

## More Than Enough Grace

### Matthew 20:1-16

#### INTRODUCTION

I don't get to see my favorite comic strip much anymore, and I miss it. Calvin and Hobbes was a classic created by a talented artist named Bill Watterson. Watterson grew up in the Cleveland area and graduated from Kenyon College with a degree in political science. He thought that degree would help him as he pursued his dream job of being a cartoonist.

The names Watterson came from his studies at Kenyon, Calvin, the little boy, was named after the Protestant reformer John Calvin, a 16<sup>th</sup> century theologian who believed in predestination and Hobbes after the social philosopher Thomas Hobbes, a 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher with a dim view of human nature. Perfect choices for these two characters.

In one of the many insightful issues, Calvin is arguing with his father for a later bedtime. As Calvin cries out "It isn't fair!," his father responds "The world isn't fair."

- We may all have felt the way Calvin does at that line: "I know, but why isn't it ever unfair in my favor."

That may have even been your reaction to the wages paid to our workers in today's gospel. In a world where equity and fairness are important buzzwords, it is hard to avoid that response when we read how these day laborers were sent to the vineyard at different hours, but all paid the same amount of money at the end of the day.

Unlike the kingdom of this world, the kingdom of God is not focused on tidy calculations of merit. Fairness – at least from our human perspective – never factors into the equation when God starts handing out His grace.

Once again, in the wonder and awesomeness of Scripture writing, this parable (story) is placed precisely at a point where it makes the most impact.

- In the very next chapter (Matthew 21) Jesus will make His triumphal entry into Jerusalem.
  - The long-awaited Messiah proclaimed as King on Sunday will be crucified on Friday, just five days later. How fair is that?
- The story in our text follows a lengthy time of teaching on money and rewards in chapter 19. There He makes it clear that this a focus on this world's values creates a barrier to our ability to receive the good God has to offer us.
- And later in Matthew 20 is the the incident where the mother of James and John lobbies Jesus for positions of honor for her sons, and Jesus teaches all the disciples that the one who would be first must be the slave of all, even as Jesus himself was.

The story may also be directed at Peter's question in Matthew 19:27,

We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us? (Matthew 19:27)

There Peter asks Jesus what the disciples, who have left everything to follow Jesus, may expect to receive, and Jesus promises them rewards in heaven. After all, it would be fair if they got a little bit more, right? Jesus responded:

Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. (Matthew 19:29)

All of this points us away from the natural human viewpoint so that we can look through the lens of God's grace. And when we will discover that ...

### **#1: GOD'S GRACE HAS NO HIDDEN AGENDAS**

Of course, in the parable the landowner is to be understood as God. The landowner does what God does. And I love the way the landowner responds when his workers start to grumble about the equity of their wages:

I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? (Matthew 20:14-15)

Talk about fairness! What is more fair than God doing what He wants with the grace He has to give?

Grace is always about the unexpected and undeserved.

Dr. Charles Stanley was pastor of First Baptist Church in Atlanta for nearly 50 years. He died earlier this year. But during his lifetime he was regarded as one of the best preachers in the country. He told this story during one of his sermons:

One of my more memorable seminary professors had a practical way of illustrating to his students the concept of grace. At the end of his evangelism course, he would distribute the exam with the caution to read it all the way through before beginning to answer it. This caution was written on the exam as well. As we read the test, it became unquestionably clear to each of us that we had not studied nearly enough.

The further we read, the worse it became. About halfway through, audible groans could be heard throughout the lecture hall. On the last page, however, was a note that read, "You have a choice. You can either complete the exam as given or sign your name at the bottom. If you choose the latter option, you will receive an A for this exam."

Wow? We sat there stunned. Was he serious? Just sign it and get an A? Slowly, the point dawned on us, and one by one we turned in our tests and silently filed out of the room.

When I talked with the professor about it afterward, he shared some of the reactions he had received through the years. Some students began to take the exam without reading it all the way through, and they would sweat it out for the entire two hours of class time before reaching the last page.

Others read the first two pages, became angry because they had studied so hard, turned the test in blank, and stormed out of the room without signing it. They never realized what was available, and as a result, they lost out totally. They received an "F."

One fellow read the entire test, including the note at the end, but decided to take the exam anyway. He did not want any gifts; he wanted to earn his grade. And he did. He made a C+, but he could easily have had an A.

Grace is always about the unexpected and undeserved.

