

## The Shock and Awe of Grace – Matthew 19:30 – 20:16

**Introduction:** Did you hear the one about the pregnant woman whose husband was on a military assignment, and she was involved in a car accident? Her injuries left her in a deep coma, and she didn't wake up for 6 months. When she woke up she discovered that she was no longer pregnant and frantically asks the doctor about her baby. The doctor said, *"Ma'am you had twins! - a boy and a girl. And since your husband is on military assignment, your brother named them."* The woman thought to herself, *"Oh no, not my brother ... he's not very bright!"* She asks the doctor, *"What's my girl's name?" "Denise." "Oh, that's not a bad name, I like it! What's the boy's name?" "Denephew."*

In his book, "What's So Amazing About Grace," Phillip Yancey says that *"part of our problem is in the nature of grace itself. Grace is scandalous. It's hard to accept, hard to believe, and hard to receive. Grace shocks us in what it offers. It is truly not of this world. It frightens us with what it does for sinners. Grace teaches us that God does for others what we would never do for them. Grace is a gift that costs everything to the giver and nothing to the receiver. It is given to those who don't deserve it, barely recognize it, and hardly appreciate it. That's why God alone gets the glory in your salvation. Jesus did all the work when he died on the cross."*

Christianity has been called a religion of grace, yet grace is one of the most misunderstood virtues of all, mostly because we hardly think about what it means.

This morning let's look at a parable that helps us understand what grace means. It's commonly called **The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard**. Let's read Matthew 19:30 - 20:16.

Let me try to set the scene. Back then there were no employment agencies, so the unskilled workers would gather in these public marketplaces in hopes of finding work.

Here we have a landowner whose vineyard needed to be harvested. So, he went to the marketplace before dawn to find workers. Now, gathering grapes was very hectic work, because during the harvesting season, it would get very hot, and the grapes needed to be harvested quickly before bad weather set in.

He hired his workers and agreed to pay them a denarius which today would be the equivalent of about \$50. But, apparently the job was too much for these workers, so the landowner needed to hire more workers to get

the job done. He did this at 9:00 AM, at noon, at 3:00 PM, and again at 5:00 PM when you'd think that all of the men had gone home. But, some were still there hoping to be hires, so the landowner hired them.

So basically, we have two groups of workers: those hired early at a set wage; and those who were hired later who went to work on a promise to be paid at whatever was right.

Well, when the work day was through at 6:00 PM, it was time for the landowner to pay his workers, so he lined them up from the last hired to first hired. No doubt that those who had worked all day were becoming a bit confused at this point.

Now it's not spelled out, but we can reasonably assume that all the workers up to those hired first were paid a denarius. You can imagine the shock of the all-day workers felt as everyone got paid the same. And that is when their attitudes went south.

They began to grumble and complain, and then they got downright mad as they saw those guys who had only worked for one hour get paid the same as they who had worked all day out in the heat. But I want you to notice the real problem they had. It wasn't so much the pay as it was the fact that they felt as though the landowner had made the other workers equal to them (vs. 12).

That is when the land owner rebuffed the workers' argument by reminding them that they had agreed to work for a denarius. And at the end of the day, both sides had lived up to their end of the bargain. The workers worked, and the landowner paid them what they had agreed to work for. What the landowner paid the other workers was really none of their business.

Then Jesus brings the story to an end in vs.16 as He says: "*So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*" (Mt. 20:16 NIV). The lesson is this: In the Kingdom of God, things are often just the opposite of what we expect, and God shows no partiality.

As I said in the beginning, this is a story about grace. Grace is a nice word, but when we see it really played out, it shocks us. It doesn't sound right, look right or seem right. Grace can be quite disturbing, because it's not the way we normally do things.

Now, obviously we can apply this text to mean that it doesn't matter when people are saved, they all will get into heaven, but I think there's more in this passage that we can learn. I want to point out four other lessons. First we can learn that:

**1. Grace Is a Gift.** The real problem in this text is the fact that this landowner was gracious in his generosity. Vs. 15, he asks the question, "*Are you envious because I am generous?*" They were taking the man's generosity for granted.

Once there was a man who stepped out to get his morning paper, and to his surprise, he found a penny taped to the step with a note that said, "*It's yours to keep!*" Well, he didn't think much of it, so he just put it in his pocket and went about his business.

The next day, he went to get his paper and there laid the same note attached to two pennies. He looked around to see who left it but found no one. Again he just put them in his pocket and went about his business.

By the third day, when he stepped outside and found 4 cents taped to a note lying on his doorstep, he got more than a little curious. He went back inside and made several phone calls to see if someone was pulling a prank on him, but no one would own up to it. He thought to himself, "*I bet someone's having a good laugh about now, but this can't last much longer.*"

But it did. Every day for the next two weeks, he'd find that the amount of money lying on his doorstep had been doubled from the previous day. And after the second week, he went out and found \$81.92 lying on his doorstep. By this time, He got a little uneasy and even called the police station to see if there was a serial killer or a stalker on the loose, but to no avail.

