

# Workers in the Vineyard

## Matt. 20:1-16

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



We were standing at Homeplate just as we had done for the last week. My job was simple I received the throws from the first baseman and tossed the baseballs back into the bucket. He made sure that our coach had a ball and called out infield directions. For over a week, we had practiced together, and he had not said a word to me. For over a week, we sat next to each other in the locker room, and he would not acknowledge me. So that day, as infield drills concluded and we picked up to begin batting practice, I introduced myself. Really I wasn't sure how to address the situation; it was awkward and, frankly, kind of petty. So I turned to him and said, "Hey, I know we haven't formally met yet; I'm Kyle." Without looking at me, he quipped, "I know who you are." and walked away. I was a freshman, and he was a junior. We both were catchers and were supposed to be on the same team. But, there is a funny thing about competition. It tends to breed jealousy and envy. Yes, competition can motivate us to get better, and can even in the healthiest environments can focus our efforts and build unity around a central purpose or goal. But, in this case, it only breed jealousy, distrust, and insecurity. The funny thing is that I had a slim chance to beat him out for his starting job that year. There was no reason to be jealous or insecure.

We've all experienced that kind of interaction in our relationships at work, with our friends, at school, or in our families. Jealousy robs us of so many things, contentment, security, purpose, and joy. The most tragic consequence is that jealousy actively harms our view of other people. When we let jealousy fester, we begin to think that others do not deserve or have enough value to have the thing that we are jealous of. The good news is that it doesn't have to stay that way. Jealousy is a powerfully destructive force, yet grace is equally powerful in the opposite way. Grace has the power to heal and to change. Jesus is the epitome of grace, and through him, we are changed. And, Jesus gets us. He gets our proclivity for self-centeredness and jealousy. He gets the destruction that comes with it and wants to set us free from it. In him, we see the very grace of God, and Jesus told a story about a vineyard owner to help us understand that our Heavenly Father is full of grace. When we experience his grace, we experience something that changes us. Simply, **grace changes hearts.**

# 1. What is grace?

- a. This parable is all about grace. → It is really easy to get distracted by all the details of the scenario of the parable and miss the profound truth that Jesus wants us to see.
  - i. Or, it is possible to allegorize the parts and characters of the parable and miss the main idea altogether.
  - ii. The parable impresses these lessons, but adds an even more important one—**God acts toward us in sheer grace**. There is no question of salvation is not an arithmetical process, adding up the good deeds and the bad ones and coming out with salvation or loss according to whether the balance is on the credit or debit side. That is not the way to understand the dealings of a gracious God.<sup>1</sup>
- b. Let's understand the context of the parable. → Remember, a key to understanding and interpreting parables is that each one has a context.
  - i. **The picture the parable presents uses realistic but exaggerated features**. The owner is probably reasonably well-off, but not so wealthy that he leaves oversight of his vineyard to agents. The picture of someone hiring day laborers from the market at a time of need is realistic, as is the wage paid. Two items are exaggerations. The number of hirings is excessive and hardly conceivable because of the time involved in going back and forth from the vineyard, unless the vineyard was immediately adjacent to the market.
  - ii. **The life of a day laborer in the ancient world was difficult by any estimation. Unemployment was a continual problem, and many slaves had an easier life because their owners had a financial investment that required protection and adequate care**. Day laborers involved no such investment and could be hired for short periods and overworked or even abused. But that does not tell us specifically about this parable and this owner. They are the “world” that forms the backdrop of the parable.
    1. **The workday was about twelve hours—from sunrise to sunset (Ps 104:22–23), and the complaints of those first hired that they have borne the burden and heat of the day (v. 12) are pointers to the difficulty of the work and the Palestinian sun.**
  - iii. The poverty of day laborers was so obvious that the Torah required that they be paid each day at sunset because they needed the money to survive (Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14–15). The rabbinic writings expect the same (*m. Baba Meši'a* 9.12; *b. Baba Meši'a* 83a, 110b). The Tosefta mentions deceit from owners who promised higher pay and from workers who did not deliver, workers who suffered from heat prostration, and specific instructions to pay in proportion to work actually done if a worker works only part of the day (*t. Baba Meši'a* 7.1, 3).
  - iv. A denarius was usually considered the average daily wage for a day laborer. It was subsistence pay at best. Usual estimates are that an adult in ancient Palestine needed about half a denarius a day to live and that an income of 200 denarii per year marked the poverty line. **Still, 200 denarii per year would hardly do more than keep a small family from going under**. As always, though, not everyone was poor. The rich “fared sumptuously,” and the disparity between rich and poor was great and offensive, as it still is. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 499.

