

## UNPACKING GRACE

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**Scripture:** Matthew 20: 1-15

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*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and to those he said, ‘You go into the vineyard also, and whatever is right, I will give you.’ And so they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day long?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’”*

*“Now when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.’ When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. And so when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day’s work and the scorching heat.’ But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go; but I wish to give to this last person the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’”*

Right at the outset, I want to give you a disclaimer in saying that this particular passage might fit into a broader context of which Jesus is talking about. When we look at the previous chapter, we see the rich young ruler who had come and asked, “What should I do to get eternal life?” and Jesus said told him about keeping commandments. He said, “I’ve done all this.” Jesus said, “Sell all you have, give to the poor and come follow Me.” And he couldn’t do that. He went away very sadly and then you remember how Jesus said in vs. 23, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” Then the disciples question Him and say, “But then, who can be saved? If not people who have the money, who have riches, who then can be saved?” And Jesus says, “With people, that is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Then they go on to say, “We have left everything and followed You,” and all of that. and Jesus ends vs. 30 by saying, “But many who are first will be last and the last first.”

That is the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter. And then in ch. 20, He starts “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner...” I stopped at vs.15, but vs. 16 is almost like a bookend to 19:30, because Jesus ends by saying: “So the last shall be first, and the first last.” The same words that He used in the beginning, then He used at the end. And in between is the whole story of the man who had invited the people to go and work in his vineyard. So it seems like this has to do with this thought: ‘The first shall be last, the last shall be first’ kind of motive. But that’s not where I want us to go today. In fact, I really want us to move away from there because I believe that there’s a theme within the theme that I want us to pick at, which is found in the first 15 verses of this 20<sup>th</sup> chapter.

**THEME: IT’S ABOUT GRACE.**

Here we have a landowner who goes out early in the morning to hire laborers. If you go to any station (and I'm speaking especially for people in Mumbai), if you go to Andheri station, or Kurla station, or Thane in the morning from 6 am to about 10 am, you will find skilled workers sitting there – plumbers, masons, painters, electricians, all of them come there. They congregate there along with supervisors, and you can go there and get all the workers that you need to do your job. That's exactly what this man is talking about. He wanted people to help in his vineyard. So he goes to the marketplace and he sees some people there, and he talks to them and says, "I'll give you a denarius." They agree on that and he sends them out to the vineyard.

But there's something strange that goes on after that. now he's got his men; they're working in the vineyard. But he doesn't stay there watching them. What he does is that he goes back. It tells us that he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle – he gets them also to go to the vineyard. This happened at the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour and the eleventh hour; and each time he goes out there, he picks up more men and he brings them back into his vineyard to work. Now the interesting thing is when he goes out at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, he asks them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day long?" They say to him, "Because no one hired us." So he picks up these people as well and sends them to the vineyard.

Now when it came time at the end of the day to pay them, a very strange thing happened. "When evening came he told his foreman to pay them and then called the laborers beginning with the last group to the first. To their surprise, he pays the last group that came in at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour a denarius, which was what he had agreed to pay the first group that he picked up early in the morning. And they'd been working all day. Then, for every group he paid the same amount. When the first group came, they thought that he would give them. More money, but he paid them a denarius too. The bible tells us that they began to grumble and said, "These last men have worked only one hour, but you have paid them equal to what we have done, working through the heat of the day – yet you've paid us the same.

And he says to them, "Wait a minute! Did I not give you what we agreed on? I gave you exactly what we agreed on in the morning. Why are you getting envious of the way that I want to spend my money? It is lawful for me to use my money in this way – to give who I want what I want." And that's the end of this particular passage.

I think it's a good passage about grace because we can learn quite a bit about grace and what it is and what it entails from this passage.

### **1. GRACE INVOLVES CONCERN, CARE AND GENEROSITY.**

In vs, 3-7, it tells us that grace involves concern, care and generosity; concern for people who didn't have a job. He got all the people he needed in his vineyard, but he doesn't stay there; he goes back. He's concerned about the people who are there who don't have a job. He's concerned enough to go back every three hours until the very end when he finds that there are still people waiting for a job; and it's the end of the day. He brings those people back in again. there's concern, there's care, there's generosity.