This activity continued on until the man started expecting the money lying on his doorstep. And it did for two more weeks. By the end of the month, the man's total fortune of money received was \$5,368,709.52. But by this time, he had very little of it left. You see, the man had started spending the money – buying cars and jewelry and a condo on the beach. He was going out to fancy restaurants and really living it up. And all his relatives found out about his good fortune and they came out of the woodworks wanting a piece of the pie.

But on the first day of the next month, the man went outside to get his money, and didn't see any. He looked under the mat, behind the hedges, and under the car but no money. He searched frantically all over the

neighborhood, stopping by each house down his street to see if perhaps it had been left at someone else's house by mistake. He went down to the police station and filed a report of theft, for he was sure someone had stolen his money. The next day and the next, he went out to find his money, but there was none. He was upset. He was mad. He was furious because the money was not there. Finally, he looked up to the sky and cursed God for being so mean and cruel. He demanded justice, and then he fell over dead.

Isn't that like us sometimes? We receive God's grace so much, that we take it for granted and we begin to expect it like the workers of this parable. Vs. 10 says, "*they expected to receive more.*" In the kingdom of God, there is no such thing as merit! God's grace is given according to His good pleasure.

Now admittedly the this landowner's action regarding how he paid his workers is confusing. But, let's not miss the point of the story: God is the giver of gifts, not wages.

If it's a wage that we want from God, the Bible says that our salary is already figured out for us. If we want to be rewarded and paid for what we deserve, then Rom. 6:23 spells it out: "*For the wages of sin is death...*" But, if we want to receive what God wants to freely give us, then the last part of this verse offers us something far better than just compensation: "*but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

God's grace is a gift. **There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. And there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.** If we'll just remember those two things, it will make all the difference in how we think about God's grace

Like a gift, the only thing we can do with grace...is to receive it. The second lesson we can learn from this parable is:

**2. Grace Keeps Us from Self Depreciation.** Has anyone ever felt like you couldn't do anything right? Do you struggle with discontentment? Has anyone ever felt inferior, or like no one else knew how you felt?

Let's think about those who were not hired until 5:00 p.m. They waited while everyone else was hired. They had almost resigned themselves to the fact that they probably were not going to be able to put food on the table that night. All day long they were passed over like a little boy chosen last for kick ball.

But, this story shows us the Lord's compassion for the forgotten. Usually the best and strongest were the first picked. These workers were the leftovers - the least skilled. Who in their right mind would pick them?

I think in a way these workers represent every one of us. When I think about it, what do I have to offer the Lord? Does He need my brains? My strength? My money? My good deeds? No.

But listen, my confidence and joy in this life is not based on what I have or don't have, or on what I do, or don't do. Rather my confidence is on WHO I have! And so is yours. For on judgment day, when I stand before my Savior there will be no distinction between me and Billy Graham. There will be no distinction between you and the Apostle Paul. Saved preachers and saved prostitutes will stand on equal ground because no one is any more worthy than another to receive salvation. We're all unworthy. The third lesson we can learn from this parable is that:

**3. Grace Makes Us Equal.** In vs. 12, the workers complained to the landowner, "...*you have made them equal to us.*" The all-day workers don't complain so much about their wage, as they do the fact that they wanted to be superior.

The word "*grumble*" is in the imperfect tense, which means that they grumbling constantly. This helps us see what kind of workers they really were. They didn't say, "*You have put us on a par with the late-comers,*" Instead, they grumbled, "*you have put them on a par with us.*"

In other words, they were not only dissatisfied with what they had received; they were envious of what had been given to the others. They were the ones who had worked all day out in the heat, so compared to these upstarts, who only worked an hour; they thought they were worth a lot more.

Sometimes we can tend to think that because we've been saved longer, or because we do more, that God should love us more, or that we should get preferential treatment. But that is nothing more than putting ourselves above other people.

Look at what took place in the hearts of these workers. They started by comparing themselves with others. This then led to coveting, which led to complaining, which led to criticizing. Is there anyone else who struggles with these things? If we're honest, we all do, so we have to stop comparing ourselves with others. In God's economy of grace, we're all equal.

Romans 12:3 says that we are not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to. So let's stop being so hard on other people. Stop looking for things that don't seem fair. Refuse to criticize. Be gracious with others. Finally, we can learn that:

**4. Grace Offers a Fresh Start.** The Christian life is really a series of new beginnings. That's what grace is all about. No one is first, and no one is last. I'm not better than you and you're no better than me. We're all covered by the grace of Christ.

Notice what Jesus said in vs. 16: "*So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*" Now look at 19:30: "*But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.*"

He changes the order, doesn't He? It's as if Jesus is trying to make the point that first and last don't matter any more in the kingdom of God. Grace is not about where we finish. It's not about keeping score. It's about having a fresh start.

**Conclusion:** God said in **Isaiah 1:18 (NIV)** "*Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.*" This is the shock and awe of God's grace. It truly is "*out of this world*" for none of us would have thought of something like this.

Do you want a fresh start today? Do you need a new beginning? You can have one because of God's amazing grace. And all you have to do is ask and you won't be turned down.