

# Septuagesima - Matthew 20:1-16

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## Matthew 20:1-16

“Indeed the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing to pay the workers a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>He also went out about the third hour and saw others standing unemployed in the marketplace. <sup>4</sup>To these he said, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup>Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same thing. <sup>6</sup>When he went out about the eleventh hour, he found others standing unemployed. He said to them, ‘Why have you stood here all day unemployed?’ <sup>7</sup>“They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ “He told them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup>When it was evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last group and ending with the first.’ <sup>9</sup>“When those who were hired around the eleventh hour came, they each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup>When those who were hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But they each received a denarius too. <sup>11</sup>After they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner: <sup>12</sup>“Those who were last worked one hour, and you made them equal to us who have endured the burden of the day and the scorching heat!” <sup>13</sup>“But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not make an agreement with me for a denarius?’ <sup>14</sup>Take what is yours and go. I want to give to the last one hired the same as I also gave to you. <sup>15</sup>Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ <sup>16</sup>In the same way, the last will be first, and the first, last.”

## Grace: Not Earned But Received

That’s not fair! If I were to ask you to make a list of the most unfair things you’ve ever heard or experienced, what would they be? Would you think of political things? The unfairness with which it seems some groups are treated? Would you think of a personal experience, or a person? Perhaps at your job; your boss didn’t treat you with the respect you thought you deserved? Maybe at school, you thought you deserved a better grade than what you got.

Unfairness is usually always bad. Bad because we look at it from only one perspective, ours. And from our point of view, either we aren’t getting what we deserve or someone else is getting more than what they’ve worked for, what they deserve.

But I’ll guess that as you formulated in your mind a list of unfair things, one thing that was *not* in your list was God’s grace.

Unfairness is bad, but God is good, right? So since God is good, His grace must also be good and the opposite of unfair. God must be fair and therefore, good.

But the parable Jesus’ told in our Gospel this morning should flip our perspective on God’s grace. So what is grace? In the parable, the owner of the vineyard is called “good,” ἀγαθός, or generous. The parable illustrates God’s generosity in His grace, through the owner’s generosity with His money.

An owner of a Vineyard goes out early in the morning to hire people to work in His vineyard. He finds some and agrees to pay them a denarius a day - basically a fair amount for a full day’s worth of work. Then He goes out at the third hour, the sixth hour, and the ninth hour and does the same thing. He wants people to work in His vineyard. But then He goes out one more time

at the 11th hour, 5:00. He sees some people who have literally been standing around all day doing nothing. He asks them why they are still unemployed, and they respond "because no one hired us." The implication is that these people were truly lazy and so no one wanted to hire them, and they're essentially blaming people who didn't hire them for their current situation. But this Vineyard Owner tells these lazy men to go work in His vineyard, and that He'll "give them whatever is right." So these men, on top of their laziness, are only working for less than an hour.

What would you do if you were the Vineyard Owner? I know what I would do: I'd make them work for their pay. If they want to get paid, they're going to have to work. Maybe I'd even make them work extra. Or I'd make them come back the next day for their pay, just to make sure they were being honest and hardworking.

But the Owner of the Vineyard does something that should infuriate us. He starts with the last and gives them a denarius - a full days wages! Then he goes to those hired at the 9th hour and He gives them a denarius, and the 6th, and the 3rd, all the way to ones who were hired first. Each got the same wage.

"That's not fair!" That's what the ones who were hired first think. And that's what we think too. And we're absolutely right. It's not fair. But Jesus is teaching us that this the essence of grace. Grace is not deserved, but given. Everything God does is counter to the world's ways, including God's grace. God is generous.

We like to live by mottos like "You get what you deserve!" "You reap what you sow!" or "Karma." And we want to insert our mottos into God's Word. We want to program God to work how we want Him to work. We want God to give us what we deserve, because from our point of view, we're pretty good and we deserve it.

As a pastor, I sometimes get people coming to me wanting to justify their actions or attitudes. They're feeling maybe a little guilty over something they did and they want me to tell them that they "aren't so bad." For instance, someone once mentioned to me people who stole from him something like 50 years ago, and he said, "I still am upset over what they did, it wasn't right, I would never do that. I pray to God all the time that they get what they deserve" - implying they deserved hell. I then asked him what he thought *he* deserved, and he said "heaven." I asked why and he said, "well, because I've been a good person, I go to church and I know the Ten Commandments." I then went through a list of sinners and asked what he thought each deserved. Someone who steals, someone who lies, someone who commits adultery, someone who murders. They all deserve hell of course. And then we looked at this parable and Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

And then we went through Scripture, and I showed him the accounts of numerous sinners. The Apostle Matthew was a Tax Collector; Tax Collectors were notorious for stealing. King David was the most powerful man in Israel, who lied over and over to cover up his sin. The Apostle Peter rejected Jesus and lied about it. Paul, before He was called to be an Apostle, murdered Christians just for being Christians. And then I asked them what they deserved. "Well, hell, of course." But I could see the confusion in his eyes - these are the "saints" of the Bible - how could they have done these terrible things, and yet still be called by God to heaven? It's not fair.

