



Grace

JESUS OFFERS GRACE TO ALL PEOPLE.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 20:1-16 Memory Verse: Matthew 20:16

In Matthew 20, we instinctively agree with the men in the first group. They were hired early, labored for twelve hours, and sweated through the hottest part of the day. On the surface, their compensation does seem unfair when compared to those who worked only an hour. But, as the owner pointed out, he had the right to show generosity to everyone who worked for him. What some might call unfairness actually represented grace.

Sometimes, we expect more for what we've done, and we begin to grumble and complain. We think we deserve better—maybe even from God. But God's values run counter to our natural way of thinking. He is a generous God who loves to give—even to those who don't "deserve" it. Truth is, none of us really deserve any grace from His hand. Thankfully, God does not pay based on merit. He gives based on His generosity.

As you prepare to lead this lesson on God's grace to all people, write down what you remember about times God has shown His amazing grace toward you. Reflect on how your life has changed because of His mercy. Consider sharing it with the adults in your Bible study as a way to challenge them to remember His grace.



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Everybody wants to be treated fairly. We become resentful when we perceive we have not received equal treatment. “Unfair,” we cry as we demand justice. “He got a bigger piece of cake!” “Her bonus was larger than mine, and I did most of the work.” We always want what we think we deserve. Yet life often is unfair. Life never levels the playing field for all those participating. Some are treated better, others are pushed down, but all suffer under the inequalities of life. (PSG, p. 72)

Why do you think we perceive life as being continually unfair?



Understand the Context (Matthew 20:1-34)

Matthew 20 is a continuation from chapter 19. Many scholars note that the Bible’s chapter divisions are not found in ancient manuscripts. Instead, they were introduced in the thirteenth century and, unfortunately, obscure the connection between the narrative in chapter 19 and the parable in chapter 20.

Bible students also propose different explanations for why Jesus told this parable. Some think He intended to contrast the religious who thought they had earned God’s favor with the tax collectors and sinners who didn’t “deserve” such grace. Others believe Jesus intended to contrast the Jewish people with Gentiles who were considered outsiders and unworthy of the kingdom. Still, others take the long view and suggest that Jesus was warning His contemporaries not to presume greater privileges than those who would believe in the centuries to come. And some think that Jesus was warning those who served Him faithfully not to despise those who either came to faith late in life or even on their deathbed.

However, since chapter 20 continues the episode of chapter 19, it is best to understand the main application of Jesus’s warning as being to His own apostles to whom He had just promised great rewards in the future kingdom (Matt. 19:28).

In chapter 19, a rich, young ruler had come to Jesus, asking about eternal life (19:16). Jesus gently led the man to see that his passion for possessions was stronger than His desire to follow

Jesus. He challenged the man to sell his belongings so He could follow Jesus with his whole heart. But the man walked away (19:21-22).

Speaking for the other disciples, Peter pointed out their commitment to Jesus. They had left their old lives behind and wondered what it meant for their future (19:27). Jesus assured them that they would be rewarded in God’s eternal kingdom. In that renewed era, they would sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28).

Jesus then shared that in God’s kingdom, the values of this life are reversed. Those who think they are first will be last, while those who seem stuck at the end will be first (19:30). To impress this lesson on His disciples, Jesus told a parable called “The Workers in the Vineyard” in Matthew 20:1-16. This story describing the kingdom of heaven and its rewards ends with a similar note as 19:30, except in reverse order.

Jesus’s parable is another way in which He stated, “the kingdom of heaven is like.” By one count, of the forty-three parables Jesus told, thirteen were about the kingdom. Twelve of those are in Matthew’s Gospel. Of the twelve that Matthew included, seven are in chapter 13 alone (13:11,24,31,33,44,45,47,52). This one is unique to Matthew’s Gospel.

Read Matthew 20:1-16 in your Bible and put yourself in the story. How would you react had you been among those who were hired at the first hour? (PSG, p. 73)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 5** (*Poster: Parables of Jesus*). Make copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Matthew Time Line*) and **Pack Item 13** (*Handout: Interpreting Parables*).