<sup>2</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 369–370.

c. **What is grace? → Grace is getting something you don't deserve.**

- i. The laborers hired from the second round on got something that they didn't deserve, a full day's wage.
    1. Vv. 3-4 - He named no specific figure as the wage, but said that he would *give whatever is right* ("pay you a fair wage," *REB, GNB*). The workmen apparently were ready to leave it to the owner (they were too late to claim a full day's wage). **They probably understood him to mean that he would pay the right proportion of a denarius.**<sup>3</sup>
    2. Vv.11-12 – First round hires are upset when everyone is paid.
    3. Receiving their pay under those circumstances was not a matter of rejoicing. They felt that they had not been treated fairly (had they not done twelve times as much as the latecomers?), and so they *grumbled*. **The verb is in the imperfect tense, which indicates a continuing process; the grumbling went on.**<sup>15</sup>
    4. **The thrust of the complaint is thus twofold: the latecomers did very little work, and what they did they did under the best conditions in the cool of the day (*NIV* says that their complaint was that they had endured "the burden of the work and the heat of the day," while *REB* prefers "sweated the whole day long in the blazing sun").**<sup>19</sup>
  - ii. **Grace is another attribute that is part of the manifold of God's love.** By this we mean that God deals with his people not on the basis of their merit or worthiness, what they deserve, but simply according to their need; in other words, he deals with them on the basis of his goodness and generosity.<sup>4</sup>
    1. Grace, however, means that God supplies us with undeserved favors.<sup>5</sup>
  - iii. **Mercy** – Not getting something that you deserve.
    1. **There is a subtle difference in wording between the definitions of grace and mercy, but a large experiential difference.**
      - a. **Often Mercy and grace go together.**
        - i. I don't get... and instead, I do get....
    2. **Mercy is both disposition and action simultaneously in the Gospels; the one who has mercy is in the position to help another who is in dire need and incapable of self-help.** This mercy is usually, but not always, based in some kind of prior relationship; often the covenant relationship between \*God and his people is involved.<sup>6</sup>
- d. **Grace transforms our identities.** → It isn't something that we merely experience, it is something that becomes part of who we are.
- i. As we experience the depth of God's grace in his faithful forgiveness, the action and response of grace become more and more part of our nature and response to others.
  - ii. Part of our experience with grace is that we come to understand and intimately know the Father, trust Him and trust the goodness of his ways/ truth.
    1. It is in this way that grace makes truth digestible.

<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 500.

<sup>4</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 265.

<sup>5</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 265.

<sup>6</sup> S. Nicholson, "Mercy," ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; IVP, 2013), 584.

## 2. Grace makes truth digestible.

### a. Grace and truth go together.

- i. One of the common misconceptions of our current cultural moment is that grace and truth are mutually exclusive. → I.e., You can't have grace and truth at the same time.
  1. This is categorically false. → Why?
    - a. If there is no truth, there is no standard to be held accountable to.
    - b. If there is no standard, there is no need for grace.
    - c. Grace requires truth, because in order to experience grace, there must be a standard.
- ii. **What is the standard that we are held accountable to?** → The righteousness of God.
  1. Gen. 1 & 2 → We were created by God, in his image, to know and enjoy him.
  2. Gen. 3 / Rom. 5 → We sinned and broke the relationship with God.
    - a. **Remember, we rejected God, and there are eternal implications that come along with that rejection.**
      - i. We said that we wanted to be free from God, and he did not force us to stay in the relationship with him. Instead, he allowed and allows us to walk in the freedom of our choice.
      - ii. But, he understand the immense weight and tragedy of the freedom we chose, and in his love and compassion, made a way. For us to be restored to him.
    - b. If God is righteous and we were created to be like him in his righteousness, but we broke it with our sin, that means we do not measure up to the standard.
- iii. **The power and depth of our sin. → More than just a wrong action.**
  1. The reality of grace is in effect a proof for the presence of sin.
  2. **The fundamental unbelief, distrust and rejection of God and human displacement of God as the center of reality.**<sup>7</sup>
  3. **Sin has deeper roots of distrust and displacement of God that are expressed through my behavior.**
    - a. I.e., Sin is not just the wrong actions I willfully do or the right actions I willfully ignore.
    - b. **If I am the center of my reality, how can I love someone else selflessly?**
      - i. **Instead, I need to put God at the center, and then from and in and through Him (the one who loves selflessly), I can begin to love selflessly.**
    - c. Rich Villodas – **"Sin is a principle of captivity to a power that permeates and contaminates our human reality. Sin is the word Christians use to name not simply our failed acts but also our inner and outer captivity."**<sup>8</sup>
  4. As an inherent part of the human condition sin is universal, and it is both corporate and individual.<sup>9</sup>
  5. What is corporate sin?

