

# Grace

## Stories Jesus Told: Part 1

### Discussion Questions

- In what areas of your life (like work, family, or friendships) do you find yourself "keeping score" or feeling like things aren't fair?
- When you look closely at this story, what does it reveal about your own secret attitudes regarding rewards and entitlement?
- The longer we follow Jesus, the easier it is to think God "owes" us for our service. What are some warning signs that we are starting to take His grace for granted?
- Why do you think Jesus told a story where the hardest workers get paid the exact same as the latecomers? Why does this bother us so much?
- The landowner kept going back to hire the people who were left behind. What does this tell us about God's heart for those who feel forgotten or passed over?
- If God were completely "fair," we would receive punishment for our sins instead of forgiveness. How does remembering this change your perspective when life gets hard?
- Grace reminds us that we can't earn our salvation. What is one practical way you can keep yourself "amazed by grace" so that pride doesn't creep in?
- The workers were happy with their pay until they compared themselves to others. How has comparing your life to someone else's stolen your joy recently?
- Have you ever felt resentful when someone who doesn't follow God seems to get all the blessings? How can we use the gospel to fight that feeling?
- Gratitude should make us want to share God's grace, not hoard it. Who is someone in your life you can pray for or share God's love with this week?

## Summary

If you spend time with a group of kids, more often than not, you'll hear the common refrain, "That's not fair!"

As adults, we never truly outgrow this tendency; we simply internalize it more. Deep down, we frequently find ourselves looking at life's circumstances and thinking the exact same thing.

## The Context: Why Jesus Told the Parable

In Matthew chapter 20, Jesus addresses this very human struggle through a profound story. Parables are far more than simple stories with moral lessons. They function in three distinct ways:

- **A Window:** They give us a glimpse into what the kingdom of God is like.
- **A Mirror:** They expose what is truly going on inside our own hearts.
- **A Door:** They invite us directly into transformation.

This particular parable lands right in the middle of a very real tension in Matthew's Gospel. Just before this, a wealthy, moral, and influential young ruler approached Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus instructed him to sell his possessions and follow Him, the man walked away sad, unwilling to give up his extreme wealth to follow Jesus. The disciples were completely stunned—if someone who seemingly had it all together could not enter God's kingdom, who could?

Prompted by this, Peter spoke up and made a statement: "We've left everything to follow You. What then will there be for us?". While Jesus acknowledged that there is indeed a future reward and responsibilities based on our faithfulness in this life, He told a story to guard Peter—and us—from a subtle danger.

The longer we follow Jesus, the easier it becomes to move from being amazed by grace to assuming we have somehow earned God's favor.

When we begin to think our sacrifice, service, faithfulness, or years of following Jesus put God in our debt, pride grows, comparison creeps in, and gratitude begins to shrink. To counteract this, Jesus shares a story reminding us that the kingdom of God does not operate on what we earn; it operates entirely on grace.

## Matthew 20:1–16

The narrative details the actions of an unusual landowner working his way through hiring day laborers for his vineyard.

### The Early Morning Hires (6:00 AM)

The story begins during the short, intense grape harvest season in late September. This

demanding season is comparable to major shipping companies like UPS or FedEx hiring temporary workers to handle the increased demand of the Christmas rush. At 6:00 AM, a wealthy landowner goes to the marketplace to hire day laborers who have no steady jobs or guaranteed income. He agrees to pay them a denarius for a standard 12-hour workday (6:00 AM to 6:00 PM). A denarius was a good, generous wage for day laborers, and the workers gladly accepted the deal and headed into the vineyard.

### **The Mid-Day Hires (9:00 AM, 12:00 PM, and 3:00 PM)**

Three hours later, at 9:00 AM, the landowner returns to the marketplace and sees more workers standing there doing nothing. He invites them to work but handles the compensation differently: instead of a specified amount, he simply says, "I will pay you whatever is right." Trusting the character of the landowner, they accept. The landowner repeats this process again at noon and at 3:00 PM. This demonstrates highly unusual behavior; rather than just focusing on getting the work done, he seems equally concerned about the workers themselves, looking for people who have been overlooked and left behind.

### **The Last-Minute Hires (5:00 PM)**

Most surprising of all, at 5:00 PM—with only one single hour left in the workday—the landowner goes back a fifth time. He finds another group standing around and asks why they have been standing there all day long doing nothing. They reply, "Because no one has hired us". These men were not lazy; they had waited all day long, watching others get selected while they remained overlooked and passed by. The landowner sends them into the vineyard as well.

### **Payday: Shattering Expectations**

At 6:00 PM, quitting time arrives. Day laborers relied on immediate daily payments to survive, as there was no direct deposit or bi-monthly paycheck. The landowner instructs his foreman to gather the workers to distribute their wages, specifically ordering him to start with the last ones hired and finish with the first.

The men who only worked for one hour step up to the front, and to everyone's astonishment, they receive a full denarius—a complete day's wage. Seeing this, the workers at the back of the line who started at 6:00 AM begin doing the math in their heads. They assume that if one hour of work equals a denarius, they might receive twelve denarii for their twelve hours of labor.

