

Grace isn't fair

Matthew 20:1–16 The workers in the vineyard

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. 2After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage,* he sent them into his vineyard. 3When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; 4and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. 5When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" 7They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." 8When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." 9When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.* 10Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.* 11And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12saying, "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." 13But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?" 14Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" 16So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

I used to really struggle over this parable and wonder what it was all about. I used to feel for the workers who had been there all day and think, yeah they should feel ripped off. The story didn't gel with the Jesus who would hang out with the poor. Here he was in this story giving the same pay to those worked only an hour as to those who slaved their guts out all day.

But as usual, it was Philip Yancey who helped me understand that this is a parable about grace. In this case it was his book, 'What's So Amazing About Grace?' If you haven't read this book, get a copy of it. I don't think you'll find a better book on what grace is all about. So, as so often with Philip Yancey's writing, reading this book opened my eyes to what Jesus was talking about in this parable.

This story is a story about grace. It's actually got nothing to do with justice and equal pay. The fact that I tried to interpret this parable in terms of workers being treated fairly for the effort they put in shows how much this world's thinking has been a part of who I am. And it shows how much it has affected my view of God.

You see, what this parable shows is that God gives out gifts, not wages. Grace is completely opposite to the way the world works. It's a completely different mindset. In a world where it's all about 'what goes around comes around', grace says no. It's nothing short of a revolution. It was a completely new way of thinking in Jesus' day and that's why it caused such an outrage amongst the Pharisees. The ones who thought they were right with God couldn't cope with the idea of a God who forgives without asking any questions. With the Pharisees it was all about rules. Doing the 'right thing' took priority over people. Rowland Croucher tells a story about when he went into a church to preach one day and he asked them to make a list of all the good qualities of the Pharisees. And they came up with a good list. They said the Pharisees were Bible believing, they had the right doctrine, they were evangelical, they were evangelistic (in fact Jesus even said that they would go all across the land just to win one convert), they were prayerful, church attending, moral, many of them were martyrs in the decades before Jesus, they were very good people, and they tithed well. The congregation went silent. So Rowland asked them what was wrong and they said, "that's us." So Rowland said there must be something wrong with the list. And so they started talking and they realised that the most important things, the things which Jesus prefaced by saying this is the most important thing, none of them were on that list. There were good things on the list but they were

secondary things. And one of them then mentioned when Jesus said you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart soul, mind and strength and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. That wasn't on the list and it isn't in any of the creeds. If you look at all the creeds that Christians have drawn up in the last 2,000 years, of the most important things they believe, none of them refers to the love of God.

The Pharisees, through all their good work, had become people of what Yancey calls ungrace. That's why Jesus would get so upset with them. They knew all the right things but they had not love. And yet the most distinguishing thing between the message of Jesus and that of every other faith is the idea of grace.

I've been realising recently how much I try to impress God. I do believe that I can't make God love me any more or any less than he already does, but I still try to impress him. It's like my motivation for doing the right thing and 'being Christ' to others is so, when I get to the end of my life, I can say, "See? Look! Look at all the things I did." And then God will let me in.

Someone said once that the longest distance between 2 places is that between your head and your heart. It seems that, on my journey so far, there is still some way to go before the belief in my head about God's unlimited grace filters down into the depths of my heart.

And so it's in this context that I think of the parable of the workers in the vineyard. It's a parable about grace. Nothing to do with fair pay. In fact it seems to be praising the very notion of unfairness. And that's the whole point of the parable. There was a sense in which I was right to be perplexed at the unequal treatment given out that day, because that's the whole point of grace. Grace isn't fair. It's not about counting up what we have done. Grace is about what God has done for us, not what we think we can do for God. Jesus demonstrated that himself on the cross when he said to the thief next to him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise". What about all those poor people who had given years of service to God? Shouldn't they be entitled to more, a few more crowns in heaven maybe? But that's not the way that grace works apparently. Grace is not fair. It can never be, for that is its very essence. If it weren't for grace we would all be in deep manure.

Grace is something that I can be grateful for, because I'm one of those who turns up late in the day and still receives the best that God has. This is the God of the second chance, indeed of the third chance and the one-hundredth chance. David Meece sang a song years ago in which he cried out "seventy times seven. Can you forgive me for all that I've done?" The answer is a resounding "yes!!!", without hesitation and every single time.

Grace indeed isn't fair. God is not into games. He doesn't play favourites. He just loves. If we could get a glimpse of the amazing grace of God, our lives would be turned upside down. We would realise that no longer do we need to play the games, those games where we say like the 4 year old, "I'm not going to be your friend anymore". It's not just kids who do that. We do it when we're 4 and we can do it when we're 34, or 54, or 84.

We are all on a journey, and the journey for many of us begins in our heads, and the final destination is deep in our hearts where, once grace is firmly entrenched, we 'love because he first loved us'.

This is not a story about social justice. If it was, it would reveal a pretty unfair God, a God who doesn't really care about equal pay and equal rights. In many activist churches, such as the church I attend, which are about social justice, it can be easy to completely miss the whole point of this parable, and indeed the whole point of the Gospel itself. The Gospel is not primarily about social justice. It's about a God of grace who gives us what we don't deserve and who wants us to be a part of the bringing in of his kingdom and to live with him in it, despite the fact that we have done nothing to deserve it. This is a story about the outrageous grace of God, and that we simply are powerless to do anything to gain more of God's favour.