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, [\*Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms\*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 107.

<sup>8</sup> Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life* (Waterbrook, 2020) 99.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, [\*Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms\*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 107.

- a. Sin also has massive effects upon the relationships between humans.
  - b. **Since sin makes one increasingly self-centered and self-seeking, there will inevitably be conflict with others.**<sup>10</sup>
- iv. Grace functions as a lens for us to get a better picture of ourselves and the depth of our sin.
  - 1. John Calvin – **“The knowledge of God and that of ourselves are connected. Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Without knowledge of God, there is no knowledge of self.”**<sup>11</sup>
  - 2. The more we experience God’s forgiveness the more we become aware of the depth of our sin and rebellion.
    - a. The Apostle Paul → I am the worst of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15)
      - i. Paul writes this near the end of his ministry and life.
      - ii. This reflection comes after years of experiencing God’s grace.
      - iii. Paul doesn’t come to say, I’ve become a better person or my good works outweigh the bad. → He says, I am the worst of sinners.
- b. **Compassion and Truth – Two lenses for life.**
  - i. We all function with two primary lenses to see and interact with the events of the world on a daily basis... Compassion and Truth.
    - 1. We all have both, but everyone looks through them with a different proportional percentage.
      - a. I.e., Some lean more towards truth and others lean more towards compassion.
    - ii. Repeat: Grace only makes a difference when truth is equally present.
      - 1. I.e., We need both lenses.
        - a. **This also means grace does not make us a door mats.**
    - iii. **Example:** Danielle and myself.
      - 1. Danielle leans towards the compassion lens.
      - 2. Kyle leans towards the truth lens.
  - iv. **Jesus is the only person to have both lenses in equal proportions. (Jn. 1:17)**
    - 1. <sup>14</sup>**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.** <sup>15</sup>**(John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ”)** <sup>16</sup>**For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.** <sup>17</sup>**For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.** <sup>18</sup>**No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.**
    - 2. I do not think John was accidental or casual in his ordering of “grace and truth.”
      - a. Grace is what makes truth palatable.
      - b. Jesus’ arrival and subsequent willingness to go the cross is the most gracious thing we could ever experience.
        - i. It is only when God’s love and grace comes into perspective that our sin and need comes into perspective.
          - 1. I.e., **We can digest the truth of our sin because of the grace of God.**
    - 3. To grow in that way of Jesus means to grow in both lenses, compassion and truth.

<sup>10</sup> Millard J. Erickson, [\*Christian Theology\*](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 563–564.

<sup>11</sup> Rich Villodas, 99.

- a. Where they are equally present that is where grace resides.

