

IT'S ALL ABOUT GRACE

FOCUS

In Philip Yancey's book - *What's So Amazing About Grace?* – he quotes Mark Twain. Apparently Twain said he put a dog and a cat in a cage together as an experiment, to see if they could get along. They did, so he put in a bird, pig and goat. They, too, got along fine after a few adjustments. Then he put in a Baptist, Presbyterian, and Catholic; soon there was not a living thing left.

Yancey said when he first thought about writing the book he was going to call it - *What's So Amazing About Grace and Why Don't Christians Show More of It?*

Yancey was asking himself as he wrote the book – If grace is God's love for the undeserving, then what does it look like in action? And if Christians are its sole dispensers, then how are we doing at lavishing grace on a world that knows far more of cruelty and unforgiveness than it does of mercy and grace?

This morning I want to talk about grace by looking at a fascinating story once told by Jesus in Matthew 20. It's a parable. It's a parable or story about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like and what Kingdom people – Christians - ought to be like. Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 20. RDG 1-16.

Let's note a few things about this amazing story of the Kingdom from Jesus.

- The vineyard owner first went out *"early in the morning"* we are told to hire the first workers. This would be at the start of the day back then – 6AM. Often a work day would be 12 hours from 6AM to 6PM. The first workers agreed to be paid the usual wage for a days work – a denarius.
- The owner went out again at 9, 12, 3, and 5 to hire the other workers who agreed to be paid *"whatever is right"*.
- At the end of the day, as was the custom, he gathered the workers to be paid. Normally the first people hired would be paid first, so they could go home first. But in Jesus' story the last people hired were paid first. I'm sure they were overjoyed at their payment of a denarius for 1 hour of work. You can imagine the excitement of those who had worked all day long. But they were given exactly what they had agreed to be paid – a denarius.
- Keep in mind that no one in this story was cheated. No one was underpaid. Some just felt that they were. But their complaint was one of jealousy, envy, resentment and anger.

Well, what are we to make of this? What is Jesus trying to say here?

THE KEY TO INTERPRETING THE PARABLE

The key to understanding this story of Jesus is to look at the context and what Jesus said just before and just after this parable. You will notice that this parable is bracketed by a similar statement in 19:30 and 20:16. Jesus comments – *"the first will be last and the last will be first"*.

Jesus is seeking to teach a couple of very important truths through this little story.

#1 - GOD & HIS KINGDOM ARE ALL ABOUT GRACE, GOODNESS AND GENEROSITY

I'm sure you relate to the reaction of the workers who worked all day long in the hot sun and only got paid the same as those who worked 1 measly hour in the coolest part of the day! Right? Their reaction makes sense to us. It is a normal human reaction. Like them we would feel ripped off. We would say – *"That's not fair!" "That's not right!" "They don't deserve that!" "I deserve more!" "I deserve better!"* Right?

You may remember the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son had a similar reaction. He was indignant that the father was lavishing love on that returned prodigal son of his. Essentially he was saying – *"he doesn't deserve that, I do"*.

It doesn't make sense to us, it doesn't seem right – and that's just the point. God is way more generous than us. His goodness is not anything like ours. His grace is amazing. It extends to those who don't deserve it.

There's a familiar story in the OT of the same reaction to the goodness, grace, and generosity of God. It's the story of Jonah. God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach against it because of their sin. Nineveh was the arch enemy of Israel. So Jonah instead ran off 1200 kms in the opposite direction. As far away from sinful Nineveh as he could.

As you know the story is a little fishy after that, but God eventually brought Jonah to Nineveh anyway to preach. As a result Nineveh repented. Praise the Lord! Right? Well that's not what Jonah thought. Here's what Jonah 4:1,2 tells us – *“But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love.”*

This is exactly what Jesus is saying about God and His Kingdom in Matthew 20 as well. It is all about God's grace, goodness and generosity to people who do not deserve it. It has nothing to do with how good we are. It has nothing to do with what we have earned. It has nothing to do with what we think is right. It has everything to do with God and His grace, goodness, and generosity.

And you know what – I'm kind of glad about that. If you and I got what we deserved we would have no hope whatsoever. The Bible says – *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* – Romans 3:23. *“The wages of sin, is death”* – Romans 6:23. The verse though goes on to say – *“but the gift of God is eternal life”*. Ephesians 2:8,9 adds – *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.”*

Look at those verses the way the Message translation puts them – *“Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving.”*

Praise God eternal life is not fair. It is God's gift. It's all about grace. It has nothing to do with you. All we do is respond and accept it.

Denise Banderman tells this story about what took place in a classroom at Hannibal LaGrange College in Missouri back in 2002.

It was the day for final exams. Denise Banderman walked into the classroom minutes before the professor arrived. Everybody in the room was doing last-minute cramming. Then the professor enters and takes a few minutes to review. Most of it was familiar, but there were some things that no one remembered ever hearing. The professor responded with what sends cold chills up every student's spine: *“This is in your textbook, and you are responsible for the content on this exam.”*

The Professor, Dr. Tom Hufty, handed out the exams and gave the word for the students to turn their papers over and begin. This is what Denise says about what she saw when she turned her paper over - *“I couldn't believe it! To my astonishment every answer on the test was filled in. My name was even written on the exam in red ink.”* It was the same for every student in the class.

