

Introduction

We Christians talk about grace a lot. We have named our fellowship with that wonderful term—grace. We SHOULD talk a lot about grace. We SHOULD think a lot about grace. If not for grace . . . well if not for grace none of us would even be here. We would be without God and without hope. It is important that we rightly understand grace. The parable before us this morning helps us in that regard.

[Read Text and Pray]

This parable is not an island. It is not stuck off out in the middle of an ocean. Rather it is a scene along a riverbank. What I mean is the parable is part of a flow events. It started with Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. We have to interpret this parable in light of that encounter and what took place in its aftermath. Chapter and verse designations are not inspired. They were inserted long after Matthew wrote this gospel. And the chapter break moving from 19 to 20 is just plain in a bad spot. It makes us feel like we have moved past the rich young ruler encounter, but we have not.

The wealthy young ruler wanted to do a good deed that would earn him eternal life. Learning that he would have to give up ownership of his possessions and follow Christ, he departed sorrowfully. Jesus explained to his disciples that it is impossible for a human being depending on his own resources to enter the kingdom. Entrance into the kingdom is only through the work of God. And though it costs an entrant everything, the gifts accompanying and corresponding to eternal life will eclipse the sacrifice a hundredfold. At this point Jesus declares, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” What does this mean? The parable of the generous master explains. And what you are going to see by the time we are finished this morning is the measure of what it costs each human being varies from person to person. Some, when they forsake all, will have to forsake more than others. But entrance into the kingdom is the generous and gracious gift of God. On the basis of what a human gives up the gift will look like more or less, but it is all of grace.

So the main idea or the central thought is that coming into God's kingdom is all of grace. Entering God's kingdom is all of grace. This parable teaches about God's grace and what it means for us.

We start by observing . . .

I. A Seeking Master

A. Jesus begins the parable, “For the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.”

The master of the house, himself, went out. He goes out again and again to call laborers to work in his vineyard. Look, he does it there in verse 1, early in the morning to obtain workers at the first hour of the work day. He does it again at the third hour and again the sixth and again the ninth and again even at the eleventh hour. Each time this parable underscores the act of the master going out. It is not just that additional workers were hired throughout the day. Rather each time additional workers were brought into the vineyard to work, they came because the master WENT OUT and FOUND them and directed them to his vineyard. He leaves his house to venture to where the laborers are. And he calls them to come and work.

When it comes to entering the kingdom of heaven, it is by the grace of God. The grace of God is his favor and kindness given to those who deserve the opposite. Grace is good will granted to unworthy recipients. It is doing good to those who deserve evil. No one can enter the kingdom of heaven except by the grace of God. God's grace makes possible what is impossible with man. God's grace overcomes the absence of human ability and the absence of human merit. "For BY GRACE are you saved."

This parable portrays the grace of God first in that it presents God as the seeker. He seeks after lost sheep. He finds them and he brings them to his home. The idea that people are seekers of God contradicts the teaching of the Scripture. ALL have turned aside. NO ONE understands. There is NONE who seek after God, but God seeks after souls. He sent his own Son into the world according to Luke 19:10 to SEEK and save the lost. He sends his Holy Spirit to bring life to those who are dead. Jesus declared that "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Jesus said to his own disciples, "you did not choose me but I CHOSE YOU." Paul explained to the Corinthians, it is "because of [God that] you are in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:30). Entrants into the kingdom are not there because they pursued God but because God has pursued them. In Romans 8 the Apostle teaches us that God set his love on specific persons and predestined them to be conformed to the image of his Son. And it is these whom he called and justified and glorified. To be clear, Paul writes the Ephesians that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world and predestined us for adoption as sons. God by grace chose specific people before the foundation of the world and these he pursues to bring them into his kingdom.

The seeking master of the house pictures the marvelous and matchless grace of God. By the proclaimed gospel, he calls out to the masses to come. And if you come it is because he came to you not only outwardly but also inwardly, graciously drawing you to himself.

The hymnwriter Jean Ingelow put it like this:
I sought the Lord and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek him seeking me.
It was not I that found O Savior True
No, I was found of you.

Left to ourselves we would never seek the Lord. If you have sought God, it is because he first has sought you. You and I by nature are darkened in our minds and hardened in our hearts. We do not seek him. Thinking rightly about God's grace requires admitting that if not for his seeking us, we would be absolutely and completely without him. If you have been saved, here is why: "by grace you have been saved and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God . . . so that no one can boast." If you love God it is because he loved you first. If you seek God, it is because he sought you first.

