

“That offensive 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.”

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

This parable helps us to see how shocking the Gospel message is. How unnatural it feels! How offensive! Just think about this parable! Those men worked the whole day in the sun and heat, and they received the same wage as those who worked for only one hour. Does it seem fair to you? How can that be fair?!

That is exactly why this parable is so powerful. It exposes a deep problem in our hearts - **we struggle to comprehend and to rejoice in God’s grace**. According to our fallen nature, we want our relationship with God to be based on what we have done, on our efforts, on what we deserve. Now, in what context did Jesus tell this parable?

Jesus tells it as an answer to Peter’s question. Earlier Jesus had sent away the rich young man who wanted to inherit eternal life. The young man believed he had done everything right. He had tried to live according to God’s commandments.

But Jesus told him: **“If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor... and come, follow me.”** The man went away. He couldn’t do that. He wanted eternal life, and he wanted to follow Jesus... but he desired his possessions more. They were his true god.

Peter then asks the question on behalf of all the disciples: **“See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”** In other words - we have done what You asked. We have sacrificed. We have left. We have followed You. What

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about us? What will we get for our efforts? Jesus answers that those who have left houses, family and possessions for His name will be blessed abundantly in this life and inherit eternal life. What a promise!

If we could truly comprehend it, we would be overjoyed, singing praises to our Lord. Every day! Eternal life with Christ is the ultimate gift, beyond anything we could have hoped for. But then Jesus adds something strange. **“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”** And then to illustrate His point, He tells this parable.

And it reveals deep corruption in our hearts. And, yes, that is true also for us Christians. Or shall we say, especially for us Christians. He warns us about forgetting our situation and failing to appreciate God’s grace. We may be striving to faithfully follow Jesus and as we do... having thoughts that we are somehow better and deserving from God more than other people. Because we follow Jesus!

That is why this parable. It teaches us how God’s grace works. Our sinful nature struggles with it. Jesus introduces those two groups of workers: those who started working early in the morning and those who were hired later and some only worked for one hour. The first and the last.

Now let’s reflect. Do you think you are a good person? Do you think you are a good Christian? Do you think you have lived a good and decent life? Now... Do you know people who are not as good and committed Christians as you are? Perhaps, even really bad Christians. We may even wonder whether they are Christians at all.

Perhaps that’s someone in the Church who treated you unjustly and has hurt you deeply. Someone who has dented your reputation, or has caused damage to your marriage, or done harm to your children, or made your life miserable by gossip.

Now imagine the Day when we all stand before the throne of Jesus Christ. Imagine that you are there. You look around and suddenly... you see that person. The person who hurt you so much, who never asked for your forgiveness. The person you may consider among the most unpleasant people you have met. And now Jesus welcomes that person into His Kingdom. How would you feel?

It is important that we reflect carefully. If we cannot rejoice when we see that person entering God’s Kingdom, then this parable has exposed something serious in our hearts. We are comparing our lives with those of others. We have not understood the depth and seriousness of our own sin. We have forgotten God’s unwarranted grace.

That is what the first workers did. They considered their efforts. They looked at what they had done, how hard they had worked, how much they had suffered in the heat and sun. They saw themselves as good and faithful workers. Deserving reward.

Then they looked at the others. Some of those people had been idle all day. They had done almost nothing. “How could you possibly compare them with us! It’s clear, we did more, we deserve more!” But they had forgotten something that changes everything.

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In the morning, they too had stood in that marketplace. No work. No guaranties. No means to provide for their families. The Master had come and hired them. He had given them work. He had given them hope. Assurance. Peace. Meaningful activity.

They knew they would be able to provide for their families. They spent that day working with the knowledge that good things have come to them. But... everything that they were able to enjoy that day was only because of the Master's grace.

The last workers had had a miserable day. Lingered without hope. Feeling how their day is wasted. Ashamed for not being able to provide for their family. No good. Useless. Waiting hour after hour as evening drew closer and time was running out.