However, when the first group steps up, each man is handed exactly one denarius. They are floored and immediately begin grumbling against the landowner. They complain:

"These who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

From a human standpoint, their frustration is completely understandable. They worked twelve long hours in the blazing heat and carried the burden of the labor, while the latecomers barely broke a sweat, yet both groups received the exact same pay.

### **The Landowner's Response**

The landowner does not alter the pay rate. Instead, he addresses one of them: “I am not being unfair to you, friend. 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. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

The landowner is completely innocent of injustice; he did precisely what he promised. The issue isn't fairness; the issue is generosity. The first group of workers is experiencing jealousy not because they were treated badly, but because someone else was treated generously. Jesus concludes the story with a powerful summary: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Ultimately, both groups end up in the same place and receive the same blessing from the landowner.

## **The Main Point: Grace is Not Fair**

If your initial reaction to this story is indignation on behalf of the early morning workers, you are feeling exactly what Jesus intended. Jesus deliberately told this story in a way that bothers and shocks us. He wants us to feel the tension and wrestle with it because this parable is not ultimately about wages—it is about grace.

**Grace is inherently unfair.** Justice is what is fair. If God dealt with us strictly according to fairness, every single one of us would receive exactly what our sins deserve: justice for our sin. As the New Testament book of Romans states, “The wages of sin... is death”—which means physical death and the spiritual death of eternal separation from the goodness of God.

Thankfully, the good news of the gospel is that God does not treat us with fairness; He treats us with grace. As that same verse in Romans continues, “the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”. We receive an eternal life we did not earn and do not deserve, made possible solely because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The big takeaway is clear: **Grace is not fair, and that is a very good thing.**

## **Two Core Implications of Grace for Everyday Life**

How should this understanding of radical grace shape the way we view ourselves, view others, and follow Jesus in everyday life? While there are usually more, we will focus on two foundational implications from this parable:

### **1. Grace Removes Pride and Humbles Us**

The Bible paints a stark picture of our reality apart from Christ: we were dead in our trespasses and sins, blind to the things of God, completely lost, and even our righteousness was like filthy rags. But through grace, a beautiful gospel reality occurs:

- Though we were dead, He made us alive.
- Though we were blind, He gave us sight.
- Though we were lost, He brought us home.
- Though our own righteousness was like filthy rags, He has clothed us in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

God is the one who initiates this, continually returning to the marketplace time and

time again to invite us into His vineyard, which is His kingdom. We who are completely unworthy should be permanently amazed by this grace.

Yet, the longer we follow Jesus, the easier it is for that amazingness to fade and for us to act like those first-hour workers. They believed they deserved more because they had worked longer and endured the heat of the day. Pride subtly shifts our focus from what God has given to what we think we have earned. It sounds reasonable at first—*"I've been faithful, I've served, I've sacrificed"*—but pride creeps in when we believe those things place God in our debt or mean bad things shouldn't happen to us. Jesus reminds us that nobody stands before God on merit; we enter a relationship with Him because of His grace alone, which should humble us and crush our pride.

## **2. Grace Removes Comparison and Leads to Gratitude**

The first group of workers was perfectly content with their situation until they started looking around and comparing. As long as they focused on their own work, they were fine. But the moment the paychecks started getting handed out and they compared, their joy disappeared. Comparison shifts your attention from what God has done for you to what He has done for someone else, allowing grumbling and frustration to take root.

We might start out genuinely grateful for salvation, forgiveness, and eternal life, but when life doesn't go the way we expected, or when we look online and see the career paths, family situations, or blessings of others, jealousy creeps in. Comparison whispers: *"Why them? Why not me? Why does their life seem better than mine?"* It becomes even more difficult when we are hurting or discouraged and observe people who don't even follow Jesus living successful, thriving lives.

There is a story of a faithful Christian man walking through serious health issues who, in a low moment, came across a man online who was living an ungodly life and was unfaithful in his marriage. Yet, this other man's career was thriving and money was coming in. Bitterness, confusion, and jealousy rose up inside the sick man, prompting him to ask: *"God, why does it seem like he's being blessed while I'm walking through this?"* That is the powerful voice of comparison shifting focus away from what God has given.

The truth is this: if God never gave us anything else beyond salvation, we have already received more than we deserve. What we earned was death; what God gave us was eternal life. Reflecting on Christ's perfect life, sacrificial death on the cross, and victorious resurrection naturally turns our response into worship, praise, and profound gratitude.

Furthermore, true gratitude moves us past our own stories to celebrate when someone else receives grace and comes to faith. Instead of comparing or questioning God's generosity, we rejoice in it. Just as the landowner repeatedly returned to the marketplace to bring more people in, our gratitude motivates us to keep serving, giving, praying, and sharing the gospel to help others find and follow Jesus too.

## Reflection: Responding to Grace

Take a moment to reflect on the state of your own heart:

- Are you still genuinely amazed by the grace you've received, or has the wonder faded?
- Is there any creeping pride or toxic comparison that you need to put away today?
- Have you truly received the free gift of grace offered to you through Jesus?

Let us thank God that His kingdom operates on radical generosity, and that He treats us with life-giving grace rather than human fairness.