READ: Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 72 of the PSG. Stress the sentence “We always want what we think we deserve” by re-reading it.

ASK: **Why do you think we perceive life as being continually unfair?** (PSG, p. 72)

CONTEXT: Point out **Pack Item 5** (*Poster: Parables of Jesus*). Introduce today’s lesson by explaining that Jesus often used parables to help believers grasp spiritual and eternal questions. Share the following content from Understand the Context to highlight the events leading up to this study:

The parable in Matthew 20:1-16 is the capstone of the larger section of teaching found in 19:16–20:16. This sequence of events and teachings began with the inquiry of the rich young ruler. It continued with a discussion between Jesus and the disciples concerning the rewards of following Jesus. To illustrate the truths concerning eternal life and eternal rewards, Jesus shared the parable that begins chapter 20. What is profound about this section is the reversal of all that might be expected from a human perspective. . . . The people of Jesus’s day expected the rich would be treated differently than the poor. The disciples were surprised at Jesus’s teaching about the impossibility of the rich entering the kingdom of heaven. Jesus turned all these expectations on their ear. (PSG, p. 73)

TRANSITION: Last week, we learned that no one gets to heaven based on their position or possessions. Today’s passage emphasizes God’s goodness and grace as He offers salvation to all.



Group Activity Option

Music

Direct adults’ attention to “’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus” (*Baptist Hymnal 2008, No. 502*). After singing the first verse of the hymn, ask, **According to this verse, why is it so sweet to trust in Jesus?** Discuss responses. Challenge adults to examine each verse of the song to identify more reasons believers can trust Jesus.

Workers Hired (Matt. 20:1-7)

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2** After agreeing with the workers on one denarius, he sent them into his vineyard for the day. **3** When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. **4** He said to them, ‘You also go into my vineyard, and I’ll give you whatever is right.’ So off they went. **5** About noon and about three, he went out again and did the same thing. **6** Then about five he went and found others standing around and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?’ **7** ‘Because no one hired us,’ they said to him. ‘You also go into my vineyard,’ he told them.”

(vv. 1-2) The term *for* continues Matthew’s look at the teaching of Jesus related to topic of rewards (Matt. 19:27-29). **The kingdom of heaven is like** is a formulaic simile that Jesus used to begin other kingdom parables (13:11,24,31,33,44,45,47,52). This parable concerns **a landowner** who owned **a vineyard**.

On a symbolic level, the owner represents God, while vineyards often represented Israel in Scripture (Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer. 2:21; 12:10). However, viticulture was common in ancient Israel, especially in the fertile soil of Galilee. That the landowner needed to return to the marketplace so many times to hire more workers suggests that his vineyard was large.

The story is set at harvest. The ripe grapes needed to be picked before they rotted or were damaged by a storm. Grape harvest was labor-intensive as each cluster had to be cut by hand. So the landowner **went out early in the morning to hire workers**. These were day laborers, who would gather in the local marketplace (v. 3) and wait to be hired. Going early suggests the landowner was looking for the best workers who were willing to give him a full day’s work.

Being there early, the landowner had no trouble finding workers. He negotiated with them for the normal rate of **one denarius** for the day (Matt. 18:28; 22:19). A *denarius* was a Roman silver coin. With their compensation set, **he sent them into his vineyard for the day**.

(vv. 3-4) The landowner later returned to the **marketplace**. **About nine in the morning** means “about the third hour.” The Jews began their day at sunrise, approximately 6 a.m.

On returning to the marketplace, the landowner **saw others standing . . . doing nothing** (literally “without work”). The narrative does not record any negotiation for their pay. The landowner simply promised to **give you whatever is right** (that is, something “just” or “fair”). These workers needed to trust the landowner’s word that he would pay them, and they probably figured they would get less than a denarius since they already lost three hours of the workday.