Next, we see . . .

II. An Agreement with Laborers

The Master agreed with the first group of laborers to give them a denarius for a day's work. It was a good wage in that era for a day's work. It was a just wage. The agreement with the master indicates that it was acceptable to the workers. They were fully prepared to work the entire day for the denarius.

The parable in this way portrays God as being fair. He does not skimp because the workers were dependent upon his giving them work. He is not an oppressor. He does not look to get away with paying the workers any less just because they are street labor. He is graciously generous.

In verse 3, we encounter . . .

III. A Return to the Marketplace

The Master ventures back to the marketplace at the third hour. Additional prospects were standing there. At this point one-fourth of the day was already complete. It is worth noting that the laborers are described both here and in verse 6 as being idle. Idleness is the opposite of what a worker should be. It is true they were available for work, but it seems the Master reflects on the waste. These are idle while the day is slipping away. Time is passing; work needs to be done, and here are laborers just standing there. They are accomplishing nothing, certainly nothing for the master.

Outside the kingdom whatever we do amounts to nothing. Gaining the whole world but being outside the kingdom of God is no better than idleness. It is a blessing to come into the kingdom of God and work and serve a gracious and glorious God and invest our lives in eternal treasure.

How gracious it is of God to involve human beings in work that has lasting value! A right understanding of God's grace sees that his call to serve, his call to obey, his call to work is itself an undeserved blessing. Idleness is the devil's workshop. Failing to work for the kingdom amounts to storing up dust and rubbish. It is useless and harmful and distracts from real satisfaction. God's commands are not burdensome. They are gracious directives for living in a way that really matters and brings gratification and most importantly glory to God. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing," but "whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit." And "by this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit." Follower of Christ, do not begrudge God's call to work. A life spent in God's vineyard is not easy. Pursuing the fruit of holiness is hard work, but our work in the kingdom is a privilege. We are fellow workers with God in which we are privileged to share in the gracious and fruitful work of our glorious God!

Then we come to . . .

IV. A Promise to Do Right

The master calls these idle workers to go into his vineyard. It is now well into the day, and he assures them, "whatever is right I will give you."

No agreement is mentioned. These laborers trust his word and they go and work.

God always does what is right. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. You can trust him. You can trust a God who is gracious and generous. You can trust the God who upholds the cause of the oppressed and downtrodden. You can trust the God who cannot lie. You can trust his sovereign working in your life. You can trust his purposes. You can trust his righteous design. You can trust him when your circumstances are frustrating and perplexing. You can trust him in the midst of heartache. You can certainly trust his promise to you, O sinner. If you will turn from your sin and place your confidence in Christ Jesus who died and rose again for sinners, you will gain entrance to his kingdom. You will receive right standing with him. He will be your father by adoption and care for you as he does his own Son. He will keep you forever and nothing will be able to separate you from his love and care for all eternity. He is a gracious and glorious and absolutely trustworthy God. He does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities. How great and gracious is our God!

That brings us in the parable to . . .

V. An Eleventh Hour Call

The eleventh hour meant the 12-hour work day was almost over. Laborers hired at this time would hardly even work an hour by the time they arrived at the vineyard and found their place. But the generous master is willing to hire laborers even then.

The effectual and gracious call of God comes to sinners at various times in life. Some come to Christ very early. Others are brought to faith mid-stream. Still others confess Christ on the bed of their death. Think of the thief on the cross. Part of the time he was hanging there, he was mocking Jesus just like everybody else. But God graciously changed his heart, and he stopped taunting Jesus and began rebuking the other thief. He admitted his own sin and entreated Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." The reply of Jesus is precious: "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." If you are alive, it is not too late to trust in Christ. Oh, I beg you not to wait until you think it is the eleventh hour, but if that is where you are, it is not too late to recognize that he is calling you even at the last minute of life to turn from sin and self and enter in to the kingdom. There will not be much opportunity to serve Christ in this life, but he is gracious and will receive you if you will come.

We come next to . . .

VI. A Climactic Evening

The arrival of evening brought with it the end of the work day. The master instructed the foreman to call the laborers and pay them. He was to reverse the order from that in which they were hired. The last hired were paid first and the first hired were paid last. The point was to demonstrate to those who might think they would get more that each one received the same wage. There were five groups of laborers according to the hour they began to work, but all of the laborers received the SAME wage.

