

# Grace

JESUS OFFERS GRACE TO ALL PEOPLE.

## Matthew 20:1-16

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a **landowner** <sup>A</sup> who went out **early in the morning** <sup>B</sup> to hire workers for his **vineyard**. <sup>C</sup> 2 After agreeing with the workers on one **denarius**, <sup>D</sup> 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** <sup>E</sup> 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** <sup>F</sup> 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** <sup>G</sup> 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** <sup>H</sup> 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**. <sup>I</sup> 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**?’ <sup>J</sup> 16 So the **last will be first**, <sup>K</sup> and the first last.”

### Exploring Key Words

- A** “Master of a house” (ESV). In this parable, the landowner represents God.
- B** Around 6 a.m., the start of a typical 12-hour Jewish workday during harvest season.
- C** Vineyards were common images in Jesus’s parables (see Matt. 21:28-32; Mark 12:1-9; John 15:1-6). 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 the early workers 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** “Thought” (ESV; NASB); “expected” (NIV). It would be natural for the early workers to expect more than those who worked only an hour.
- I** “Unfair” (NIV; NLT). While the landowner’s pay may have been surprising, it was fair. He had 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.
- K** Jesus was reiterating His message about judgment and rewards in Matthew 19:30. Those considered “last” by the world will be honored in God’s kingdom.



NOTES

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

- Jesus told a parable about a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the usual daily wage of one denarius.
- The landowner hired more workers at nine in the morning, at noon, and at three and five in the afternoon.

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

- At the end of the workday, the landowner paid the laborers, starting with the group that came in last. He gave each worker one denarius, regardless of the number of hours they worked.
- Those who worked longer hours complained, thinking they deserved more pay.

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

- The landowner in the parable told the workers he had the right to be generous to whomever He chose. He had agreed to pay the early workers one denarius, and he kept that promise. He was not being unfair by paying the others the same amount.
- Echoing His teaching in Matthew 19:30, Jesus again said that “the last will be first, and the first last” (v. 16).

### **Summary Statements**

*Jesus offers grace to all people.*

- 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.

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### **Memory Verse**

*Matthew 20:16*

### **Key Doctrine**

*God*

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



For additional commentary,  
see the Leader Guide  
or Adult Commentary,  
available for purchase at  
[goExploreTheBible.com](https://www.goExploreTheBible.com).

## ENGAGE

**Bonus: How do you know when you're being treated fairly? What standard do you use?**

- 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."
- 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, while others are pushed down. But all suffer the inequalities of life.

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

## EXPLORE

### WORKERS HIRED (MATT. 20:1-7)

**Bonus: Why is trust important in the workplace? How do you see trust demonstrated in these verses?**

- This parable by Jesus is like other parables about the rule and reign of God. The "kingdom of heaven" is the sovereign rule of God over all things. The kingdom has a ruler—God the Father, along with the Lord Jesus Christ. The kingdom also has subjects—those who have entered a relationship with God through faith in Jesus.
- In the parable, the landowner, symbolizing God, arose early to hire some workers for his vineyard. Early morning would be around 6 a.m. He reached an agreement with these men to work all day for a "denarius," the common daily wage in first-century Israel.
- The landowner returned to the marketplace to hire more workers at 9 a.m., noon, and 3 p.m. With each of these groups, he promised to pay "whatever is right" (v. 4). He also hired a final group around 5 p.m. with no mention of how much he would pay them.

**What is the significance of the detail about the landowner and workers agreeing on the amount of pay? (PSG, p. 75)**

### EQUALLY PAID (MATT. 20:8-12)

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

- The law of Moses specified that day laborers were to be paid daily (Deut. 24:15). Their families would depend on that pay for daily expenses. So, the landowner ordered his foremen to pay the men "when evening came."
- Interestingly, the foreman started by paying the men who had come last. While the landowner could pay the workers however he wished, this reversed order helped set the stage for the parable's larger point.