(vv. 5-7) Three more times the landowner returned to the marketplace looking for workers: **about noon** (“about the sixth hour”), **about three** (“about the ninth hour”), and **about five** (literally, “about the eleventh hour”). In none of these hirings did the landowner negotiate payment, but the words **did the same thing** probably indicate that he told those workers he would pay them what was right, as he did with those he hired at 9 a.m.

The case is different with those hired about five because the landowner saw them **standing around**. When he asked why they had been standing there all day, they told him that **no one hired us**. While these men clearly wanted work, their response may hint that they were the most undesirable of workers. Still, the landowner decided to give them a chance—**you also go into my vineyard**, the same words he used to those he hired in verse 4.

This time nothing is said about remuneration at all. The owner did not even promise to pay them what is right (v. 4 and implied in v. 5). However, Jesus placed special emphasis on this group by noting their direct discourse with the landowner. No other group of hired laborers had their words shared in the story.

Equally Paid (Matt. 20:8-12)

8 “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, ‘Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first.’ **9** When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius. **10** So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. **11** When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: **12** ‘These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day’s work and the burning heat.’”

(v. 8) *When evening came*, the 12-hour workday ended. The **owner of the vineyard** can also mean “the lord” (*kurios*). Highlighting *kurios* at this turning point in the parable reminded Jesus’s disciples that the owner represented God.

A **foreman** supervised the property for the owner. At the end of the day, the owner told his foreman to gather the laborers and to **give them their pay**. In the law, day workers were to be paid at the end of each day (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:15) because their family’s daily existence depended on it. Further, the foreman was instructed to distribute the wages **starting with the last and ending with the first**. It is not clear if this practice was unusual or not, but it certainly aligns with the point of Jesus’s parable and with Jesus’s sayings in Matthew 19:30 and 20:16.

(vv. 9-10) The workers **hired about five** had worked only one hour, with no guarantee regarding pay (v. 7). Given that, they must have been incredibly surprised when **each received one denarius**—a whole day’s pay!

The groups hired at 9 a.m., noon, and 3 p.m. are not essential to the story, but we can assume that they all received a denarius as well. When the time came to pay the workers hired at 6 a.m., **they assumed they would get more** for a full day’s work. However, **they also received a denarius**.

(v. 11) If these workers had been paid first, they would have left and never known what the owner did for the others. But because they were paid in reverse order, their expectations began to build to the point of entitlement. As a result, **they began to complain to the landowner**.

The landowner became a target of their discontent. The Greek wording indicates that once they began to complain, they continued for a while. In fact, the Greek word for *complain* is

related to the Old Testament term that described the Israelites’ ongoing grumbling about God, Moses, and Aaron in the wilderness (Ex. 17:3; Num. 14:2-36).

(v. 12) The men hired earliest in the day felt they had been treated unfairly—even though they had agreed to work for a denarius in verse 2. Once they saw that those who had **put in one hour** were **made . . . equal to us**, they felt the injustice of the situation. Their attitudes were heightened by **the burden of the day’s work and the burning heat**. These workers were resentful that those who had only done what they considered an insignificant amount of work received the same privilege as those who worked a full twelve-hour shift.

They considered equal treatment to be unequal! They also were resentful because the last group was not exposed to the heat of the day. **Bore** carries the idea of “suffered” or “endured a difficulty,” while *burden* suggests carrying a heavy load. Metaphorically, it also can be used to describe hardships in general. *The burning heat* refers not only to the blazing Middle Eastern sun, but also to the hot sirocco winds that swept in from the desert (Job 27:21; Jer. 18:17; Jonah 4:8).

These workers felt their work had been disrespected and discounted. And they were not hesitant about giving voice to their frustrations.

Key Doctrine

God

God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections. (See Isaiah 40:25; Matthew 6:9)



APPLICATION POINT: We should be thankful God gives us more than we deserve.

READ:

Instruct adults to read Matthew 20:8-12 silently, considering the tone of the workers.

EXPLAIN:

Jesus’s parable reached a turning point in these verses. Everyone received a denarius, but those who had been out for twelve hours felt shortchanged by the landowner.

