

# Grace

JESUS OFFERS GRACE TO ALL PEOPLE.

In the last couple of years, some friends and I have started getting together every few weeks for talk and encouragement. Sometimes, we meet at a restaurant, but not always. The first time we went to a restaurant, one of the guys in the group, Ryan, made what seemed to be an unusual request. He said, “When the server returns with your bill if you don’t mind, can everybody please give me your ticket? Y’all can give me cash if you’ve got it. If you don’t, that’s okay. You can pay me later, or if you can’t, it’s okay, too. I’ve got this covered. And I’d like to do this every time we go out.” Fortunately, I had cash with me—enough for my meal and a tip—so I gave it to Ryan. Everybody else did the same thing. Ryan put all the money in his pocket and pulled out a credit card.

When our server returned, Ryan gave her the stack of tickets, about nine in all, and a credit card. She returned; he signed the ticket and handed it to her. She walked off. In a few minutes, she came to the table again and said to the group, “It’s been a pleasure to serve you.” And she gave Ryan a huge hug. “Do you know her?” someone asked. No, he had never seen her before tonight. This happened every time we went out to eat.

One night, there were only five of us at dinner. As usual, each meal, with a tip, was less than twenty dollars. We passed our cash to Ryan, and he paid the server. This time, the manager and the server came to the table. The manager showed Ryan his signed receipt and asked, “Did you mean to leave this tip, sir?” “Yes ma’am, I did.” The manager hugged him. Ryan looked slightly embarrassed, and we all sort of shrugged and laughed. After the server and manager left, we all stared at Ryan. Knowing we were curious, he said, “Times are tough, and servers work hard. So, I always over-tip.” We kept staring. He continued, “Tonight, the tip was one hundred dollars. God has been good to me, and I get great satisfaction from being generous. The servers think I do it for them, but I do it for me.”

Ryan’s attitude and actions have caused me to want to be a more generous tipper. I thought a lot about Ryan as I read the verses for today’s

text, which involves people getting paid more than expected. This study has made me think about the connection between grace and generosity. I have come to believe they are related.



## Matthew 20:1-34

In today's study, we read a parable. Jesus spoke of a situation that would have been familiar to His hearers—a wealthy man was hiring day laborers to work on his property. Jesus used this common imagery to teach an unexpected characteristic of kingdom living—God extends grace to all, even those we might consider the least likely and least deserving.

The backdrop for the story was the Jewish understanding that positive occurrences in one's life were an indicator of God's approval. Jews believed that God gave greater blessings to the one He was more pleased with. Receiving a smaller blessing meant He was less pleased with that person. This explains the disciples' confusion when Jesus taught how hard it is for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God. Essentially, they asked, "If the wealthy can't make it into the kingdom, who possibly can?" (19:25). The other layer to this type of thinking was that receiving an equal blessing meant equal approval.



## Workers Hired (Matt. 20:1-7)

Jesus was continuing His response to Simon Peter's question, "See, we have left everything and followed you. So what will there be for us?" (19:27). Jesus explained that their reward would be greater than they could fathom and that "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (v. 30). Although Mark 10:28-31 and Luke 13:30 included this teaching, only Matthew told this parable.

## VERSE 1

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**“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.”**

**The kingdom of heaven** does not refer to a region defined by political or national boundaries. It has nothing to do with palaces, fortifications, armies, land holdings, or wealth accumulation. *The kingdom of heaven* refers to God’s absolute rule in a person’s life. For a Christ follower, being part of this kingdom means a person is living under and according to God’s lordship and leadership. The phrase has a wider application that includes both the seen and unseen realms; it is not limited by time or place.

Jewish parables often depicted God as either a king or a **landowner**. The *landowner* symbolized wealth, power, and influence in the first century. Hiring workers **early in the morning** meant these men were day laborers. These workers were at the lowest rung of the socio-economic strata in the first century—even lower than slaves. Slaves had the protection of their owners, who would not have wanted any harm to come to them. Verse 15 below betrays the fact that the one hiring could treat a day laborer any way he chose, even if that led to abuse. Typically, those hired *early in the morning* were the most promising and capable workers.

## VERSE 2

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**“After agreeing with the workers on one denarius, he sent them into his vineyard for the day.”**

Hearing that the laborers were paid a **denarius** for a day’s work raised no eyebrows in Jesus’s audience. A *denarius*, a Roman coin, was a fair and thus common day wage for an unskilled or day laborer in Jesus’s day. With this salary, a worker could support his family at a peasant level.

A **vineyard** was an essential part of the biblical world. A vineyard provided food and income for its owner. People used grapes both to eat and, when processed, to drink. If the vineyard were large enough, the owner would hire laborers; the vineyard provided income for the workers and their families. Thus, **the workers** agreed to the man’s offer. They had a job, at least for that day.

