

“People of grace” Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, “You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.” So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, “Why do you stand here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You go into the vineyard too.” And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.” And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” So the last will be first, and the first last.”

What do you think about our today’s Gospel reading? How does it make you feel? Just think about it, – those guys worked the whole day in sun and heat and they got the same wages as those who only worked for one hour.

Do you know why this parable is so good? Because it shows the depth of our sin. It shows that we really don’t understand or at least struggle to believe in God’s grace, that instead we think about our relationships with God as based on our goodness and good things we have done.

With this parable Jesus keeps teaching us how to think as Christians, and how to live as Christians. Let’s take a closer look. Jesus tells this parable as His answer to another of Peter’s questions.

Jesus had just sent away the young, rich man who wanted to inherit God’s Kingdom. The young man thought that he had done everything. He had done his best trying to live according to God’s Commandments.

But Jesus added one more thing. If you want to be perfect “go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” And that was it. The guy went away.

Sure, he desired the life everlasting, and he wanted to follow Jesus, but even more he wanted to keep his possessions. They were his true god. That’s what he loved more than anything.

And when Jesus had said that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God”, Peter asked the question on behalf of all the apostles.

“See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” [...] We have done what you expected ... Jesus answered: “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.” And then He added: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Jesus words are clear. Now we should be jumping up and down and singing praises to our Lord if we could truly comprehend what Jesus says. Everyone who has given things up and followed Jesus will be blessed abundantly and inherit eternal life.

There is this fulfilment, the ultimate prize for following Jesus, which surpasses all our understanding. And this is what we need to desire and strive for with all our mind and heart and strength. This should be our ultimate life goal.

But then Jesus warns against the danger, which hides in our sinful hearts. Pride and arrogance: that we may want to think that if we are with Jesus, we are somehow better than others. So, He told this parable.

This parable helps us to understand how God's grace works. People don't like how it works. Our sinfulness screams against God's grace. For according to our sinful nature, we want to enter the Kingdom of God by our own goodness. We want to merit it.

In this parable Jesus compares two groups of people. Those who begun the work in the morning and those who worked just for one hour. The first and the last, as they are called in this parable.

Now I invite you to think about a few questions. Do you think you are a good person? Do you think that you are a good Christian? Do you think that you have lived a good and decent life?

Do you know other people who are not that good and committed Christians as you are? And even if you haven't been such a good person, or a good Christian, I am sure you would know someone who is worse than you are.

There always is at least someone. Do you know others who are just terrible people? Is there a person, or persons who have hurt you, deeply, unjustly, who have ruined your life?

Maybe broken your marriage, harmed your children, damaged your reputation in community, destroyed your business or health, been mean to you and made your life miserable. I guess we all could come up with at least someone.

Now, think about the Day when we all will be gathered before the throne of Jesus Christ and when God's chosen ones will be invited to enter the Kingdom that was prepared for them before the creation of the world. And you are there.

You look around and suddenly you can't believe your eyes. The same person, or persons who has hurt you the most, whom you have known as the worst people alive, they are entering the Kingdom of God before you.

Are you getting the picture? How do you like that picture? This is the moment of truth – if you can't rejoice seeing those people entering God's Kingdom, you have a serious problem. You haven't understood the seriousness of your sin.

You haven't understood what God's grace is, you don't think as a Christian and you are not able to live as a Christian. Instead, you still think and live as a pagan who relies on his own goodness and merits, instead of relying on God's grace.

Let's talk more about this. For this is extremely important. Why did the first in this parable get so upset? What was the reason? For they looked at themselves, and they looked at others. This is what pagans do.

The first looked at what they had done, how hard they have been working, how much they had suffered from heat and sun, to summarize it, how good and faithful worker they have been, and then they compared themselves with others.

Those others, they had been idle the whole day. They had done nothing useful apart of that one last hour. How could you possible compare the two! Isn't that obvious that the first deserve much more than the last?

They looked at themselves and they looked at others. They didn't look at their gracious Master. That is what Christians do. In the morning, they all had stood in that marketplace, hoping that maybe someone would hire them.

The Master had hired the first first. He had given them job, he had promised them salary, they could rejoice for they knew they will be able to provide for their families. They had spent that day working and knowing that good things are to come. They had enjoyed all that only thanks to the Master's grace.

The last. They had been waiting for opportunities. They didn't know what to expect. They were ashamed to return home to their families with empty hands. They have been waiting, and waiting and waiting... hoping for something.

When they were hired, they didn't even ask for wages. They were happy that they could do at least something, at least something. But instead of just something, they had received the Master's undeserved grace – full day's wages.

You see, both the first and the last had received what they received only thanks to the Master's grace. What they got was undeserved, that was grace. Instead of looking at the last, the first should have been looking at their Master.

With gratitude and joy. For they had been blessed. They didn't have anything in the morning. The Master didn't owe them anything. They had been lucky recipients of His undeserved grace. As were the rest of workers.

This is how we should think and see the world as Christians. We are not to compare ourselves with others. If we are here in God's presence, this is only thanks to God's grace. It has nothing to do with our own goodness.

We are not here because we chose to, we are not here for we are better than others. We are not here because of our merits. We are not here for we deserve it. We are here only because our God has graciously called us by the Gospel.

Only because He has breathed His Spirit in our hearts, only because His grace has enabled us to be who we are, God's chosen ones. Paul the apostle puts it well as usually. He writes reflecting on his own ministry:

"By the grace of God, I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them [other apostles], though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." (1Cor 15:10)

Paul knows that he has done more than others. And you may know that you have done more for Christ than anyone else whom you know. But the second part of what Paul says is the key.

"It wasn't me though, but the grace of God that is with me." This is how Jesus teaches us about God's grace. This is how we are to see ourselves. Every single person who is saved, is saved by grace alone.

You may have heard someone saying that they will not go this or that congregation for 'that' person worships there. 'That' person who is not as good as we are, or had done something to us.

What they are essentially saying is that I have merited God's grace, but they haven't. What they are saying is that we are saved not by God's grace alone, but because of our own goodness.

We are not here because of our own goodness. Neither the best among us, nor the worst among us. We all are here only by God's grace. Do you see how Jesus challenges us to get rid of our old, sinful way of thinking?

We are all to look at Jesus, at our God and Savior. To know Him and to be with Him is God's undeserved gift. If you received this gift long time ago, good for you, for you had the chance to work in your Master's vineyard longer.

That was His gift to you, that was your privilege. But it doesn't make you better than someone who may have received God's grace only an hour ago. Instead, we can rejoice that our Master has done it again.

He has gone out, He has found those who were still waiting, and by His grace He has brought them in. They will have their chance to rejoice in His grace. We

will have our change to rejoice in our Master's grace and to praise Him that He still brings new workers into His vineyard. For us it means more brothers and sisters in God's Kingdom.

Knowing God's grace makes us grateful, joyful and humble. Everyone here is here only by God's grace. Everyone who is not here, is just a person still waiting for God's grace. At the end of the day, they may enter the Kingdom before us. And that's great. For then we will feast and celebrate together.

Just one more thought. How terrible it would be, if we were invited to enter God's Kingdom as we are now. How disappointed and upset we would be to see who else has made it there. It wouldn't be heaven for us, it would be hell.

How good is to know that our Lord will give us new bodies, perfect, pure and sinless bodies, where we will be fully able to rejoice in His grace. Where we will not be looking at ourselves and others, but at our Master Jesus, rejoicing in what He has done for us and for others.

Many who are first, will be last, and many who are last, will be first. And it doesn't matter. For the main thing is – we will be there. Amen.