And it made me think about concern, and care, and a generous spirit when I thought about the father of the prodigal son. His son had taken half the share and had gone. This was something that only happened after a father had died. So in effect, the son was saying, "You're dead to me. Just give me what I need." And he had gone. He splurged it on all kinds of wrong things. And yet, the father waits and waits, so concerned, still thinking about that son. I wonder, when he saw that speck on the horizon, wondering whether that was his son coming back – can't be; he looks disheveled but his

gait is unmistakable. Is it my son? Then he runs all the way to his son, holds him, waves away the words that his son had – I want to be a hired hand and all that spiel. He brings him back, sandals, ring, clothes, a feast – all for one who had spurned him, turned his back on him, taken what he needed from his father and had gone away from him. Yet, such wonderful care and concern and generosity of spirit in giving him such a warm, warm welcome. The very nature of grace is that it involves concern, care and generosity.

## **2. GRACE IS UNDESERVING.**

You know that, and I know it. It's a much bandied around phrase that grace is undeserved merit. When we look at vs. 9, it says, "When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius as well." Did they deserve it? No, they didn't. From a purely practical point of view, from somebody who's looking at how much I can pay to get a job done, they got more than they had bargained for. They should have been pro-rated according to the number of hours they worked. It was completely undeserved and it must have blessed the socks off them. But that again is the nature of grace – that it is undeserved.

I was looking for an example and I thought of Saul of Tarsus. Here was a man who had made it his life's ambition to pursue followers of Jesus and make sure that they were imprisoned. The Christians were fearful of him. He was single-minded in his pursuit, zealous to maintain the traditions of his forefathers. In fact, we read in Acts 7:57 about the killing of Stephen. Stones were being thrown at Stephen as he knelt there, and he said, "Father, forgive them." And the people who were throwing stones were taking off their cloaks and laying it down at the feet of one man who stood nonchalantly watching this whole thing. Because that is what he did. That was who Saul was. He was there at the stoning of Stephen. Persecution had broken out because of this man.

And yet, Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, gives him a new mission in life and sends him back into the world as His follower. And you would think: Wait a minute Jesus. Couldn't You have found somebody good, somebody who was following You? This man should have had a horrible end, the way he was pursuing the Christians. In fact, when Ananias was told to go and pray for him, he said, "This is a man who's been persecuting the Christians, and should I go and pray for him?" Undeserved, completely undeserved! That's the nature of grace as we look at this particular story that Jesus told us.

I don't know how many of you would have had the opportunity to see the play, or the musical, or the film called "Les Misérables" by Victor Hugo. There are many beautiful parts in this story, but there's one where Jean Valjean has been let out of prison, and he's trying to find a way to navigate in a world that he doesn't know and is not able to. He's hungry, disheveled and lonely, without a job, without any money. Then the bishop takes him home, feeds him. There's this beautiful scene where they fix a meal for him, make him sit at the table. There is silver cutlery, spoons, forks and knives that are brought out. A hot meal is being served on his plate, and he doesn't wait for grace; he just begins to eat until the bishop begins to say grace; he stops, looks but then plunges in again on food he hasn't ever seen before. Then they offer him a bed, and while he's sleeping, he thinks about the silver cutlery. He goes down and picks up all the spoons and the knives and the forks, and he leaves.

The next day, two gendarmes pick him up and bring him back to the bishop's house. They say, "See, we caught him and he had all these things that belonged to you. He had the affront to tell us that you gave it to him." And the bishop actually says, "Well, I did." Then he turns to Jean Valjean and he says, "But why did you leave the two candlestands? I mean, those could have got you 2000 francs. You left the best things there that were yours." Jean Valjean is staring at him, and the gendarmes look surprised. "You actually gave it to him? It isn't stolen?" He says, "No!" And he tells the sisters

there, "Give them some wine. You know they must be tired." And Jean Valjean is looking at him and can't comprehend. Grace is being offered to him. I love the line that says, "But remember this, my brother; see in this some higher plan. You must use this precious silver to become an honest man." Undeserved, and yet grace was offered to turn this man into something wonderful.

### **3. GRACE MAY NOT SEEM FAIR TO OTHERS.**

Grace, when offered, may not seem fair to others. Vss. 11-12 bring that out. When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner saying, "These last men have worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day." It may seem unfair to others, and it often is when you look at it from somebody else's perspective. Think of the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son. He comes home, hears all this revelry, music playing, the aroma of freshly made food – and he inquires of the servants: What's going on? And they say, "Your brother has come home." He refuses to go in and share in the joy of the moment. His father comes out and pleads with him, but he tells his father, "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when the son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him." The father entreats and pleads with him, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate. Be glad because this brother of yours was dead but is now alive, was lost and is now found." But the elder brother would have none of it. It always seems very unfair to other people.