- Those who had been in the vineyard all day saw what others were being paid. So, when the 5 p.m. crew received a full denarius for just an hour's work, they took notice. They assumed they would receive more.
- However, the 6 a.m. workers also received a denarius. Offended, they grew angry and began to complain. They failed to recognize that the owner had not given any of the workers what they deserved, but what they needed.

**Bonus: When has God given you what you needed instead of what you deserved?**

### GRACE EXEMPLIFIED (MATT. 20:13-16)

**Bonus: How can you nurture contentment and appreciation in your life?**

- In response to the workers' complaints, the landowner affirmed that he had done them "no wrong." He had kept his word by paying them a day's wage for a day's work. He had honored their bargain. They were just jealous.
- He also had the right to pay workers any amount he wanted. His generosity toward the other workers did not diminish his integrity toward those hired at 6 a.m.
- Jesus taught that participation in the kingdom of heaven is not based on human effort, but on the benevolence of God. All of us stand condemned before God and desperately need His generous grace. Jesus emphasized that God is both just (fair) and generous.

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

## CHALLENGE

As a group, discuss the main point of Jesus's parable in these verses.

**How should it impact the way we evaluate ourselves in relation to others? How does it impact the way we relate to others? (PSG, p. 80)**

Challenge individuals to spend time in prayer, contemplating God's incredible love and grace toward us.

**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? (PSG, p. 80)**

### FURTHER DISCUSSION



Scan here for additional discussion questions for this week's study.

## BONUS IDEAS

### BIBLE SKILL (PSG, P. 79)

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.

Provide several Bible dictionaries for the group. Direct adults to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 79 of the PSG. Encourage them to record their thoughts in the space provided under the Bible Skill description on page 79. After a few minutes, allow a few volunteers to share their findings. Affirm that Jesus used a familiar setting to teach His followers an important lesson about God’s grace and how one enters His kingdom.

### 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. Affirm that while it was natural for the early workers to expect to receive more, the landowner was just being generous to those who came to the vineyard late. Emphasize that his generosity did not harm the ones who had worked all day.

Challenge adults to consider how they might “expect” more from Jesus than others get. Say: *If any of us got what we really deserved, we would be lost and without hope.* Remind them that all of us rely on God’s grace.

## DIG DEEPER

### WAGES AND GRACE

A surprising twist concerning daily wages is the central focus of Jesus’s parable in Matthew 20:1-16. Every laborer, regardless of when they began working for the generous landowner, received the same wage—one denarius (20:2). In the first century, a denarius was a fair day’s wage for a common laborer.<sup>1</sup> Every servant standing idle in the marketplace was hoping and waiting to receive work and to be paid at the end of the day. According to the Mosaic law, wages were to be paid daily (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14-15). Withholding pay was condemned in both the Old and New Testaments (Mal. 3:5; Jer. 22:13; Jas. 5:4).

Jesus used something familiar—a daily wage—to communicate something profound. The kingdom of God operates by grace, not merit. He had suggested as much when He talked to His disciples about rich people in Matthew 19. There, He emphasized that God’s mercy was the key to salvation, not positions or possessions.

In this parable, the landowner did exactly what he said he would do (Matt. 20:13-14). But he also chose to show generosity to those who worked less time

(20:15). While the early workers grumbled (20:11), the landowner reminded them that his mercy toward others did not diminish what he provided for them. It wasn’t a matter of justice. It was about grace. Likewise, what we receive from God does not align with what we’ve given Him. None of us can earn salvation. We receive it through the generosity of the Master.

So, instead of comparing daily wages, we should marvel at divine grace. God does not shortchange His people. He gives us far more than we could ever deserve. Or as Paul put it in Romans 4:4-5, “Now to the one who works, pay is not credited as a gift, but as something owed. But to the one who does not work, but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited for righteousness.”

1. Blomberg, Craig L., “Matthew,” *New American Commentary*, vol 22. (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 1992), 302.