

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man 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?' "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Grace is not fair; it's free!

It's not fair! Those of who have gone through the experience of raising children know these words well, don't you?

- "He got more ice cream than I did; it's not fair."
- "She gets to stay up later than me; it's not fair."
- I had to do the dishes and she didn't; it's not fair!
- "I'm better than Billy and he made the team and I didn't; it's not fair."

Children want things to be equal. They don't want their sister or brother or friends to get something they don't get to have. But doesn't this happen with adults as well?

- Why did I get laid off at work and my friend didn't? It's not fair."
- "Why does my brother have a great job and live in a great house and go on vacations to nice places and I don't? It's not fair."
- Why did I have to get this cancer? I didn't smoke. I took care of my body. Why did this have to happen to me? It's not fair."

Did anyone tell you that life isn't fair? That's a hard lesson to learn, but it is true. The Bible says that we must go through a lot of hardship before we enter the kingdom of heaven. And some of us are going to go through a lot more hardship than others. That's just the way life is. Life isn't fair.

In our parable today, Jesus shows us that there is something else that's not fair. God's grace is not fair. ***It is free, but it is not fair.***

I. The blessing of free grace

Jesus tells us another parable about the kingdom of heaven in our text. Remember what the kingdom of heaven is all about? It's about God's work in the hearts of believers. It is about God building his church.

The story is very simple, but maybe it was hard for you to understand the timing because it is told using Jewish time. Let me tell it again using our time. A man had a vineyard and needed to get his grapes picked. So he went out at six o'clock in the morning to the place where you can get workers by the day and hired some men. He agreed to pay them \$100 if they worked the whole day. At 9:00 he went down and found some more men and hired them. He told them he would pay them whatever was right. At noon he went and hired some more with the same agreement and at 3:00 PM he hired some more. Then he went out at 5:00 PM, just one hour before quitting time, and hired some of the workers who sat around all day doing nothing.

At six o'clock, he went out to settle up with the workmen. He went to the men he hired last and gave them \$100 for working just one hour. Then he gave the men who worked three hours \$100. He paid all the men \$100, even those who worked for twelve hours even during the hottest part of the day.

"It's not fair!" they said. They expected to get paid more because they worked twelve times as much as the men who worked for only one hour. How did the landowner answer their complaint? **'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man 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?'**

What's the point that Jesus is making with this parable? It's very simple. God's grace is free, and God gives his grace to everyone no matter how hard they may have worked in the kingdom, or how often they went to church, or how much they prayed. The thief cross was a believer for about three or four hours. Yet he will get to have a place in heaven alongside the Apostle Paul, who traveled thousands of miles and endured all kinds of trials and hardships in order to reach people with the gospel. That doesn't seem quite fair, does it?

We all know about the thief on the cross. But do you know about Jeffrey Dahmer? He was a serial killer in Milwaukee who killed 17 boys and men and dismembered their bodies. He was

sent to prison for life. In prison, he asked to see a pastor. The pastor who visited him often was convinced of his repentance and baptized him. Not long after that he was stomped to death in a shower by fellow inmates. Do you think that God is being fair by letting someone like that into heaven?

That doesn't seem fair to our sinful nature, does it? We shouldn't expect it to make sense to our sinful nature, because our sinful nature will always think that heaven is something we have to earn by the things that we do. Sometimes you hear people expressing that at the funeral of someone they knew. "He was a good man. I'm sure he is in heaven looking down at us right now." If he was a good man and didn't believe in Jesus, he won't be in heaven. If he wasn't such a good man, but in the end believed in Jesus, he will be in heaven. That's what Jesus meant when he said, **"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."** God's plan of salvation is counterintuitive to our sinful nature. It turns things upside down. That's why grace isn't fair, it's free!

Deep down in your heart, I know you believe in Jesus for your salvation. But do you ever entertain some of those "non-grace" thoughts in your mind? I think that's a danger for those of us who were baptized into the kingdom as a child, grew up going to church every Sunday, taught Sunday School and have served on almost every committee in the congregation. We think that we have arrived at some higher level of sanctification, and that somehow we don't need God's grace as much as the person sitting next to us in the pew, or as much as Jeffrey Dahmer did in prison. We forget that we struggle against sin every day. We are just as broken and weak as the convert who just took his first breath of grace.

