddock, a hard luck boxer who fights to feed his family. He eventually earns a title fight against the reigning heavyweight champ, and... I'll not spoil the ending. The movie is set in the late 1920's and 1930's, and any of you who were alive then, know exactly what was going on. The Great Depression was ravaging this country, and in numerous scenes, James Braddock joined the throng of men seeking daily work at the docks in New York City. Those scenes of workers being rejected day after day reminded me of this morning's text, commonly called the parable of the Vineyard Workers, let's give a listen:

*<sup>1</sup>"For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the owner of an estate who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work.*

*<sup>3</sup>"At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. <sup>4</sup>So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. <sup>5</sup>At noon and again around three o'clock he did the same thing. <sup>6</sup>At five o'clock that evening he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?'*

*<sup>7</sup>"They replied, 'Because no one hired us.'*

*"The owner of the estate told them, 'Then go on out and join the others in my vineyard.'*

*<sup>8</sup>"That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. <sup>9</sup>When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. <sup>10</sup>When those hired earlier came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage. <sup>11</sup>When they received their pay, they protested, <sup>12</sup>'Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.'*

*<sup>13</sup>"He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? <sup>14</sup>Take it and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. <sup>15</sup>Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be angry because I am kind?'*

*<sup>16</sup>"And so it is, that many who are first now will be last then; and those who are last now will be first then." Matthew 20: 1-16*

What's your initial reaction to this story?...IT'S NOT FAIR, comes quickly to my mind! It's not fair! But it does lead us to the question of the day: What would you prefer; fair, or grace? That's the choice we'll explore today, but first the context.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew mentions that a wealthy young man came to Jesus seeking how he might get to heaven. Jesus tells him to obey the commandments. He says he's done that, all his life, what else is there to do? Jesus then cuts to the heart of the matter, and tells the young man to sell his significant wealth and give his belongings to the poor. This was too much, and the young man slinks away in his BMW. The disciples can't figure this out, and ask how can anyone get to heaven, especially rich people? Jesus responds, 'with humans it seems, in fact is, impossible, but with God, everything is possible', and then he launches into this morning's text, the story of the Vineyard Workers. Let's just remember the context is who can and how to, get to heaven. There are four interesting points in today's lesson I want to explore, and as our question reminds us, they all have to do with Grace. Which do you prefer, FAIR, or GRACE? Let's begin.

### **1. GRACE REMINDS US THAT GOD'S FAVOR IS A GIFT.**

Remember the "problem" in this text. It is not the injustice of a mean and cruel landowner. The problem is the scandal created by the generous act of a gracious and loving farmer. In verse 15 the farmer cuts to the core of the issue when he asks the early hired workers this question, "Are you envious because I am generous?" One of the most harmful sins that we can commit as God's children is the taking of God's grace for granted.

John MacArthur puts it this way: "The charge of unfairness was not grounded in a love for justice but in the selfish assumption that the extra pay they wanted, was pay they deserved."

It's so easy to take grace for granted. We love God's grace when we are in need, when we are caught with our hand in the cookie jar, when we are discovered in our secret sin, we love God's grace then. But we are not quite so 'generous' when we observe others in need of God's grace. When we are in trouble, we hope God will grade on a curve, when others are in trouble, we hope God will give them what they deserve.

Many of us identify with the employees who put in a full day's work, rather than the add-ons at the end of the day. We like to think of ourselves as responsible workers and the employer's strange behavior baffles us. But, let's not miss the point of the story: God dispenses gifts, not wages.

If it's a wage that we want from God, the Bible says that our salary is already figured out for us. If we want to be rewarded for our merit, if we want to be compensated for our work, then Romans 6:23 spells out how we will be paid: *"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 offers us something far better than just compensation: *"but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord."*

God's favor is a gift. Let me mention two truths that can radically transform your thinking and your way of living. Here they are:

There is nothing you can do to make God love you more.

There is nothing you can do to make God love you less.

Like a gift, the only thing we can do with grace...is to receive it.

## **2. GRACE KEEPS US FROM LOOKING DOWN ON OURSELVES.**

How many of you have ever struggled with feelings of incompetence? Have you ever experienced discontentment? Have you ever wished for a greater gift or a more important ministry? Have you ever felt inferior to others in the church or at your job, and thus less important?

Think with me for a minute 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 and that they probably wouldn't be able to buy any food for dinner that night. All day long they were passed over like a little boy chosen last for kick ball. Our natural and initial reaction to these people not being hired, sitting all day in the marketplace, is that they are what: LAZY; but there is no indication of such, they just simply were not chosen. We should look on them with compassion, not resentment. We tend to look down on these unemployed workers as if it was their own fault, and maybe it wasn't!

Maybe they represent all of us who feel left out, all those who are left unchosen, all those who have missed out, not on a job, but on life, because they were never invited or hired. 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, the least skilled, the outcasts and downtrodden. Who in their right mind would pick them?

