

Gratitude for Grace

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 10, 2020.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last (Matthew 20:1–16).¹

Jesus taught his disciples that eternal life cannot be earned. He taught them that entrapments in this life can hinder the life to come. He taught them that all who follow him in faith shall inherit eternal life, and what they sacrifice for Christ's sake will be rewarded for his sake in the heavenly kingdom. What Jesus taught them was counter cultural, transcending their understanding of the world.

We all have a basic understanding of how the world works, which makes the account of the rich young ruler so perplexing. He was remarkably moral, admirably industrious, and outwardly successful. And yet, he could not inherit eternal life. This hardly seems fair from our perspective. In the cosmic ranking of fairness, surely this extraordinary young man would be first place. But Jesus says that "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matt. 19:30).

Life in the kingdom of heaven is different than life in the worldly kingdom. In the kingdom of heaven no one earns access. Rewards may be gained, but it is not a race to first place. It is unlike anything this world knows because it is not a kingdom of achievement but of grace.

To teach this truth, Jesus uses a parable about workers in a vineyard. A parable, as one scholar defines, is not merely a story but "an expanded analogy used to convince and persuade" (Snodgrass, 9). The narrative of a parable captures our imagination, teaching truth indirectly, engaging both heart and mind.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Gratitude for Grace

What are the essential details of this parable? There is a landowner who needs temporary laborers to work in his vineyard. Starting early in the morning he begins to hire workers and continues to hire throughout the day. The wage paid is a denarius, which was the standard for one day of work. At the conclusion of the workday, the landowner pays every worker the same wage regardless of time worked, which creates a problem with those who worked the full day.

Do you want to know how to foster discontent in the workplace? Pay everyone the same wage regardless of time worked. What kind of employer is this landowner? Clearly, he is a poor manager, perhaps a financial fool.

The problem is that this parable contradicts our sense of fairness. Those who work longer should get paid more than those who work less. But Jesus is not describing the commercial transactions of society. He is teaching us about the kingdom of heaven. He is teaching us about the grace of God.

Since grace is the unmerited favor of God, our attitude should be one of gratitude to God, thankful for his generosity. And in gratitude for grace we see that there is nothing we have done, do, or will do that could merit the favor of a holy God. What we do is not the deciding factor. Rather, it is the sovereign choice of God.

The Sovereign Choice of God

At the end of the day, every worker got paid, isn't that good enough? Apparently not. Frustrated by the lack of perceived fairness the workers complain: "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." Equal pay for equal work, it's the fair thing to do. Maybe so, but it's not their land and it's not their money, is it?

Listen carefully to how the landowner responds: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ...I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Did the landowner fairly compensate the workers? Indeed, one denarius. Was the landowner generous in compensating the other workers? Definitely. So, the issue in reality is not with the landowner's fairness but with his generosity. Or, to state it another way, the landowner's generosity seemed unfair to some but in reality was not.

What is missed completely by the discontented workers is that the landowner has the prerogative to be generous with his money how he pleases. Frustrated by their jealousy, the envious workers cannot celebrate the extravagant blessing received by others. Instead, they are emboldened by their envy to *expect* more than they deserve.

Now, consider the kingdom of heaven. Is God sovereign over what belongs to him? May he call whom he chooses to come into his kingdom? May he choose the means by which one enters his kingdom? Does our opinion require that he alter what he does with his kingdom? What does this parable teach us about the kingdom of heaven?

First, the kingdom of heaven is God's. While God is sovereign over all, the worldly kingdom in which we live has been infiltrated by "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2), a world temporarily under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19 NIV). Such is not the case in the kingdom of heaven. There is no Satanic influence, and it exists as it always has and will purely and perfectly aligned, wholly and holy under God. Indeed, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (Ps. 115:3).

Second, entry into the kingdom of heaven is by God's sovereign choice not our decision. Every child of the kingdom of heaven was chosen by God "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). This strikes some as unfair, grumbling like the discontented workers that there is injustice on God's part. In response to this argument, the Apostle Paul explains, For [God] says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy (Rom. 9:15-16). Or, as the landowner of the parable asks, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Indeed, he does. Indeed, God does. It is his kingdom and his sovereign choice.

The third thing we may learn about the kingdom of heaven is that since the kingdom is God's and entry into it is by his sovereign choice, then he gets all the glory. Perhaps you like I have been asked, why study the doctrine of election? Since it strikes some people as unfair, since it leads to an allegation of injustice of God, why not avoid the doctrine? Aside from the fundamental matter that "all Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16) and therefore worthy of our study, the reason to study the doctrine of election is *to see the glory of God*, which leads not to cries of unfairness but to humility and worship. God is glorified in our salvation because it is all by his grace.