On the bottom of the last page of every test was this note from the professor: *“All the answers on your test are correct. You will receive an A on the final exam. The reason you passed the test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test did not help you get the A.”*

(Denise Banderman, Hannibal, Missouri; cited in PreachingToday.com, "Professor Takes Students' Test for Them")

I never had a professor like that when I was in school, but all of us have a God just like that. His grace is amazing. His goodness is incredible. His generosity is unbelievable. Would you say amen to that?

There's a second truth Jesus wants us to learn from this parable – Because God and His kingdom are all about grace, goodness and generosity -

#2 – GOD'S KINGDOM PEOPLE NEED TO BE ALL ABOUT GRACE, GOODNESS AND GENEROSITY AS WELL

While we may understand the reaction of those who worked all day long in the hot sun, their attitude is wrong. Attitudes of anger, complaining, and bitterness have no place in the Kingdom of God and the church. Instead we need to be people like our God – full of grace, goodness, and generosity. Instead of

resentment we need rejoicing. Instead of jealousy, joy. Instead of bitterness, blessing. Instead of grumbling, gratefulness. That's the lesson Jonah needed to learn. That's the lesson we need to learn.

Our natural inclination is to be like Jonah and not share God's goodness with others. Our natural inclination is to give people only what they deserve.

Let's imagine you have a 6 year old son whom you love dearly. Tragically, one day you discover your son was horribly murdered. After a lengthy search the investigators find the killer. If you were to use whatever means you had and were able to kill that murderer that would be vengeance. If instead you allowed the courts to arrive at a guilty verdict and sentence him to life in prison – that would be justice. But if you were to plead for the pardon of that murderer, forgive him completely, invite him into your home, and adopt him as your son, that would be grace. I'm not suggesting that we should do that, but that would be the kind of grace that God shows to us and the kind of grace he wants us to show to others.

I love the sub-title to Charles Swindoll's book – *The Grace Awakening* – it is *"Believing in grace is one thing. Living it is another."*

Philip Yancey once commented – *"When I ask people, 'What is a Christian?' they don't usually respond with words like love, compassion, grace; usually they describe a person who's anti-something. Jesus was not primarily known for what he was against. He was known for serving people who had needs, feeding people who were hungry, and giving water to the thirsty. If we the church were known primarily for that, then we could cut through so many divisions."*

Again Jesus said - *"the first will be last and the last will be first"*. In the Kingdom of God we need an attitude of humble service. We need the attitude of Jesus. Notice what Jesus adds a bit later in Matthew 20 at verses 26-28 - *"whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

There is an old parable about a farmer who had 2 sons. When the farmer died the 2 boys took over the farm and formed a partnership. They both contributed what they could and at harvest time they would divide everything equally.

Over the years the elder brother never married. The younger brother did marry and had 8 children. Some years later when they had an excellent harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself – *"My brother has 10 mouths to feed. I only have 1. He really needs more of this harvest than I do, but I know he is too fair to renegotiate. So, in the middle of the night I'll take some of what I have and put it in his barn to help him feed his family."*

At the very same time, the younger brother was thinking to himself, *"God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn't been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do. But I know him, he's much too fair. He'll never renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the middle of the night I'll take some of my portion and slip into his barn."*

And so, as you may have anticipated, those 2 brothers came face to face that night, each on a mission of generosity, goodness and grace. At that moment, though there wasn't a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. The rabbinic parable says that the rain is God weeping for joy because 2 of His children had gotten the point. God and His kingdom are all about grace, goodness and generosity, and if we want to be like God - citizens of His kingdom - then we too will seek to demonstrate grace, goodness and generosity to everyone around us.

The recent issue of the "Thrive" magazine of our Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists is all about Grace. The President of the Fellowship – Stephen Jones – who was at BBC for our 50th Anniversary – wrote this in the magazine:

Imagine for a moment what would happen if you were to wake up tomorrow morning to discover that Jesus has moved into your heart and mind for just one single, twenty-four hour day. Jesus is inside you. He walks in your slippers. He assumes your daily routines. He drives your car. He sits at your desk. Jesus is living your life, living in your heart and mind. Your heart gets the day off. Your mind takes on the mind of Christ.

What would you be like? What changes might people notice? Would you treat your spouse, your kids, neighbours, friends, co-workers, the poor, your enemies, the same? What differences would they see? And you? How would you feel? How would you think differently? How would your behaviour be altered? How would you live the next twenty-four hours?

Those are good questions to think about. What are some ways we can play nice?

What are some ways in which you can show the goodness, grace, and generosity of Jesus to others this week? What are some ways you can demonstrate this even to those who don't deserve it?

Because the reality is - if you have surrendered your life to Christ, then you do have Jesus living inside of you and He ought to shine through you! The Apostle Paul put it this way in Galatians 2:20 (NIV): *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* Jesus lavished us with His grace and asks us to lavish it on others.

A woman was asked by a co-worker, *"What is it like to be a Christian?"*

The co-worker replied, *"It is like being a pumpkin. God picks you from the patch, brings you in, and washes all the dirt off of you. Then he cuts off the top and scoops out all the yucky stuff. He removes the seeds of doubt, hate, greed, etc., and then He carves you a new smiling face and puts His light inside of you to shine for all the world to see."*