## VERSE 3

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**“When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing.”**

The common workday in the first century was divided into four equal parts. Work typically started in the cool of the day, about 6:00 a.m., and continued until 6:00 p.m. The majority of grape harvesting in Israel was done in August or September. This landowner had a bountiful harvest; thus, he needed additional workers.

**The marketplace** could have been a town square, forum, or public meeting place. The marketplace was always the hub of a city. It was a place to do business, to see and be seen, and at times to bring one's grievances (Mark 12:38).

The single Greek word translated **doing nothing** means “without work.” These were not men who didn't want to work—they did. Each needed a job. Their situation was not due to apathy or lack of willpower or desire; they lacked opportunity. That, though, was about to change.

Seeing how demanding the workload was, the landowner returned to the marketplace at about 9:00 a.m. He knew men would still be there, hoping for an opportunity to work.

#### VERSES 4-5

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**“He said to them, ‘You also go into my vineyard, and I’ll give you whatever is right.’ So off they went. About noon and about three, he went out again and did the same thing.”**

The vineyard owner made no promise about the men's salary for the day. He only promised to do **“whatever is right.”** Hearing this, the men expected to receive a pro-rated percentage of what those hired earlier would be paid. Hearing and trusting the man's promise, **off they went**, ready to work for the rest of the day.

The vineyard owner returned to the marketplace a third and fourth time. The details are abbreviated. There is no mention of the marketplace, of men *doing nothing*, of what the vineyard owner said to the men, or of promised pay. Jesus's hearers would have filled in the details based on the owner's interactions with those he hired earlier.

#### VERSES 6-7

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**“Then about five he went and found others standing around and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one hired us,’ they said to him. ‘You also go into my vineyard,’ he told them.”**

For the fourth time in this story, Jesus said of the vineyard owner **he went**, meaning he went out to the marketplace (see vv. 1,3,5). The Greek

phrase underscores the landowner’s intentionality; he was determined to hire additional workers.

Jesus’s audience would have understood that in this parable, the vineyard owner represented God. The repetition highlighted the Father’s single mindedness. The verb **found** is a reminder of His determination.

The vineyard owner returned to the marketplace because he needed additional workers, even at this late hour. The men were still standing there because they needed work. They were desperate for some income for the day. No work and no income meant no food.

Responding to the landowner’s question, the men were neither accusatory nor defensive. They would have worked if someone had hired them. Going to the vineyard at this late hour, the men would have hoped for or expected one-twelfth of the pay those hired first would receive. For these men, any income would have been better than none.



### **Explore Further**

Read “Wealth, Trade, Money, and Coinage in the Biblical World” on pages 871–873 in the *Holy Land Illustrated Bible*. How did the development of coinage change the way people paid for goods and services? How did coins make life easier and/or more complicated?

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## **Equally Paid** (Matt. 20:8-12)

Old Testament law dictated that employers were to pay their day laborers at the end of each day (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:15). For those without other support or income, receiving their daily pay was their only means of survival. James rebuked the wealthy for withholding the workers’ pay after they had finished the job (Jas. 5:1-4).

### **VERSE 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.’”**

The **evening** marked the transition from daylight to dark. It was the end of the workday, which, for these men, meant the time to be paid for

their labor. It was time for accounts to be settled—a concept that had both economic and spiritual connotations. Jesus’s hearers would have recognized the implied dual application.

The Greek word translated **foreman** can refer to a manager of lands or a household. He was not the property owner; he was the overseer or steward. Having a foreman further highlighted the landowner’s wealth and, in that culture, his influence. Socially, the distance between the owner and the day laborers was striking—the powerful and the pauper, the wealthy and the wanting, the influential and the overlooked.

To pay the most recently hired first would not have raised eyebrows. The owner was free to pay his workers in whatever order he chose. Giving the men **their pay** underscored two thoughts. First, they had worked for and earned the day’s wage. Second, it was *their* pay, meaning that at this point, they each thought they would receive an amount based on how long they had worked that day.

#### VERSE 9

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**“When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius.”**

Presuming the laborers heard this conversation, the owner’s instructions had to raise the eyebrows of each worker. Those hired last would have been both shocked and delighted. Having worked just one hour but being paid for twelve hours of work meant these men were being paid twelve times more than they expected. One can almost see them turning to one another and asking, “Did I hear that right?”

#### VERSE 10

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**“So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each.”**

Hearing that those who had worked just one hour had received a denarius, the earlier hires expected to be paid far more than usual. **They assumed they would get more.** Their expectations were through the roof. Were they also about to receive twelve times their normal pay?

