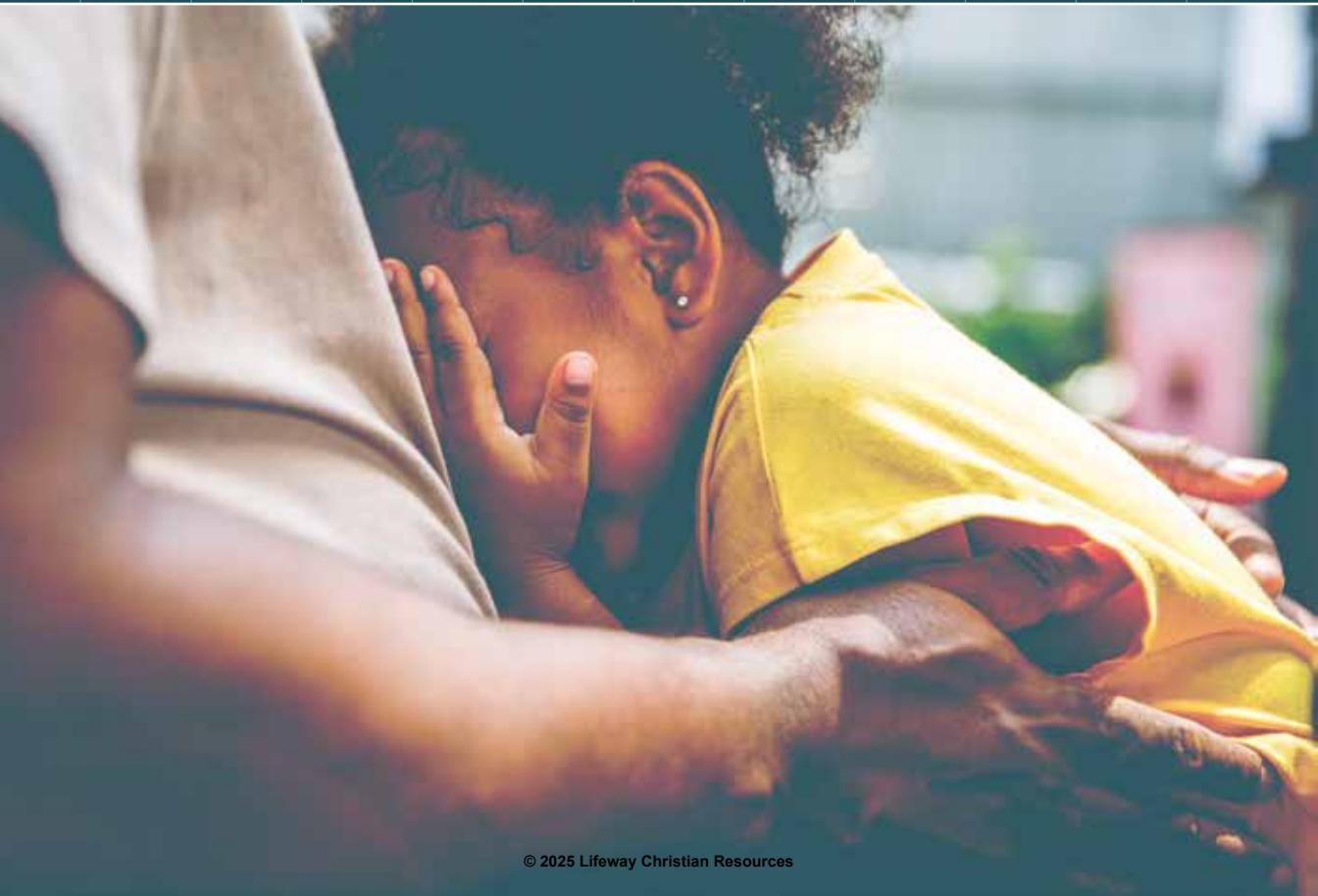


SESSION 8

Grace

MATTHEW 20:1-16

JESUS OFFERS GRACE TO ALL PEOPLE.



Everybody wants to be treated fairly. We become resentful when we perceive we have not received equal treatment. “Unfair,” we cry. “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.

