

Matthew 20:1-16

Pentecost 21; October 22 & 23, 2023

Give a single bag of M&Ms to two four-year-olds and tell them to share. You will witness counting done with precision. Each child will get an equal amount of candy because that is fair. Human beings have an incredibly strong sense of fairness. That is why it can be so puzzling when we see how God dispenses blessing and grace. We see people who don't believe in God who are more prosperous than believers. We see people who convert on their deathbed, and Scripture tells us they obtain the same salvation as someone who has been Christian all his life. How is that fair? The reality is, it's not fair. We need to stop expecting God to be fair. God is not fair. He does not give us what we deserve, instead he gives us this incredible thing called grace. What's even more amazing, he is incredibly generous with his grace.

That's the point of the parable that Jesus tells us today. Grace is an attitude in God by which he loves with a love that has its cause only in God. God doesn't love you because you're so cute or cuddly or have checked all the right boxes. He doesn't love you because you're so pitiful and wretched and in desperate need of help, even though you are. He loves you because that is what God does. He wants us to see just how unfair God is.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. "About nine in the morning 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 noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon, 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.'"

Everything that this landowner does, says that he is unfair. In the chapter before our text, a young man comes **"up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"** Jesus gives a simple answer: **"If you want to enter life, keep the commandments."** The young man says that is no problem. **"All these I have kept,"** is the answer he gives to Jesus. The sad thing is that he really thought this was true. Jesus wants him to see that he really had not done that. He just couldn't put God ahead of everything else in his life. So, Jesus points this out to him in his response. **"If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."** He just couldn't do that because he had too much wealth. So, he walks away.

But I wonder what the disciples thought when they heard these words of Jesus? *But we've done that. We have left our former jobs. We have left our families. We have left everything, and we have come and followed you.* **"Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"** Our parable for this morning is part of Jesus' answer to that question. He tells them – you get a denarius. If you think that you have a place in God's kingdom because of what you do, you will be disappointed. If you think that you have a place in God's kingdom because of what you do, then you don't understand *GRACE*.

Grace can only be undeserved. It forces us to admit that even on my best day, I'm not good enough on my own. He wants his listeners to see that no matter how many sacrifices they made, no matter how many calves they gave for burnt offerings, no matter how many gallons of oil they brought to the temple or how many *"good"* things they did, they cannot deserve heaven. No matter how we think or act in this life, we will remain tarnished because of sin. You cannot earn heaven!

Jesus tells us to come back to his grace. You can't deserve it, but the Lord only deals with you in grace. He wants us to see his grace not in what we do, but in what he has done. You can't choose him or give yourself to him. He chooses you. He sees your heart tarnished by sin and claims it as his own. We can try to check off all kinds of boxes with what we do, grace wants us to see that we can't. He wants us to get rid of any notion that you are a Christian by your accomplishments. He wants you to see that it is his grace that works in you. He brings us to him as we see (saw) in baptism today. He wants us to see that he drowns your sinful nature and all that goes with it. He takes those sins and nails them to his cross. He puts you to death in those waters. He puts you to death so he can raise you up again. He creates you as a new creature dripping with grace. Your sins are forgiven and you are now bound to your Savior by his grace.

Jesus wants to be clear. No matter when he brings us to trust in him and forgives our sins, he will give each of us the same thing -- a denarius. **“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one 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?’”**

That’s hard to completely swallow. The better we do, the better we think that we are. That’s how we think. I want to you to picture yourself driving on a highway and you are coming up to a construction zone. You see that big yellow sign with a flashing arrow telling you to move over. Your lane is about to close. So, you change lanes just like you are supposed to. But there is always that person who thinks that arrow doesn’t apply to them. They come racing down that lane trying to get ahead as far as they can before they change lanes. Now they are trying to cut in right in front of you. Don’t you love that? Isn’t there a part of us that says: *I’m not going to let you in. It’s not fair. I followed the rules and you didn’t, so I’m not going to let you in.* It’s not fair. I followed the rules, you didn’t. So, you are going to sit there for a while. But if you think about it, your attitude isn’t much better, isn’t it? Yet, isn’t that the beauty of grace? Whether we have had faith in Jesus all our life, or obtained it on our death bed, we get to experience God’s generosity. We get the denarius.

At some point in our lives, we have probably thought: *It’s not fair.* How many times don’t we think that God is not fair. Thank God that he is not fair. Instead, he pours out his grace on us purely out of his love. We give thanks that we have a God who pours out on us his incredible grace. Amen.