ASK:

Do you think what each worker received was fair? Why or why not?

ENGAGE:

Summarize the following context (PSG, p. 77) to highlight the tensions felt by the other workers.

“No mention was made by Jesus of those hired at three, noon, or nine o’clock. Instead, He skipped to the climactic portion of the story and spoke of the initial hired laborers. They assumed they would receive more. They were expecting ‘fair’ treatment, since they had worked more. . . . But they, too, received a denarius. Incensed, they demanded equality.”

SHARE:

Remind adults that the landowner symbolizes God. So, the story reflects how some might complain about God’s fairness, even when it comes to including people into His kingdom.

ASK:

How do people today question God’s fairness? How do some view His just nature? (PSG, p. 77)

REFLECT:

Enlist a volunteer to read the Key Doctrine (PSG, p. 77). Give adults a few moments of silence to reflect on areas where they might be tempted to think God is unfair—and how they should respond to those feelings.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Money

Prior to the session, collect the amount of money that represents what you were paid per hour in your first job. Show this to the group. Allow others to share what they made in their first jobs. Note that the amount might seem paltry today, but most people are thrilled to receive those early paychecks. Briefly discuss how easy it can be for discontent and ingratitude to set in when it comes to being paid. Apply this principle to the workers described in Matthew 20:8-12.

Grace Exemplified (Matt. 20:13-16)

13 “He replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius? **14** Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you. **15** Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I’m generous?’ **16** So the last will be first, and the first last.”

(v. 13) Verses 13-15, and possibly verse 16, provide the owner’s response to the workers’ complaints voiced in verses 11-12. Apparently, one grumbler acted as the spokesperson for the group, so the owner addressed his response **to one of them**.

The landowner called the man **friend**, perhaps because he didn’t know the man’s name. However, the term is not a positive one in Matthew’s Gospel, where it is used elsewhere to distance individuals from those who are in the wrong (22:12; 26:50). In this case, the landowner did not argue or seek to refute the man’s facts. There was no reason to dispute that the 6 a.m. group had worked longer hours under unpleasant conditions. Instead, the owner first addressed the issue from the legal side.

He pointed out, **I’m doing you no wrong**. That’s because he had paid these workers the amount they had agreed on in verse 2. The owner’s rhetorical question, **Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?** expected a “yes” answer. The workers had agreed to that amount, and the owner had paid that amount. There was no injustice.

(vv. 14-15) Unfortunately, the workers associated equality (v. 12) with injustice. They felt like they were being treated unfairly, but they had no legal ground for complaint. With that, the owner simply said, **Take what’s yours and go**. *What’s yours* referred to the man’s pay, while *go* is a command to leave the property.

The owner also pointed out that this was a matter of generosity, not a matter of legal obligation. As the owner of the vineyard and the one who hired the workers, he could do as he pleased with his money. The repetition of **want** in verses 14-15 emphasized his authority to use his resources as he desired.

Specifically, he chose **to give this last man the same as I gave you**. The owner spoke of giving, not of paying. As noted, the early group was the only one to sign on for a specific payment. For the others, no compensation was set.

Instead, the owner had promised to do what was right for each group. The first group agreed to a denarius, while the others agreed to whatever the landowner felt was right to give them.

Then the owner asked two more rhetorical questions. The first related to the owner’s **right to do what I want with what is mine**. The term **right** recalls what he said in verse 4. Again, the expected answer is “yes.” So, the workers could not question either the owner’s legal obligations or his moral rights. The owner thus was drawing a contrast between “what’s yours” (v. 14) and “what is mine” (v. 15).

The second rhetorical question confronted the workers’ real problem. They were **jealous** because the owner was **generous**. The term **jealous** (literally, “have an evil eye”) includes resentment and stinginess. The 6 a.m. workers were angry about the good fortune of others. The Greek language highlights the contrast between the evil or bad in the laborer and the goodness of the landowner. The landowner’s inherent goodness reflects back to Jesus’s statement that only God—the one represented by the landowner in the parable—is good (Matt. 19:17).