WHY DO YOU THINK WE PERCEIVE LIFE AS BEING CONTINUALLY UNFAIR?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

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 rich young ruler expected to hear steps he could take to gain eternal life. 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 those expectations on their ear.

God’s ways are not man’s way. Eternal life is not earned by doing, riches are not a sign of God’s favor, and they don’t buy entrance into the kingdom of God. In this parable,

Jesus taught His followers that God’s graciousness toward humanity is based on His love and not on human effort.

Following the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, Jesus again spoke to the disciples about His coming death. This is the third time in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus spoke explicitly about the crucifixion (see also 16:21; 17:22-23).

Jesus continually spoke of greatness in the kingdom of God (for example, see Matt. 18:1-4). Even so, the rivalry among the disciples continued. One glaring example of this is found in 20:20-28, where James and John enlisted the help of their mother to petition Jesus to elevate the rank of her two sons over the other disciples. Such open jockeying for position must have brought Jesus much grief.



Matthew 20:1-16

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a **landowner**^A who went out **early in the morning**^B to hire workers for his **vineyard**. **2** After agreeing with the workers on **one denarius**,^D 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**^E 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**^F 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. **8** When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, ‘Call the workers and give them their pay, **starting with the last**^G 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**^H 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.’ **13** He replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I’m doing you **no wrong**.^I 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**?’^J **16** So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Key Words

A. In this parable, the landowner represents God.

B. Around 6 a.m., the start of a typical 12-hour Jewish workday.

C. Often in Scripture, vineyards symbolize the nation of Israel (Isa. 5:1-7).

D. A typical day’s wage. This would have been considered fair compensation for a day’s work in the vineyard.

E. Day laborers would gather in the market and wait to be hired. This landowner made several trips to the marketplace to enlist workers.

F. These workers would put in only one hour of work, in contrast to others who had been in the vineyard for nearly twelve hours.

G. The law demanded workers be paid at the end of the day. Jesus used paying the men in reverse order to establish the main point of His parable.

H. It would be natural for the early workers to expect more than those who worked only an hour.

I. While the landowner’s pay may have been surprising, it was fair. He lived up to their agreement.

J. The landowner had the right to do what he chose with his own resources. His generosity to those hired at 5 p.m. reflects God’s grace and generosity in offering salvation to everyone.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

1. Workers Hired

(Matt. 20:1-7)

We can trust God to always do what is right.

- **What is the significance of the detail about the landowner and workers agreeing on the amount of pay?**

2. Equally Paid

(Matt. 20:8-12)

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

- **Do you think what each worker received was fair? Why or why not?**
- **How do people today question God's fairness? How do some view His just nature?**

3. Grace Exemplified

(Matt. 20:13-16)

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

- **Were the all-day workers justified in their complaints about their wages? Why or why not?**
- **What does this parable teach us about comparing ourselves to others?**

Apply the Text

Discuss in your group what you believe to be the main lesson of Jesus's parable of the vineyard workers.

- **How should it impact the way we evaluate ourselves in relation to others? How does it impact the way we relate to others?**

KEY DOCTRINE:

God

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

BIBLE SKILL:

Use Bible study resources to gain more insight into a passage.

Read articles on "vineyards" and "denarius" from a Bible dictionary. Record significant insights you gain as you consider what you read in light of this session's focal passages. In addition, consider what made the setting of Jesus's parable (hiring day-laborers to work in a vineyard) so effective for the audience He was addressing?

DAILY EXPLORATION



Day 1: Matthew 20:1-4

Pay attention to the agreement between the landowner and workers in verse 2.

Once again, Jesus explained what life in the kingdom of God is like, using a short story with a central theme. The “landowner” in this parable is representative of God Himself. This landowner arose “early in the morning” to hire the workers needed to work the vineyard. Early morning would be around 6 a.m.

By beginning this parable with the word “for,” Jesus was linking this story back to Matthew 19:30 and the discussion of the rewards of the disciple. This parable is illustrating the statement that “many who are first will be last, and the last first.” The parable is bookended by that statement (Matt. 19:30; 20:16).

An agreement was reached with these laborers for “one denarius.” This was an equitable amount for a full day’s wage. Having agreed to the wages, these laborers were sent into the vineyard. The landowner was back at the marketplace around nine o’clock.