And those hired first were unhappy. They thought they should receive more. Since the master so graciously overpaid those who worked less, even much less, than they, these early laborers reasoned that since they worked longer and persevered through the most difficult part of the day, they should have received more. Their extra sweat-equity was surely worth additional payment. Now in the world in which we live, that is exactly how we would feel wouldn't we? Let's say you have been working at an employer for a number of years earning a number of raises, and the company hires another employee with your same qualifications to do the same job you do and they start them off at the same rate of pay you are making, your flesh would probably be acting out just like the first laborers in the parable.

But here is just the point Jesus is making. This is not the world in which we live. This is the kingdom of heaven. You only get in by grace. No matter who you are, you do not get in by what you earn. You only get in because God is gracious. You deserve eternal punishment. You did not even seek God on your own. From the moment he called you out of the world, it has been by grace. It is all of grace. Some are called earlier in life, and some are called later. Some spend more of their lives being idle and unproductive. That is actually not a better thing. Some who are called work through the heat of the day. Some followers of Christ are tortured and become martyrs. Some live in more peaceable times. Some experience great suffering and die early. Others live to be quite old. But all who trust in Christ receive eternal life. The promise Jesus gave to the disciples about what they would receive as his followers—that they would rule with him, receive a hundredfold what they left, and eternal life—is not a payment of what is due. It is all a gift of God's grace despite what they actually deserved.

VII. A Staggering Truth

Here is a truth we in the kingdom of heaven must learn to accept. Sinful flesh rails against it, but instead we should humbly embrace the magnificence of God's sovereignly dispensed grace. Gaining entrance to eternal life in the kingdom of God is a gift of God's sovereignly determined favor. And that is the matter here. Jesus is not addressing future rewards that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 3. He is addressing the gracious gift of eternal life. And if God owed eternal life in ANY sense of the word, it would cease to be grace. God is NOT under ANY compulsion to do the same for everyone.

Here is that staggering truth. The master says to the grumbling laborers, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Paul makes this same point when he writes to the Romans. He explains that God makes the choices that matter about his dispensation of grace. It is written, "Jacob I loved but Esau I hated." And the really amazing thing about that statement is not why did God hate Esau. The unanswerable question is, "why did God love Jacob?" With this statement in view, Paul asks, "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?" He answers, "By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

Not everyone can be an Apostle. Not everyone can be Moses or Joshua or David. Not everyone can be a prophet; not everyone can be the mother of Jesus. In the body there are various spiritual gifts that differ according to the grace given. God sovereignly decides.

What about in every day life? Some brothers and sisters work less, give less, sin more (at least more than we think we do), and sacrifice less than we think we do. And yet all the laborers are getting the same blessing of eternal life. We must get our eyes off of ourselves and fix them on our gracious and glorious God. First, none of us are first hour workers. Second, is it not a joy to be idle less and serve him more?

The attitude of these first hour workers makes me think of the elder son in the parable of the prodigal. After the younger son took all his inheritance and left home and squandered it, he returned ready to be only a servant in his father's house. But the father was overjoyed. What grace he displayed when he saw the son far off! He ran and greeted him with open arms and called for a great celebration, saying, "this my son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found." The older son became angry and jealous and refused to join in the celebration. He said to his father, "Look these many years I have served you and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends."

This older son refused to enter into the joy of his father's grace.

Look, if our eyes are on our father and the fact that he has dealt with us in grace, we will not then begrudge when he shows grace to others even if it seems to outstrip the grace he has shown to us. If we rejoice in our father and his lavish riches of grace, then we can rejoice when that grace is magnified when he gives it to others as well.

Let's bring this home down to where we live. In the context of relationships—certainly relationships within the home but also relationships in the church, in the neighborhood, on the street, and at work—our flesh never wants to be the one who sacrifices, never wants to be the one who gives up more than others. But grace, the grace that we have received from the generous hand of God, beckons us to humility. It beckons us to selflessness, to the magnification of the great grace of our heavenly father. We do not demand more. We do not expect more. We are blown away that we have received grace. Knowing what we really deserve, we never get over that God has been gracious to us. And we thrill rather than begrudge that he shows that amazing grace to others too.

Conclusion

Many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first. So the last will be first and the first last. These are statements meant to demonstrate how important it is that we understand the grace of God. In the economy of grace you should think of yourself last not first. When you think of yourself first, you are last in the kingdom.