

## Parables, part 2

### Matthew 20:1-16

#### The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

<sup>1</sup> "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

<sup>3</sup> "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup> He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' <sup>5</sup> So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. <sup>6</sup> About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

<sup>7</sup> "Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

<sup>8</sup> "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

<sup>9</sup> "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. <sup>12</sup> 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

<sup>13</sup> "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' <sup>14</sup> Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. <sup>15</sup> Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

<sup>16</sup> "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Let me start tonight with a riddle: What is the one thing you hate to have, but can't stand being without? ... a job. Can't live with em... can't send kids to nice schools without them.

Tonight Jesus tells a parable of that thing we all love to hate... about workers in a vineyard.

At college some years ago, a message went out about a student selling a car. It was an old Volvo, a reliable car, he had just repaired the gear box, brakes and the suspension at the cost of \$3000 and was hoping to get between \$1500-2000 for the car! The moral of the story is youth workers make for bad businessmen.

Jesus tells this parable of a vineyard owner who is a terrible business man.

All the small business owners probably hear this story and think to themselves, "I give that vineyard 6 months". Because his business practices are crazy – he hired

men to work his vineyard all day long. Because he doesn't know how many he will need he goes back 5 times to hire people. He could have hired less workers at the start of the day and still got all the work done but he doesn't.

Then he lines them all up from those who worked 1 hour, 3, 6, 9 and 12 hours. He pays them all the same, one denarius – wildly over paying the last workers, 12 times the hourly rate of the first hired. While at the same time discouraging his hardest workers. If you worked 12 hours, tomorrow you might show up after midday to work because you know you will get paid the same. He is encouraging his men to come and do less work.

The whole economic system is backwards. It doesn't make any sense because the economy of salvation makes no sense to this world. It is foolishness to the wise, yet it is the greatest hope humanity has ever seen. It is totally back to front – in our world you work hard and get rewarded, here Jesus is saying, those who don't work hard get rewarded also.

The economics of heaven is not about equity, not about being fair but Grace is about giving generously to those who don't deserve it. It's about God unjustly giving his favour to some – some people will have done less to deserve his grace, and others done more, yet they will all receive the same salvation.

Because when you have a salvation of grace it gets messy, **law is easy, grace is hard**. Because with a salvation of law you can just say, to be a Christian you need to do a-b-c. For example, come to church, give regularly, not steal, not binge drink – and then you're in, then you have made the grade. But with grace that is not true, our actions are a symptom of being a Christian, but not the cause.

We're not saved because we follow the law but we follow the law because we were saved and this can be a hard pill to swallow for the faithful obedient Christians – to see grace being given to people still hanging on to all their fun sins.

Jesus talks about this in other parables also like the prodigal son who, when he returns, is showered with grace from his father and the brother is furious:

*<sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'*

*<sup>31</sup> "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. Luke 15:29-32*

Grace is harder than law, for those who are saved but this is what the message of this parable is for us, what Jesus is saying to the church in this story.

**We have to get our theology of Grace right, we have to be a church that truly lives out the message of God's grace for people in all stages in their faith journey.**

Who are we to begrudge God grace, given to someone, still living in sin? Who are we to say to God, don't be so generous, they haven't earned it.

Time and time again the church constantly swings back and forward between law and grace because the church likes law better as its easier, and fairer, and more equitable.

In the early church Paul and Peter had a big argument over circumcision – do the new converts have to be circumcised? Because this is not a helpful evangelistic message – come join our church, hear about Jesus love and grace (by the way we will need to give you the snip) – it was an obstacle.

But the Jews wanted the law, they had to do it so the gentiles should also.

Then in the 4-5<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a monk called Pelagious and he said, salvation is about works, you have to meet a standard. That salvation is not just freely given, you need to follow the rules. Once again swinging back to law

And the predestine church had a bad history of setting up systems of law. To be in some of the churches there were long lists of rules to follow. Again, if you're really a Christian then you will do a-b-c.

Today we don't have a theology of works in our church but I wonder if we sometime live out law in our practice, if our theology of grace means we act like were under law.

The church has come a long way over the last 50 years – for example, if you were living with someone not your spouse, if you had a divorce, if you had a child out of wedlock – the church was not a safe place for you, you were often ostracised or limited in how you could serve and be a part of the church and, on occasion, asked to leave.

Why? Because in the eyes of the church those people didn't deserve grace. The church was like the 12 hour workers looking down the line at the others, thinking they do not deserve to get what I am getting.

So what about us today? Where does our theology of grace need some fine tuning? What are the areas where we need to get our grace right? How do we engage with people who live with a partner, who are same sex attracted? Do we make church a place where they can feel at home? Or do we set up a boundary of rule around them, make them feel like an outsider? Are we living the gospel of grace to those who need it most?

The Bible is filled with example of people who had less than perfect life but By God's grace were call righteous. Think of King David, he was a man that kill 100s of Philistines, had multiple wives, slept with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah. As an old man he is given a young woman to keep him warm in bed and before he dies gives his sons a list of people to murder so they won't be a problem politically. And yet he is remembered as one of the greatest Kings of the OT. Why? Because he would humble himself before God and repent. This didn't stop him from living in sin in the future but he realised his failings and gave God the glory.

People from minority groups, or people outside the bounds of mainstream society, eg. single parents, divorcees, same sex attracted people, suffer from extreme isolation, dislocation from community and identity issues.

The chances of a gay youth attempting suicide is 2-7 times higher than the national average. There is a higher rate and risk of depression among people in these circumstances and the question for us as church is do we want to be part of the problem? Do we want to be part of that isolation and disconnection or can we give support and spiritual guidance to people going through a hard thing in a non-judgemental, loving way?

I believe our theology of Grace should lead us to have a greater heart for those living lifestyles outside the bound of the normal.

Let us not be the ones at the back of the line, begrudging God's generosity but know that God uses the small, the imperfect and the unlikely to do his will.