Does that describe you? Do you sometimes go through the motions of going to church, but get easily bored with the hymns and the liturgy and the sermons instead of looking for God's grace in every Word? Are your daily prayers hastily spoken and easily forgotten even though you are stepping before the throne of the most awesome God and Savior? Do you rush through your Bible reading ... or not read your Bible at all, because it has just become a task and chore instead of a grace moment in our life? If this is so then maybe you haven't really arrived at a higher level of sanctification. Maybe you are just in the middle like all the rest of God's people. You struggle with sin every day and you need God's grace, God's free grace. And that's what Jesus is telling us in this parable. God's grace is free, with no conditions, no strings attached.

Fiorello LaGuardia was the mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of WWII. He was a colorful character who used to ride the New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and go on the radio and read the Sunday funnies to the kids. One night, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her

daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. He said, "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson." LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions-ten dollars or ten days in jail." But even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his hat, saying: "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Baliff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." That's grace, she got what she didn't deserve.

God has done the same for us. When we stepped before his court for judgment, and we had nothing to pay the debt of our sin, Christ came to pay the judgment against us. He has pardoned us of every one of our sins. And even more, in his love he sustains us with his abundant grace every moment of our lives. He comforts us with the sure promise of sharing in his glory for eternity. Whether you have been a child of God all your life or just came to faith in Jesus, you have the same standing before God. You are God's children by grace. You are saints by faith.

So then why should we work?

II. The blessings of being a worker in the kingdom

Unlike the men in the parable who complained that they had to work all day and even in the heat of the day, we have nothing to complain about. I would not in a hundred years trade places with the thief on the cross, even if he had died a peaceful death and not shared a cross next to Jesus. In fact, I feel sorry for the thief on the cross because of all that he missed out on in his lifetime.

I have been blessed beyond imagination purely by the grace of God. I cannot remember my baptism, but I know it happened in my home, because I was born premature and my parents didn't want to take me out in the cold winter. What a blessing to have such Christian parents. I can remember sitting on my mother's lap and learning to sing a hymn when I was only three. "Glory be to Jesus" was the hymn she taught me. I remember learning about Jesus in our Lutheran school, and sitting in confirmation class. I will never complain that our pastor made me memorize lots of passages because I can call them to mind today in times of temptation and despair.

And for me, what a blessing that God has called me into this ministry, which I do not deserve one bit. It is all God's grace, just as Paul said many times about his ministry. I got to a college and seminary where I went to chapel twice a day. I learned to study the Bible in

the original languages. And now I get to be a pastor of such lovely Christian people like yourselves.

Sometimes we may complain about “the people in the church.” Shame on us when we do that! All of us are sinful and broken people. We are not among the saints in heaven yet, and we make mistakes. We sin against each other, mostly because of neglect, and sometimes because we can be mean spirited. We should never expect the church to be a perfect place. But it is a lovely place. David said it well in Psalm 84:10: **“Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.”** Where would I rather be than in God’s house with God’s people singing God’s praises and doing God’s work? If you should ever hear me complain about the church, then rebuke me and call me to repentance, because belonging to God’s Church and to a congregation of believers is a blessing that is mine only by grace.

If you should ever hear me complain about the work that I have to do for God’s kingdom, then rebuke me sharply and remind me that it is all God’s grace and nothing but God’s grace. Jesus said in **John 9:4: “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.”** Notice that Jesus said, “WE must do the work of him who sent me.” God has called each of you to do his work.

I grew up on a small dairy farm. I remember my father giving me chores when I was five years old. We never thought of getting paid for our work. We never even dreamed that we could sleep in on our days off. We worked alongside of our father because it was our farm. You are more than hired hands in Jesus’ vineyard. You are sons and daughters of the king.

In the end it is all about God’s grace. If we have been Christians as long as we can remember, that is God’s grace. If we have come to faith just recently, that, too, is God’s grace. Grace isn’t fair – it’s free. Amen.