It's not. But that's God's grace. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24). Scripture is full of examples of God's grace. In our Old Testament lesson we saw how God called Jeremiah even before he was conceived. Jeremiah was one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, someone to speak on God's behalf to the people. That's a high position. But it had nothing to do with Jeremiah - he hadn't even been born yet.

In our Epistle we were reminded of the Exodus when God called His chosen nation of Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea to the Promised Land. They had every blessing from God. They were baptized as Paul says, through the Red Sea. They had been slaves on one side of the Red Sea in Egypt, but came through the water to freedom on the other side. God gave them food from heaven to eat and drink. He was there with them visibly in the pillar of cloud. And yet, they rejected Him over and over and over. And still, God never stopped showing them His grace.

You can turn to just about any page in Scripture and find an example of God not being fair, but being generous; showing or promising His grace because of Christ.

And you know what else isn't fair? Baptism. I'll bet this was another thing you didn't put down in your mental list of unfair things you've witnessed. But if there's ever a picture of God not being fair, but being generous and giving his grace, this is it: the baptism of an infant.

Koren did nothing to deserve God's grace. He couldn't. And yet, that doesn't stop God from looking on him with His grace. Now we may think, 'well he's just an infant, he's perfect, he doesn't need God's grace yet.' But he does. Scripture says "Certainly, I was guilty when I was born. I was sinful when my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). Koren isn't perfect. He's is a sinner and deserves God's punishment, which is exactly why he needed baptism. "Baptism effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, just as the words and promises of God declare." Koren needed God's grace. God gave it and continues to give it, even now, through the Gospel.

God's grace isn't given to good people. It's given to sinners. It's given to infants who didn't do anything to earn it and its given to lazy old sinners who don't deserve it.

God gives us His grace not because we are good, but because He is. Jesus was the only person to keep God's Law perfectly. He was truly good. He truly earned and deserved God's grace. But He didn't keep it for Himself, instead, He gave it to us. Jesus died on the cross with our sins to earn that grace once and for all for us. Because of Jesus, God's perspective on us is different.

I've used this illustration before in some youth group outings. People who wear sunglasses all the time have just different attitude. God's grace is like He is putting on sunglasses and instead of seeing you - He sees Jesus. He sees Jesus' perfect life and innocent death. God's grace is an attitude He has toward you. It should be one of wrath and punishment, because that's what you and I deserve. But it's not. It's an attitude of love and forgiveness. Because of Jesus, He doesn't make us pay for our sins, but declares them forgiven, because Jesus already has.

That's the true beauty of God's grace. Grace doesn't depend on you. It doesn't depend on when you believed, whether you were baptized a week after you were born, or came to believe in Jesus on your deathbed. Grace doesn't depend on how good or bad your condition is or how good or bad you've been. Grace is *purely* based on the giver, not the receiver.

That's why the Owner of the Vineyard was good. He's not good because he's fair. He's good because he has grace. So is God. God shows His grace in the best way possible:

"God loved the world, in this way: that He gave His only begotten Son to die for the world" (John 3:16). Jesus died on the cross. He opened heaven. And God doesn't stop there. He doesn't make you work to get it. He brings it to you. He gives it to you. In His Word, He gives you faith to trust this grace is real. In Baptism, He clothes you with Jesus' righteousness. In the Lord's Supper, He gives you forgiveness, life, and salvation; He places on your lips the assurance that your sins are forgiven and that you are right with Him. That's grace that you can actually see, touch, and taste.

If we think we want from God what we deserve, we need a change of perspective on God's grace. Because that's what God has done for us. God's perspective, His attitude toward us is different because of Jesus. He doesn't give us what we deserved, no He gives us what Jesus deserved.

From beginning to end, from Jesus' dying on the cross, to God's calling of us in His Word, and His choosing of us by the Holy Spirit in the means of grace, grace is entirely God's work. No, it's not something we deserve, but we've received it. Grace is the gift of God, given to us freely, because of what Christ has done.

To God alone be Glory. Amen.