The most famous hymn of all, 'Amazing Grace', was written by John Newton in the 18th century. Newton was an abolitionist who was a mentor to William Wilberforce in getting rid of slavery. But did you know that when Newton wrote Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, he was a slave trader? He wrote that hymn while sitting in a bar waiting for a shipment of slaves. At the time, he didn't connect the idea that the grace of God had something to say about the social conditions of his day. He was still living a life of ungrace. But over the years he changed, and he realised that the words 'amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me', meant that he was free to serve, to give his life for something bigger than himself. He saw that it wasn't just about his own private salvation with God and a ticket to heaven.

If you look at the chapters just before and after this parable in Matthew's gospel, you'll notice how often Jesus talks about servanthood, and the first being last and the last being first, and that fact that the kingdom is not about being the greatest, but that if you want to be great, you would put yourself at the service of others. It's everywhere in just a few chapters in this gospel. This is what the Kingdom of God is all about. Jesus spoke about it and Jesus lived it. This is a God who accepts people no matter what they've done.

What these passages also show is not just that Jesus accepted sinners, but that he was the promised Messiah. Jesus' whole interpretation of who he was, was based on the Bible that he read, our Old Testament. It is particularly based on Isaiah where the prophet talks about the coming of the kingdom when the lion will lie down with the lamb and all will eat together. When Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners, he was living out the words of Isaiah. And everyone there knew it, because the Pharisees who were watching him knew their Bibles backwards, and they all knew exactly what Isaiah said. And here was Jesus actually living this out and showing up the Pharisees and others for their legalism and rule-keeping, which is what they thought that pleasing God was all about. That's why Matthew (and Luke) quote Isaiah so often in referring to Jesus, because he is showing that Jesus is the fulfillment of their Scriptures. They say in Sunday School that the answer to every question is Jesus, but when Jesus was in Sunday School it would have been that the answer to every question was Isaiah!

The Pharisees were all about keeping rules, and by doing that they were automatically excluding anyone who didn't keep the rules, anyone who wasn't like them. Whenever we start substituting love for rules, we start to become people of ungrace and we can't help but create an 'us and them' culture. And anyone who is not like us is not really accepted, and we judge them in just the same way as the Pharisees judged people in their day. And what did Jesus say about them? You go to the ends of the earth to bring these people in, but then you make them twice a son of hell as you are. Are we like that? When we criticize those who are not into social justice as much as we are, are we being

exactly like a Pharisee who Jesus called sons of hell? We dare not think that our social activism gives us any extra brownie points with God. It doesn't work like that. We do social activism for other reasons, but let's not think we can do it and think we're better than those other churches that aren't really into that stuff.

Too many people have grown up in churches where grace is not the norm, where it's more about being a certain type of person and doing the 'right things' that gets you approval from others, and presumably, from God.

In a world where everything is about performance, where we talk about equality and justice, and where there is so little of that, in a world of so much ungrace, Jesus shows and models grace. Where we have such a mindset of economics and about getting what we deserve, grace comes along and interrupts all that. It is revolutionary. In an interview with Bono about this, he says "Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions".

When we have a mindset that has been tuned to think in terms of getting more rewards for effort, we fall into the trap of wondering if God cares when things go wrong. The Psalms are full of cries of anguish at the fact that the wicked get away with murder while the good continue to suffer unjustly. But the whole life of Jesus shows that God has come into the world to do something about it. Jesus demonstrated that the kingdom of God is not some distant future thing, but it is now among you. The kingdom is here, Jesus said, and you can be a part of it. The idea of the last being first and the first being last is starting to happen, and then when he rose from the dead, he proved that, while we may never understand why bad things happen to good people, we may never understand why life is so crappy at times, God has done and is doing, something about it. That's what the resurrection is all about, and that's what grace is all about. God saying, I want to be with you, it's ok. Nothing you have done can keep me from loving you.

Jesus as usual, never defines what grace is, just like he never defines the kingdom of God. He just tells stories about it and models it in his own life. We live in a world where grace is not known. Some years ago I did a devotion at work on grace and one of the people in our group didn't know what I was talking about. All he knew about grace was that it was a girl's name.

The God we see in the Gospels is a God who forgives the most deplorable sin because all he wants is to have us back in his arms. Many of us haven't known a God like that. Everything we are taught in life comes down to earning our way. When we grow up we get rewards for doing well and so we are motivated by the hope of reward. In school we are thought of more highly by our teachers the higher our marks are. We compete against others to get a job, when we enter into a relationship we try to impress her or him. The message we get every day is that we constantly have to look good, do good and buy the right things to be accepted. Everything in the way our world works operates from a law of ungrace.

Ernest Hemingway tells the story of a Spanish father who wants to reconcile with his son who has run away to Madrid. Now remorseful, the father takes out this ad in the El Liberal newspaper: "Paco meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa". Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the square he finds 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.

This picture of a God of grace is not very common to us. Some of us have an image of God which is like a Farside cartoon which shows God at his computer. On the screen is an image of an ordinary man in the street with a block of concrete over his head. God is looking at the screen and is just about to hit the 'smite' button to wipe him out.

I still struggle with this image of God at times. I recall once when I was serving communion at church, something from the sermon that day struck me. I realised, as I was serving communion, that when I am saying 'this is the body and blood of Christ shed for you to forgive you for all your sins', I have sometimes focused on the 'all your sins' part as if I've been saying to the person I'm serving, you're forgiven but don't forget your sin. But as I was serving that day, it suddenly occurred to me that God focuses on the 'shed for you to forgive you' bit. In the act of serving communion I had realised what grace was about. My attitude towards others had come out of my image of a God who might forgive but who is still stern.

This parable is story of a God of grace who forgives, full stop! We always wait for a catch, but there is no hidden fine print with God. This is a God who doesn't know when to stop loving. Nothing you or I have done – nothing! – can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Amen!

by Nils von Kalm
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