In the first chapter of Ephesians, after describing that all who enter the kingdom of heaven were predestined by God, Paul then explains that it is "according to the purpose of [God's] will, to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:5-6) and "to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:14). In explaining why God sovereignly chose the elect, Paul says nothing about our worthiness nor our will, but that God sovereignly chose his children "in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy" (Rom. 9:23). Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is God's, he does with it what he pleases, and always for his glory.

While this is true, it is often viewed with hostility. The allegation of unfairness remains, not because God is unjust but because God does as he pleases with what belongs to him, bestowing the bounty of his grace upon those he chooses. This, however, is not regarded as glorious by some, who rather than rejoicing have an arrogant attitude of ingratitude.

The Arrogance of Ingratitude

In the parable, workers are hired for a daily wage, and then more and more workers are hired throughout the day. The hiring does not cause consternation; it is the compensation: all the workers are paid the same. Imagine how this would make you feel. Having "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat," you would expect those who worked less to be paid less. You would be frustrated, likely grumble, and voice your complaint. But what about the other

Gratitude for Grace

workers? Have they not received a generous blessing? What about the landowner? Has he not been fair and generous?

The problem with the workers is our problem too. We think first of ourselves with little to no consideration of others. We want our fair share and more, especially compared with others. In our arrogance, we confront not our selfishness and jealousy but grumble in our ingratitude.

Now, consider the kingdom of heaven. How often do you consider the needs of your brothers and sisters? Have you embraced a consumer mentality in which your faith is defined by your personal consumption? Do you consider yourself on a solo trip to heaven, fixated on your destiny, as if you are all that matters? What if God were to use you to call other workers to his vineyard?

How often do you consider God's perspective, his grace, the sacrifice of his Son, his patience with you? Have you taken his grace for granted, receiving the gifts of his favor as if you deserve them, with no concern for his glory? Has your Christian life become disturbingly less about pleasing Christ and more about pleasing yourself?

Many Christians live lives of arrogant ingratitude, freely accepting God's grace as the means of salvation yet indifferent to God's grace in the lives of others. This is sometimes revealed in frustration or anger toward the providence of God. We become frustrated when things don't go our way, failing to consider what God is doing to *teach us*, to *bless others*, to *glorify himself*. We grow angry because we compare ourselves to others in a constant wheel of self-justification, ignoring God's generosity to us and others.

Christian, you were not redeemed to merely be a consumer. You were not redeemed to care only for yourself. You were not redeemed to arrogantly act as if God owes you. No, as recipients of God's unmerited favor, redeemed in Christ, and children of the kingdom of heaven, we are to have the gratefulness of a child.

The Gratefulness of a Child

In the parable, the workers are day laborers, the least skilled of the workforce. Daily work is not guaranteed and likely seasonal. There is nothing unique about these workers. From first to last, they are expendable.

In contrast, the landowner is unique. He hires the ready, willing, and able, as well as the idle and late. He provides work and is faithful to pay what he promises. But, his most startling attribute is his generosity, leaving some angry and others, I would imagine, astounded.

Imagine that you were the last of the workers. How would you feel as the landowner paid you a full day's wage for one hour of work? You would be elated, perhaps humbled, but certainly grateful. You would not boast about your extraordinary work and toilsome labor, but you would tell everyone you know of the generosity of the landowner. With whom do you identify most? The first or the last workers?

Gratitude for Grace

Now, consider the kingdom of heaven. Have you earned your entry? What is it about you that led God to predestine you for adoption as his child through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:5)? What have you achieved greater than the rich young ruler? We bring nothing to our salvation but our unworthiness, and yet God has “blessed us in the Beloved,” in whom “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us” (Eph. 1:6-8).

We are not workers in the kingdom but have become children of God (Gal. 4:5), in fact heirs of the kingdom and joint-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17 KJV). Therefore, we have no room to grumble, no room to boast. We who were the last have become the first. All because of the grace of God.

Let us live in light of this truth. Rejoicing in the generosity of our gracious God, let us extend grace to our neighbor, rejoicing in God’s blessings. And let us glorify God with our lives, living in gratitude for grace.

By grace! These precious words remember
when sorely by your sins oppressed,
when Satan comes to vex your spirit,
when troubled conscience sighs for rest;
what reason cannot comprehend,
God does to you by grace extend.²
(695)

May we who are the recipients of God’s grace be grateful, rejoicing in it in others, and glorifying our God in heaven.

² “By Grace I Am an Heir of Heaven,” *Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 695.