Notice, when the Master finally called them, they did not even inquire what wages they would receive. They were simply grateful to have work. To have a rope to hold to, to have a hope. But to their shock, instead of receiving just something, they received a full day's wage! Unmerited. By Master's grace. How immensely grateful would they be!

This is what the first workers had forgotten - they too had received grace. They simply had stopped seeing it as grace. They looked at their efforts. They compared theirs with those of others. They had forgotten what an undeserved gift they had received.

That is our temptation too. We compare ourselves with others. "I have been such a faithful Christian." "I have served so much." "I have sacrificed so much." "I have never done the terrible things that that person has done." And slowly, almost without noticing, we may begin to believe that God owes us something.

He doesn't. If we are here in the Father's house, it is only because of God's grace. We are not here because we are better than others. We are not here because we deserve to be here. We are not here because we somehow chose God while others did not. We are here only because the Father graciously called us by the Gospel.

Paul the apostle understood this. Reflecting on his own ministry, he wrote: **"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... though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."** [1 Cor 15:10] He knew it was by God's grace.

At the same time Paul recognized that he had worked harder than others. But he refused to take the credit: **"It was not I, but the grace of God."** That is the Christian confession. Whatever any Christian has accomplished, it is by God's grace alone.

Notice something important - grace does not mean that our efforts are worthless. The first workers really did work hard. Paul did work hard, indeed. Christians do serve, sacrifice, pray, give, witness, love and labor in Christ's vineyard.

But our works are never the reason that brought us here. They are fruits of God's grace, not the price we have paid for God's favour. The Master gave the first workers their place in the vineyard. Their work was a privilege and joy before it was ever a burden.

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That changes how we should see our Christian life. If God has given you many years of faith, many opportunities to serve, teach, give, pray, encourage or suffer for Christ, we do not look at those things: “Look what I have done.” We look at our Master Jesus and say: **“Look what God’s grace has allowed me, a poor sinner, to receive and do!”**

We tend to forget we do not have God the Father’s favour because of our goodness, or how much we have left following Jesus, or because of many years of our service. We have it because of what His Son Jesus did. Jesus didn’t go to the cross for good people.

Good people wouldn’t need it. Jesus did it for sinners, just like me and you. He went to the cross bearing my sins and your sins, sins of the first and sins of the last. Now He gives us freely what we could never dream about earning – His forgiveness, reconciliation with God the Father, and eternal life with Him. As a gift of His grace.

That is why God’s grace is so offensive to our old nature. We are not in God’s family because we are good. **We are here because Jesus is good and gracious.** When that sinks in, we can finally rejoice when God’s grace reaches someone else. If you received God’s grace many years ago, rejoice! You have had the privilege of working in your Master’s vineyard longer. That is not your achievement. **That is His gift.**

If someone receives God’s grace only at the end of their life, they have not stolen anything from us. The Master has not been less generous to you. He has simply been gracious and generous to someone else too.

We should pray for those who are still lingering in that marketplace. We should pray that God would change their hearts, call them by His Gospel, give them His Spirit, and bring them into His Kingdom. And when He does, that is our reason to rejoice.

There is one more thought. How terrible would eternal life be if we entered God’s Kingdom with the same sinful hearts that we have now. Still comparing ourselves with others, keeping score, still asking who deserves more.

It would not be Paradise at all. But thanks be to God, we will not remain as we are. We will be renewed and restored – good, perfect, beautiful. We will be free from that deep corruption of our hearts that make us compare ourselves with others.

We will not be looking at ourselves. We will not be looking down on others. We will be looking at our gracious Master Jesus. We will rejoice in what He has done for us and what He has done for others. Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. And it will not matter to us.

For the great thing will be this - we will be there. You will be there. Not because you deserved it. Not because you worked longer hours or harder. Not because you were better than others. But because of God’s grace.

Amen.