### **4. GRACE IS THE GIVER'S PREROGATIVE TO DISPENSE.**

It is the grace giver's prerogative to dispense grace the way he or she sees it. This landowner was well within his rights to do what he wanted to do with his own money. He tells them in vs. 15, "I did what was right by you, did I not? I told you that I would pay you a denarius for a day's work. Did I not pay you? What I said to you, I have done. I have kept my word. Then he says, "I haven't taken anything from you to show grace to someone else." That's implicit with what is going on here. "I didn't give you less than a denarius so I could pay them. I gave you what I told you I would give. It's my right to do what I want with what I have." Absolutely true! This is mine and I can do what I want with it. Grace has nothing to do with other people. It has everything to do with the grace giver and the way grace is offered is the prerogative of the grace giver.

### **5. GRACE ALWAYS GOES THE EXTRA MILE.**

If grace goes beyond what we deserve, then what would it involve? When grace is offered, it always goes the extra mile. What is given is way more than what was expected. The equation is rarely equal. So often, when grace is offered, it goes beyond forgiveness. It may go on to reinstatement; it may go on to helping the other person, rehabilitating that person, giving a fair recommendation even. Just going beyond the nice correct thing to do.

It could mean overlooking something – sloth, laziness. You say: Okay. This person is lazy and I'll do what is right, but nothing more. Then to take the trouble to find out what is it that makes the person like that. Can I help? Can I go the extra mile in moving that person away not only from laziness to something, but to make something noble and good out of a person? Again, goes beyond.

We see that beloved, modelled by Jesus. The bible tells us that while we were yet sinners, Jesus died for us. We were yet sinners; we were diametrically opposed to everything godly, going our own way. And yet, Jesus gave His life for you and for me. He offered us grace.

## 6. GRACE NEEDS TO BE ACCEPTED.

I've been moving this whole sermon, these thoughts away from the landowner and the workers, and trying to move it into our world, to begin to ask questions of grace in our own lives. So this area I finally want to offer is this: grace needs to be accepted. It may be offered, but it can only work if accepted. The workers who are still in the marketplace accepted the offer to go to work even at the eleventh hour. I wonder in your life, with what's going on, whether you look at yourself and you think: I'm not worthy. I'm undeserving of anything good. I wonder whether just a little bit of hope has come alive as you've heard different aspects of this passage and wonder – could grace be offered to me? Is it possible to receive something that I really don't think I deserve? Is God offering me anything today? Would He? Maybe you're saying: I don't deserve it, and you're right. Maybe you don't. But that's what grace is – getting what you and I don't deserve.

Max Lucado writes in his own inimitable style. He says:

“Behold the fruit of grace – saved by God, raised by God, seated with God, gifted, equipped and commissioned. Farewell earthly condemnations. What are those? Stupid, unproductive, slow learner, fast talker, quitter, cheapskate. No longer. You are who God says you are. God says you are spiritually alive, heavenly positioned, connected to God, a billboard of mercy, an honored child.” That's who you are beloved, an honored child.

I wonder today whether you've gone away thinking that you've got exactly what you deserve; you don't deserve anything better. Plus, time has gone by; it's too late now, it's the eleventh hour. I wonder whether God is still going out at the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour, the eleventh hour – looking for you, looking for me and saying, “I'm still in the business of offering grace. Will you take it? Will you accept it? Because grace gives you the opportunity to turn your life around? I wonder whether there's an aspect of your life that needs to be turned around? Can we say, “I really need God's grace in this area. I don't deserve it but I need His grace.”

Bart Miller wrote a song many years ago:

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,  
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!  
Yonder on Calvary's mount our-poured,  
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilled.

Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;  
Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that is greater than all our sin!

Are you ready to accept that grace, the marvelous grace of God today? Would you just close your eyes, bow your heads? Let's just wait on the Lord this moment. If you need a touch from Him, would you just raise your hands to Him and say, “Lord, I'm undeserving, but Your grace I need today.”

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,  
Freely bestowed on all who believe!  
You that are longing to see His face,  
Will you this moment His grace receive?

Lord, we receive from You, from Your benevolent hand, bestow grace Master where outstretched hands reach out to You and may that grace bring about change in our lives, change that will align us

with Your holy will for each one of us. We thank You, Lord Jesus, and as always, it's in Your name that we pray. Amen.