These workers really do represent each one of us. When you think about it, what do we have to offer the Lord? Does He need our intellect? Does He need our strength? Does He need our money? Does He need our good deeds? No. Let our confidence and joy in this life be based not on what we have or do not have; or on what we do, or don't do. Rather, our confidence is on WHOM we have! For on the last day, when we stand before our Savior there will be no distinctions between preachers and taxi drivers, there will be no distinction between statesmen and housemaids, there will be no distinction between presidents or bartenders.

No one is worthier than another to receive salvation because we're all unworthy. Not worthless, but unworthy. Grace, God's grace reminds us that we dare not look down on ourselves, for we are of immeasurable value to the one who hand crafted us!

### **3. GRACE MAKES US EQUAL TO EVERYONE ELSE.**

The workers' complaint in verse 12 fascinates me; and though the NLT misses it, most of the others don't. "*You have made them equal to us.*" The all-day workers don't complain about their wages because they knew their pay was generous. They're upset because they wanted to be superior; they assumed they would be getting more.

The word "grumble" appears here in the imperfect tense, which means that they complained not just once, but were in a constant state of grumbling. This helps us see what kind of workers they really were. 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."

In other words, they were not only dissatisfied with what they themselves had received; they were also envious of what had been given to the others. They wanted fair, while the others received grace. 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 a lot more.

There's a part of us that wants God to give us grades so that we can compare ourselves with other people. And if the truth were known, many of us think God has given us an "A" while others are barely passing the class. Do you put yourself above other people? Be careful!

I want you to notice a tragic chain of events that took place in the hearts of these workers. They started by comparing themselves with others. This then led to coveting, they coveted more than they deserved, more than they had agreed upon. Which led to complaining, which led ultimately to criticizing. When we struggle with coveting, complaining and criticizing, we ought first look to stop comparing ourselves to others, which is often at the heart of our criticism, if we'd consider it honestly. God declares that in the economy of grace, we are all equal.

Romans 12:3 challenges us to not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to. Friends, let's stop being so hard on other people. Stop looking for things that don't seem fair. Refuse to criticize. It's ironic, isn't it? We want grace for ourselves, but we don't always give it to others. Grace applied to us always seems good and nice and right but grace given to others, often, frankly, disturbs us; it just doesn't seem fair.

Be gracious with others. Cut them some slack. Your sin doesn't smell any better than mine does. It really doesn't. Let's treat 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 really a series of new beginnings. That's what grace is all about. No one is first, and no one is last. I'm not better than you and you're no better than me. You're no worse than I am and I'm no worse than you are. We're all covered by the grace of Christ.

That's why I think Jesus used such radical language in verse 16 about the first and the last. Notice what He said, "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."

He changes the order, doesn't He? The first and the lasts, lasts and firsts all blur together. It's as if Jesus is trying to make the point that first and last don't matter any more in the kingdom of God. Grace is not about finishing first. It is not 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 want it.

Do you want a fresh start today? Do you need a new beginning? You can have one!

How do you find God's grace? Just ask for it. That's all. It's really 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. It's never too late. Though your sins are as scarlet, God says they will be white as snow.

This is the miracle, the wonder, the scandal, and the shock of God's grace. It truly is "out of this world" for no one in this world would have thought of something like this. Here is good news for sinners. Free Grace! Free Grace! Free Grace! Shout it, sing it, tell it, and share it. And above all else, believe it, for in believing, you will be saved.

I was fortunate, so magnificently fortunate to become a follower of Jesus at an early age; 16. I was hired early in the morning, at the beginning of life's day. So it is that I have been blessed through all my life with a sense of life's purpose, value, and beauty. How dare I, then, be bitter about those who have waited all day in the marketplace, if at the end of the journey they are blessed with an eternity as good as mine? Shall I envy those who have gone through life with no clear goal, no consuming passion beyond their own belly, battling their way through disillusionment, boredom, and despair, because life hasn't hired them?

To the contrary! When I stand before the Great Landowner as he passes out the silver pieces of eternity, I might well take mine and say, 'Give part of this to that poor soul who didn't come to faith in Christ until he was 60 years old...and to that woman who became a believer only when she was dying. I've been employed all my days; have been blessed by a purpose and a passion, even a communion with God. Give them part of my reward, because they stood in the marketplace for so long, because no one invited them to be hired, while my life was filled with purpose.

For now, let us look around the marketplace of our lives and see if perhaps, we might lead some soul waiting there to a place of employment. Let us go to life's marketplace, in Christ's name, and say, "God wants to hire you! I speak as one of his hiring agents. Stand idle no longer! There is meaning to be had in this life! Come quickly to the vineyard of God's will!"

When we get to heaven, there will be no contest to see who was the most deserving of God's grace...because no one deserves it. It is not fair...thank God! 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. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." Shall we practice???

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