It makes no sense by any worldly standard. Grace is all about God, and He can distribute it however He wants to do it. Whether it seems fair to you or not.

## **#2: GOD'S GRACE IS NOT BASED ON ANY WORLDLY STANDARD**

Look at verses 12-13:

"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." But he answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?" (Matthew 20:12-13)

An active, dedicated, hard-working church member dreamed that he passed away after a long and satisfying life. As he approached the heavenly gate, he noticed a sign posted which read, "ENTRANCE REQUIREMENT: 1,000 POINTS."

The man looked a bit worried. He walked up to the angel guarding the gate and said, "That requirement seems pretty high. Do you think I could possibly have accumulated that many points?"

The angel kindly replied, "Well, why don't you tell me what you have done, and I will tell you how many points you have earned."

"OK, then," the man said enthusiastically. "I was baptized into a Lutheran Church when I was a baby, and I have faithfully followed Jesus for more than 80 years. I taught a Sunday school class for over 25 years. I was a youth chaperone whenever they needed one. And I was a regular member of the church choir!"

"That's wonderful!" said the angel. "Now let me see. That's worth -- ONE POINT."

The man suddenly became very pale and began to perspire, but he went on. "Well, I fithed all my income, and sometimes gave even more. Also I served on the church

council. I was an usher and greeter. I attended every workday at the church. I helped with the garden and did repairs and painting. At every fellowship supper I helped set up the chairs and tables and then stayed late and helped take them down."

He looked expectantly at the angel, who smiled sympathetically and answered politely, "That sounds great! That's worth -- ANOTHER POINT. Now you have a total of TWO."

The man looked as if he were about to go into shock. He spoke rapidly with a sense of desperation: "I invited a lot of people to church, and often went calling with the preacher. I supported the several outreach ministries, and for a while was a sponsor for a child in the Philippines. And I never cheated on my income tax!"

The angel tried to speak encouragingly as he said, "That's quite a record of good works! That's worth still another point. Now you have -- THREE."

The poor man's face sagged with futility, and his shoulders drooped as he seemed resigned to his fate. "I may as well give up," he mourned. "I don't think I can ever be good enough to get into Heaven. In fact, it seems impossible for me or anybody else to get in there without the GRACE OF GOD."

"Ah, now, did you say GRACE? You know what? YOU'RE STANDING AT THE WRONG GATE! This is the WORKS gate; this where you need the 1,000 points. Look over there. Do you see that other gate, with another line of people leading up to it? That's the GRACE gate. You don't need any points to get in through there. By grace, heaven is free!"

Whenever we look at what we have done as the basis for God's blessing, we are not operating in the realm of grace.

## **APPLICATION**

I read this week about a baseball game that took place in heaven one day. It seems that the Lord's team was playing Satan's team. The score was zero to zero, and it was in the bottom of the 9th inning with two outs. Satan was pitching. Coach Peter and the God were at the end of the dugout, watching the game carefully.

As they watched, the leadoff batter stepped up the plate. His name was LOVE. Love swung at the first pitch and hit a single, because, you know, "love never fails."

The next batter was named FAITH. He also got a single because faith works with love.

Next up was WISDOM. Wisdom looked at the first pitch and let it pass ... ball one. Three more pitches and Wisdom had drawn a walk, because wisdom never swings at what Satan throws.

Now the bases were loaded. God turned to Coach Peter and told him it was now time to bring in their star player. So up to the plate stepped GRACE. Coach Peter said, "He

sure doesn't look like much." Satan's whole team relaxed when they saw Grace come to the plate. Thinking they had won the game, Satan wound up and fired his first pitch. To the shock of everyone, Grace hit the ball harder than anyone had ever seen. But Satan was not worried, as his center fielder let very few get by. He went up for the ball, but it went right through his glove, hit him on the head and sent him crashing on the ground. The ball continued over the fence for a grand slam home run! The Lord's team won.

God then asked Coach Peter if he knew why LOVE, FAITH, and GODLY WISDOM could get on base but could not win the game. Coach answered that he didn't know why. The Lord explained, "If your love, faith and wisdom had won the game you would think you had done it by yourself. Love, faith and wisdom will get you on base, but only My GRACE can get you home."

On this Consecration Sunday, we know and confess that our best efforts will always be less than enough but with God's grace what we offer here today – just like those five loaves and two fish when the 5,000 were fed – will be multiplied by His Grace and will be more than enough to do the work He has called us to do.

Amen