The landowner enlisted these men to work in his vineyard as well and told them, “I’ll give you whatever is right.” The implication was that they would receive pay for about nine hours of work, from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

What is the significance of the detail about the landowner and workers agreeing on the amount of pay?



Day 2: Matthew 20:5-7

Note the times at which the landowner hired more workers.

The landowner hired more day laborers around noon and around three. The text says he “did the same thing”—that is, he promised to give them whatever was right. Again, these workers expected to be paid partially for the hours worked.

Finally, the landowner went back to the marketplace around five o’clock, where he discovered still more men standing around hoping to be hired. Perhaps by now they had almost given up for the day since no one had hired them. The benevolent landowner asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?” Perhaps they had arrived late or were in an area of the marketplace where those hiring had not observed them. They could have been the least desirable of workers and had been passed over. Once again, the landowner sent them into the vineyard to work the final hour of the day. No doubt they realistically expected to earn an hour’s wage.

Note again, the agreed-upon wage at the beginning of the day was one denarius. Each group of workers hired assumed that they would receive a portion of a denarius for the time they worked.

Give thanks that God always does what is right.



Day 3: Matthew 20:8-9

Compare verse 8 to Matthew 19:30 and 20:16.

The law specified that day laborers were to be paid at the end of each day they worked (Deut. 24:15). What is interesting is the order of payment. The landowner directed the foreman to start with the last of those hired and end with the first group.

As far as the foreman and laborers were concerned, the order didn't matter, as long as each laborer received what was coming to them. For the landowner (and for the intent of Jesus's parable) the order did matter. This rhetorical device of reversing the order set up the amazing contrast of treatment of each group. The reversal of order served as a clue that the hearers were in for a surprise ending. This reversal is the point where the parable connected to Jesus's statement in Matthew 19:30 (and 20:16) that the first shall be last and the last first.

All the laborers, regardless of when they were hired, "received one denarius." Those who were hired last received a full denarius—twelve times what they were expecting. There is a tremendous truth here about God the Father. He doesn't give us what we deserve!

Obviously, the payment made to those hired at the five o'clock hour was made in the presence of all those hired. Expectations arose for the others, thinking that maybe they would receive proportionately more than was contracted. They all eagerly awaited their bonus. But such was not the case.

Spend time in prayer, thanking God that He doesn't give us what we deserve.



Day 4: Matthew 20:10-12

Note the complaint of the laborers hired first.

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 and should receive twelve times what the last group received. But they, too, received a denarius. Incensed, they demanded equality. They had worked more and believed they should be paid for their work. But the landowner paid each group as he had promised (see vv. 4,5,7). He did not renege on any agreement.

The laborers hired first began to complain as they recounted the details of their day-long labor in the sun. The others labored far less and in the cool of the evening. As these first-hires compared themselves to the others, their anger only deepened. Their whole perception was that they had been treated unjustly.

In compassion, the landowner had not given each man what he deserved but what they needed. For some, this would be over and above what they deserved. From a human standpoint, those first hired had the right to complain. From a divine standpoint, the ways of God as pictured here are completely different from our ways.

How do people today question God's fairness?

How do some view His just nature?



Day 5: Matthew 20:13-16

Take note of how the landowner was both fair and generous.

One person emerged as the spokesman of this group of complainers. To him, the landowner spoke directly: “Friend, I’m doing you no wrong.” They were out of line with their grumbling. 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. 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.

Jesus’s desire was that the disciples realize participation in the kingdom of heaven is not based on human effort, with those who work the hardest expecting the biggest reward in glory. Entrance into the kingdom is based on the benevolence of God, pictured here as the landowner. He deals with us according to grace.

We should be grateful that God doesn’t give us what we deserve. Instead, He deals with us in mercy and grace. What we all deserve is God’s judgment. Instead, God gives us grace. Through this parable, Jesus taught that God’s justice (fairness) and His generosity are not mutually exclusive. He is both.

What does this parable teach us about comparing ourselves to others?

APPLY THE TEXT

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very often, how often do you feel you must earn God’s love by doing right things and thinking right thoughts? Contemplate in prayer that God’s love for us is based on what He has done for us and not what we do for Him.

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