

## RECEIVE GRACE

### THE PARABLE *of the workers in the vineyard*

*Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?*

*Or are you envious because I am generous?*

*Matthew 20:15*

Many of Jesus' parables are counter-cultural. They present a world or a "kingdom" as he puts it that is radically different from what his listeners know. It is after all the kingdom of God he is describing, and sometimes God stings us with his wisdom.

It's a simple story. At six a.m. a vineyard owner goes down to the local day workers center and hires a crew to help with the grape harvest. He agrees to pay them the fair wage of one denarius for a day's work—six a.m. to six p.m.

By nine a.m. he sees he needs more workers and brings on another crew. He adds more workers at noon and again at three in the afternoon. In fact the harvest is so good, he even brings on fresh additional workers at five p.m., which means they'll only work for an hour, but he needs them.

The parable's unsettling sting comes when it's time to pay the workers. To everyone's surprise, those who came at six a.m. and those who came at five p.m. all get paid the same wages—the one denarius as promised at the beginning of the day. Everybody gets the same. Naturally the six a.m. crew who had put in 12 hours were upset. They expected to get more when they watched the latecomers get their denarius. Instead, everyone gets the same no matter how long they had worked.

It seems to be more than coincidence that Matthew places this parable in his gospel just a few verses after Peter asks Jesus, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Mt 19:27). In other words, "Jesus, we've given up everything to work for you. What do we get in return?" Jesus responds with a very generous promise, including eternal life, but he also turns things upside down by saying, "But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30). Then he tells this parable, and it stings.

This isn't the way we operate. They all get the same pay, even the ones who just got to work an

hour ago? Ever hear of equal pay for equal work? This is like a high school student who has attends school for only one month and gets the same diploma on graduation day as the senior who has been in classes for four years! It's like the young upstart at work, there just three months, while you've been working there 20 years, and she gets your promotion, the one with your name on it.

We get upset. We should get what we deserve. We should be paid what we have earned. "Equal pay for equal work" is a principle at the heart of our economic system! Then the vineyard owner says, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

That changes things. If Jesus is trying to teach us something about God, we may not like what he has to say. It doesn't help when he repeats what he has just said to Simon Peter: "So the last will be first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16).

It's a different arrangement, focused not on our rights or privileges, not even on what we consider to be just and fair. It's God's prerogative that matters here, and since God is God, and we're not, we don't get to question how God distributes the riches of the kingdom. So the dirty rotten scoundrel who has left a wake of disaster behind him all his life and just now comes to faith is leveled out by God's grace with the long-term Christian who has worked in the Church for 50 years. So sinners late to the vineyard find their place in paradise, and the thief on the cross beside Jesus comes into the kingdom in his last hour.

God's grace is unfair alright, unfair because none of us, no, not one of us, deserves what we have by grace. We could never earn what God gives us. God just chooses in love to gives it to us, all of it—forgiveness, hope, peace, security. It isn't fair. God's economy of grace is so unjust that his own perfect Son, Jesus Christ, gets rejection, ridicule, torture and death as his pay "at the end of the day" on Good Friday. He gets what we deserve. That is his compensation for a lifetime of perfect obedience, and it isn't fair, but it is God's choice, not ours.

If you want to take all this and do something with it, then do what God has done for you. Do the unsettling thing, the gracious thing. Serve someone.

Love a child. Give someone more than they ever dreamed you would just because that is how God has treated you. That's grace—leveling, unsettling and amazingly generous grace! Amen.

Philip Tesch  
March 29, 2017  
North Highlands, California