### 3. Grace is an action of generosity.

- a. **Because grace is unmerited, it flows from generosity.**
  - i. The vineyard owner's actions are that of radical generosity.
    - 1. He promised to do right by them for their labor.
    - 2. He gives them more than they deserve.
  - ii. Our Heavenly Father's actions towards us and for us are that of radical generosity.
- b. **A key reality about the nature of grace: Grace is never deserved or earned.**
  - i. The workers who were hired first, agreed to the rightful wage. The owner was not cheating them, but simply being generous, which was his choice.
    - 1. Conversely, for those hired later it is never said that they earned or deserved the extra wages.
  - ii. V.13 - **Then he pointed out that there was no injustice: "*I do you no wrong.*" When a man makes a solemn agreement and keeps to his side of the bargain, there should be no thought of injustice. This man had made a legal agreement with his workmen; they would work for a day, and he would pay them a denarius.** That was what they did and what he did. Where is the injustice? **The fact that he chose to be generous to other people gave these men no new rights. Their discontent was due to envy, not to the overlooking of any of their rights.**<sup>12</sup>
  - iii. V.14 - This is not a question of a legal undertaking or of striking a bargain; the man says simply, "*I want to give.*" He chose to be generous to those who came late on the scene. This did not mean that he was compelled to be generous to those who had worked all day.<sup>13</sup>
  - iv. Any ounce of work turns grace into performance.
- c. **A key risk for our hearts is that of jealousy. → Jealousy robs us of the joy of grace.**
  - i. This is the warning in this passage.
    - 1. We love when we experience grace. → We might even think that we deserve or deserved an action of grace.
    - 2. When we see other people experience grace, it can make us jealous.
      - a. Again, the vineyard owner has done no legal wrong to anyone in the scenario.
      - b. But, those who received their negotiated wage, became jealous and resentful of both their co-laborers and the vineyard owner.
  - ii. **How often do we look to other people's experiences, situations, benefits, jobs, or relationships and we act like those who were hired first?**
    - 1. We grumble, complain, and demean others. → This is particularly a risk generationally.
      - a. As parents, we work hard for our kids to have it better than we did, but then we grumble when they actually have it better. → The irony!

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<sup>12</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 502–503.

<sup>13</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 503.

- b. Listen to this from 1938 - **“Parents themselves were often the cause of many difficulties. They frequently failed in their obvious duty to teach self-control and discipline to their own children.”**<sup>14</sup>
    - c. **“The beardless youth... does not foresee what is useful, squandering his money.”** - Horace, 1st Century BC
  - 2. The grumbling and jealousy festered... it went on and on.
    - a. V.11. Receiving their pay under those circumstances was not a matter of rejoicing. They felt that they had not been treated fairly (had they not done twelve times as much as the latecomers?), and so they *grumbled*. **The verb is in the imperfect tense, which indicates a continuing process; the grumbling went on.**<sup>15</sup>
  - 3. We are quick to become jealous, envious, or just cold to someone because we so quickly center ourselves in our perspectives and worldviews.
    - a. This takes the form of another cultural phenomenon, narratology.
      - i. Narratology – My experience is the truth.
- iii. **The risk of jealousy is not the we desire something else or someone else’s something else, it is that we dehumanize and devalue the other person.**
  - 1. Those who grumbled and grew bitter and jealous, were robbed of the joy for their fellow worker who experienced grace.
  - 2. If we allow jealousy to take root in our lives, we can begin to think that other people (our neighbors, co-workers, children, grandchildren, etc.) do not deserve or are not valuable enough to receive God’s grace.
    - a. This is tragic!
    - b. Again, you might say, “I would never!” → But, the reality is that we all do this in little or big ways already.
    - c. When those subtle shifts and judgments become normal they grow into large and commonplace barriers.
- d. **We are to resist jealousy by routinely experiencing the generosity of God through grace.**
  - i. **Confession** – The action of prayerful declaring sin in my life to God.
    - 1. Don’t know what to confess? Ask the Spirit or a friend to point out a few things.
  - ii. **Repentance** – Turn from the sinful action and walk in the way of Jesus.
    - 1. Turn from doing life on your terms to doing life on God’s terms.
  - iii. **Bearing one another’s burdens** – Care for others.
    - 1. Loving our neighbors **with selfless love** is an essential mark of a follower of Jesus.
    - 2. Loving with selfless love is an gift of grace that requires generosity.
    - 3. The surprising effect is that care for others deepens our gratitude!
  - iv. **Salvation story** – Make it a habit to tell and re-tell yourself your salvation story.
    - 1. God’s grace made the truth of your sin palatable.
    - 2. God’s grace changed your heart.
    - 3. Keep bathing in that grace so that you will not forget it, or, more tragically, become deluded that you earned it.

<sup>14</sup> Problems of Young People, Leeds Mercury (British Newspaper) 1938