Why did Jesus speak of only those hired first and last? He had been contrasting the first and the last—meaning the presumed most and least deserving—in His teaching (see Matt. 19:30; 20:16). Jumping from the one-hour workers to the twelve-hour workers emphasized the contrast between the two groups.

## VERSES 11-12

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**“When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: ‘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.’”**

The Greek word translated **complain** carries the idea of grumbling or murmuring. The verb tense conveys repeated or ongoing murmuring. These first-hired day laborers showed no hint of civility, gratitude, or respect. They did not address their employer by a title of respect. They questioned his behavior and spoke to him rudely.

Each group hired after 6:00 AM received a bonus, meaning more per hour than the first group. The first ones hired, though, received no bonus whatsoever. The workers did not say, “What you have paid them is equal to what you have paid us.” No, instead, **“you made them equal to us.”** Implied in the statement is the complaint: “Don’t you see we are not equal? You should value us more. We have worked and suffered all day. They worked one hour right at dusk when it was getting cooler. This is not fair!”



### **Explore Further**

Think of a time that someone intentionally gave you more than you expected or deserved. How about giving you less than you expected? How did each of those make you feel? Pray that God will give you opportunities to show someone unexpected generosity this week.

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## **Grace Exemplified (Matt. 20:13-16)**

In this parable, Jesus never mentioned grace; yet that is clearly the theme. Jesus did not tell the parable because He wanted to teach His followers about viticulture or hiring practices in His day. He wanted them to understand God’s extravagant grace.

## VERSE 13

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**“He replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?’”**

Scripture does not say why the landowner **replied to one** of the workers rather than to all. Regardless, this action reminds us that God relates to us individually. The verb *replied* refers to a deliberate and well-thought-out response.

In this case, the word **friend** is not a term of fondness. It actually indicates a distance between the speaker and the listener (see 22:12; 26:50). The phrase **“I’m doing you no wrong”** echoes the Greek terms translated in verse 4, “I’ll give you whatever is right.” The wording would have reminded the worker of the earlier agreement.

Further reminding the protesting worker of their agreement, the landowner posed a rhetorical question: **“Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?”** The principle here was that no one was getting less than they deserved or had been promised. Some, though, were getting more than they expected.

#### VERSE 14

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**“Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you.”**

The time for argument and protest was over. The employer gave his employee a two-fold directive: **“take”** and **“go.”** Both words imply a fulfillment of obligation. To *take* meant the worker was not stealing something; the employer said it’s **“yours.”** The worker had earned it. Having received what was his, the employee was free to go; his obligation had been fulfilled, and he was dismissed. If the vineyard owner had paid first those whom he hired first, they would have taken their denarius and left; they would have never known what those hired later were paid. In telling the story in this way, Jesus set up the situation for this very moment. His whole point was to tell what the vineyard owner wanted to do; he wanted to give the last the same as he gave the first.

#### VERSE 15

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**“Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I’m generous?”**

The landowner made three “I” statements: **“I have the right”**; **“what I want”**; and **“I’m generous.”** Taken in order, these statements say something about God’s authority, His intention, and, finally, His character.

The word translated *right* conveys the idea of power and authority. First-century landowners had the authority to do as they wished with

their property or, as this owner stated, “**with what is mine.**” The landowner’s statement served as a reminder of God’s authority and sovereignty over what is His.

This verse echoes what the landowner said in the previous verse: “*I want.*” This underscores that God’s intentions—His actions—are beyond human understanding. God’s ways and thoughts are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). He sees and knows what we cannot.

Any true child of God would have to say He is generous—it is part of His very character. He supplies our every need (Phil. 4:19). Every good and perfect gift comes from Him (Jas. 1:17). And He saves us, not partially or barely, but to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25).

The question, “**Are you jealous?**” reads in Greek as “Is your eye evil?” This was a first-century metaphor for being envious (see Matt. 6:23). The complaining employee had been blinded by jealousy. What a contrast! The employee was jealous; the employer, **generous.**

## VERSE 16

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“**So the last will be first, and the first last.**”

**So** that begins this verse is a signal that the story has reached its end. Therefore, Matthew 19:30 and 20:16 function as bookends for the story that comes between.

What was the theological difference between the first and second statements? When Jesus earlier talked about **the first** and **the last**, He was differentiating between those who were His disciples and those who were not. This parable, though, applied only to His true disciples—those who had been invited to work in His vineyard. These verses teach several principles. First, genuine grace costs the recipient nothing. It does cost the grace giver something and often costs dearly. The grace giver always operates out of a generous heart. Second, God’s application of grace is an affront to a world that cries out for justice. As believers, how grateful are we that God has not responded to us with justice but grace?

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### **Explore Further**

Read the article “Grace” on pages 670–672 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How do you see the descriptions of grace in this dictionary entry played out in this parable that Jesus told?

- What does this teach us about being grace-filled believers?
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