

Topic: The Tension Getting Surprise of Grace

Subtitle: A reorientating perspective on God's grace

Video Presentation: <https://youtu.be/bqCylqELBkc>

As a youth minister, I often began a discussion with what was commonly called “*A Tension Getter*.” It was usually a short story or statement that would naturally bring disagreement, and it generally got everyone engaged in thinking about the topic. Today's parable of “*The Workers in the Vineyard*” does just that.

I had a seminary professor who said, “Parables are carefully crafted to work their way into the consciousness of the hearer and pose deep and striking questions. They are designed to disorient us before they reorient us with a new perspective.”¹ When Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God, he most often used parables. He did this because the principles upon which the kingdom of God is built are not easily explained. It is a world much like the make-believe world of “*Alice in Wonderland*,” where, as Alice puts it, things get “curiouser and curiouser.”

Today's parable comes from a familiar scene in Palestinian agriculture where “...*a landowner goes out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*”² But because the laborers are few, he keeps going out to find and hire more and more laborers. Five times he goes, throughout the day, to pick up those who are idle. He agrees to pay them a denarius each time he sends them to work. A denarius, by the way, was a generous day's pay for a common laborer. It was the equivalent of what a Roman soldier, who was higher up the economic and

¹ The Rev. Stephen Smith, Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity School for Ministry

² Matthew 20:1

social ladder than a common laborer, would receive for a day's work. So when the laborers in the parable agreed to this rate, they did so with eagerness because it was **more than fair**. But at the end of the day, they started to grumble when they noticed that all would be compensated the same regardless of the time of day they were hired. So the vineyard owner *"...answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?'"*³ *"... Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"*⁴

This parable challenges the way most of us think. God will certainly reward us, but his grace has nothing to do with our concept of fairness, which is often based on envy.

I saw this principle when my uncle, who had eleven children, was dealing with a complaint from the older siblings that he was not fair when they saw how generously he was able to treat their younger brothers and sisters. As it turned out, he could give his younger children more as his business grew and prospered. In his appeal to them, he admitted, "I cannot treat you all equally, but I did treat you with all the love I had." By the way, when he died none of his children could complain about his lack of generosity, because he made all eleven of his children millionaires by the inheritance he left them.

In the same way, God may not treat us all equally, but his generosity is always more than we will ever deserve. And when we get to heaven, none of us will have anything to complain

³ Matthew 20:13

⁴ Matthew 20:15

about, for we will be *“heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”*⁵

In his book, “What’s So Amazing About Grace,” Phillip Yancey points out that what challenges and disturbs us the most about grace is that it is not based on merit. Any attempt to earn a right standing before God or put him in a place where He owes us something is contrary to the nature of grace.

One of the easiest ways to understand the nature of grace is by using the word itself as an acronym. Grace is:

God’s

Riches

At

Christ’s

Expense

With this understanding, we can see why grace is based wholly and entirely on the generosity of God, where God takes the initiative to first love us.

We can see an example of this unearned grace in the life of Jonah, who is featured in our first lesson today. Jonah is the closest resemblance to the prodigal son in all the Old Testament. When he was called to preach to the citizens of Nineveh, he ran as far as he could in the opposite direction. Consequently, he ended up in the belly of a whale that took him down to the depths of the earth. In his repentance, he reluctantly but finally responded to the call of God. And despite his apparent prejudices and hatred towards people of other nationalities, God patiently dealt with him, even though pagan sailors acted more righteous and God-fearing than he did. If there is a moral to the

⁵ Romans 8:17

story, it is that he was loved by God more than he could ever deserve.

From first to last, God's love (and any rewards that may follow our loving response to him) must be viewed from this perspective.

Therefore, when we hear the call of God to ***“go out into the vineyard”***⁶ and work, we can do so with joy knowing:

- It will connect us deeper to God and his purposes.
- It also will profoundly connect us with other people.
- It will give us a greater sense of God's presence and help.
- It will expand our comprehension of God's kingdom.
- It prevents us from the human tendency to become self-centered.
- And ultimately, it will keep us out of trouble. Idol hands and minds are the devil's playground.

The hymn, *“Come Labor On,”*⁷ poetically exhorts: “Claim the high calling angels cannot share—to young and old the Gospel gladness bear: redeem the time; its hours too swiftly fly. The night draws nigh.”⁸

So why should we labor on? Because, as Jonah declared, ***“God is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love.”***⁹

When the Apostle John saw a vision of that future day when our Lord will return, he heard our Lord say, ***“Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done.”***¹⁰

⁶ Matthew 20:4 & 7

⁷ The Church Hymnal, 1982 #541

⁸ Ibid. verse 4

⁹ Jonah 4:2

¹⁰ Revelation 22:12 (paraphrased)

“Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”¹¹ Amen.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:58