(v. 16) Some Bible students think the landowner also spoke the words of verse 16 contrasting the **last** and the **first**. However, since Jesus made the same statement in Matthew 19:30 (albeit in reverse order), it is reasonable to assume that He also spoke these words. The reversed order of the wording (compared to 19:30) fits the flow of the parable. The last workers hired were paid first, while those who were hired first received their compensation last.

These verses remind us that genuine grace costs us nothing, while the grace giver pays dearly. Yet, the ultimate Giver (God) always operates out of a generous heart. Second, God’s application of grace often offends a world that cries out for its own idea of “justice.”



APPLICATION POINT: We should never cease to be amazed by God's grace.

READ:

Invite a volunteer to read **Matthew 20:13-16** aloud as adults focus on the landowner's response to the angry workers.

ASK:

Were the all-day workers justified in their complaints about their wages? Why or why not?

RECAP:

Highlight the legal and moral arguments as described in Matthew 20:13 and 20:14-15 on page 94 of the Leader Guide. Read this content to provide more background.

The landowner wanted them to know that they were out of line with their grumbling. He had fulfilled his word to them. They worked the number of hours to which they agreed, and he had paid them accordingly. There was nothing unfair about this. The landowner was not in their debt because they worked longer and harder than others. . . . If the landowner chose to act out of compassion toward those last hired, that was his prerogative. The landowner had every right to do with his money and his vineyard as he chose. He was not acting unjustly; instead, the complainers were jealous of the payment others received. Their complaints didn't arise from some vaulted sense of justice but from sheer greed and jealousy based on their faulty expectations. (PSG, p. 78)

ASK:

What does this parable teach us about comparing ourselves to others? (PSG, p. 79)

EXPLAIN:

In sharing the parable, Jesus emphasized that the kingdom of God was not about human effort. Those who "work hardest" are not granted automatic admission, and they should not expect the biggest reward. Instead, entrance into the kingdom is an act of God's mercy and grace. We cannot earn it, and we don't deserve it. The Master provides freely for those who are willing to accept His offer. We have no right to take His grace for granted or to question who He demonstrates that mercy toward.

REFLECT:

Write the application statement for these verses on the board: *We should never cease to be amazed by God's grace.* Encourage adults to spend a few moments silently reflecting on God's grace in their lives and confessing ways they have lost their awe for what He has done for them.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 80 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *We can trust God to always do what is right.*
- *We should be thankful God gives us more than we deserve.*
- *We should never cease to be amazed by God's grace.*

REVIEW:

Read the statements aloud, stressing “can” and “should” in each one. At the end of each statement, encourage adults to suggest practical ways they can apply these principles to their lives each day. Point out the first set of questions on page 80 of the PSG. Urge adults to adopt some of these ideas for living out God’s grace and generosity before the world.

DISCUSS:

Read aloud the second set of questions on page 80 of the PSG. Explain that adults need not answer aloud, but challenge them to think of a number that correlates with their honest response. Share a time in your own life when you felt like you needed to earn God’s love and how you came to understand that He offers it freely. Encourage the group to consider keeping a journal for recording God’s blessings so they will be more attentive to His grace.

PRAY:

Close in prayer, asking God to help adults contemplate God’s love and blessings in their lives. As adults leave, challenge them to share with at least one person this week how God has been gracious to them.

AFTER THE SESSION

During the week, send the group a text or email, sharing the lyrics of “Amazing Grace” with them. Urge them to reflect on God’s grace regularly. Remind them to share His grace with someone who needs to know about it this week. If you personally experience a moment when life seems unfair, reflect on the truths of this week’s focal passage. Be prepared to share that intentional mindset change with the group.

ADULT COMMENTARY



Want to go deeper in your study?
Explore the Bible Adult Commentary offers additional information and biblical insights related to the key passages.
(Available for purchase at [Lifeway.com](https://www.lifeway.com).)

EXPLORE  THE BIBLE.