

Grace in a Wage Based World

Dr. Alan Rodda



Matthew 20:1-16; Colossians 3:17

Our first reading is from the Gospel of Matthew 20:1-16, where Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘you also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And 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?’ They said to him, ‘because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘you also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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 the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Then Colossians 3:17: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD,
PRAY WITH ME

Worker God, whose hands built the earth, molded our bodies and sowed the stars across the sky, touch us with your words and presence, we pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be inspired by you, our Creator and Sustainer, Amen?

LET’S SET THE SCENE

After following Jesus all over the countryside, dodging overenthusiastic crowds, mixing strangers, and other interesting people following Jesus- and just having heard Jesus declare that rich people might not make it into the Kingdom, His disciples were getting anxious. If, as Jesus indicated, it’s that hard to get into His kingdom, his disciples wanted to know if their full-time commitment to follow him meant anything. Did Jesus truly understand their sacrifice for him? Was there any reward for leaving everything to follow him? So Peter asked that familiar question, “Master, for those of us who have left everything and followed you, what then will there be for us?” What’s in it for me, us? On the surface, a fair question, don’t you think?

And Jesus replied, “You who have followed me will sit on twelve jeweled thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel”. Don’t you worry, Peter, everyone who left their loved ones for me will receive one hundred fold, and will inherit eternal life.” Whew! Peter must have thought, relieved and affirmed. “Oh, but there’s one more important thing to mention,” Jesus adds: “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. And let me tell you how that works”. Then Jesus launches into this parable, our reading for this morning.

We could all put ourselves in the place of those who showed up early and worked hard all day, couldn’t we? I’m sure we all have had an experience of knowing people who, in our opinion, neither earned nor deserved what they got; a job, a promotion, a raise, recognition, success. That we worked longer and tried harder seemed to make no difference. Our reaction would be typical, right? It’s not fair when things like this happen, especially after giving years of faithful service. It’s not fair that those less deserving got more recognition. It’s tempting to view our world, ourselves, and others through the lens of fairness, isn’t it?

“...Grace holds before us the truth that each person is more than their behavior, their accomplishments, or their failures.”

That fairness matters started at an early age. Having a level playing field mattered. Watch a bunch of children play and it won’t be long before you hear someone say, “That’s not fair!” I remember some of my childhood reactions about fairness. Like, when my mother would put 10 lima beans on my dinner plate, but my sister only had to eat 6. I know. I actually counted those beans carefully. I suspect that some of you too in some way have counted your lima beans!

Deep down, there is something in us that wants fairness. We like fairness, I think, because it give us some assurance of order, predictability, and control. Shouldn’t fairness be based on what we deserve, how hard we work, what we achieved or didn’t achieve? If we behaved, we get a reward; if we didn’t, it’s only fair that we get punishment. After all, in the final analysis, that is fair, is it not? We live in a wage based society in which we, deserve, earn and receive the consequences, good or bad, of what we do.

So that brings us to those workers who came on at 9, 12, 3 and 5:00 o’clock and received the same wage as those who had been working since 6:00am. How does that fit? Well, in a wage based world view, it doesn’t. I played football in high school (a decision, given the continuing of my ankle and knee issues – which some of you have commented on occasionally in my stair climbing), I might have revisited). Frankly our quarterback was not very good, but clearly the coach’s pet. He had an interesting name which made for a great play on words, Claude Hopper. Say it fast and you what we said behind his back. He would show up late for practice, and often, when a play in the game would go wrong because of his timing, the rest of us in the backfield would get chewed out by the coach. As we saw it, not our fault and definitely not fair!!

But here is Jesus himself offering us a parable that

would seem to defend the very definition of unfairness. From a human perspective, we can understand why those earlier workers, as our text says, “grumbled against the landowner. They had a point. It would never occur to us that, when driving past a labor pool stop late in the afternoon, those few still standing around and getting hired would

get the same wage as those hired earlier? NO. Fairness means getting what’s rightfully coming to us based on the order and predictability of our timetable.

At our best, we think of ourselves as fair-minded people who believe that people should get what they deserve and that is good. There’s a lot of press today about a “fair wage” – And even though we might not agree with the suggested amounts, whether CEO’s at the top or laborers at the lower end, we agree that it’s only fair that a decent wage is paid for the work done. I overheard a conversation at a restaurant some weeks ago, in which one of the diners was complaining about the unfairness of a decision made by his company; to which his tablemate – trying to be helpful, responded with, “Whoever said life would be fair?” Now when someone has said that to me, that doesn’t really bring a lot of comfort, does it.

So what is Jesus’s message here? Is he downplaying the value of work? Telling us that good and hard work has no virtue in our economy? That how long we work and what we get paid, or aim for equal pay for the same work is of little interest to him?

No, none of this is what Jesus is telling us. Other verses in our Bible commend the importance and value of hard and honest work. As important as these issues can be and worthy of discussion, Jesus is talking here about something way more than a landowner’s practice in hiring day-laborers and what he chooses to pay them.

There is something intriguing – and perhaps troubling - about this parable that so bluntly challenges the way in which we-our society seems to operate. Here Jesus is drawing a picture of how God views the world and our lives. Rather than seeing human fairness as the ultimate measure by which His followers act, or judge

other people or their own life circumstances, God introduces us to a world where grace is a priority: where generosity, love, acceptance, mercy, forgiveness are far more important. And if you look at it as a contest, in God's economy, grace - the unmerited favor of God, always trumps human fairness.

Could it be that the degree to which this parable strikes one as unfair is the degree to which that his or her view is wage based? A wage-based world view knows little about "the last being first, and the first being last." A wage-based view rather says that the last are last and the first are first because they deserve it. It's what is fair.

But in God's realm, a wage based view leaves little room for grace. In God's world, grace is the rule not the exception. Grace looks beyond our productivity, our appearance, our dress, our ethnicity, our accomplishments, our failures. Grace recognizes there is more to us and who we are than what we have done or left undone. Grace reverses business as usual. Grace reminds us that we are not nearly as self-sufficient, deserving, or independent as a wage based view would lead us to believe. Nor is our worth determined solely by our productivity or usefulness. Grace does not justify or excuse discrimination. Rather, grace holds before us the truth that each person is more than their behavior, their accomplishments, or their failures.

Wages reveal human effort. Grace reveals the goodness of God. Wages make distinctions and separate. Grace seeks unity and inclusion. Wages are based on merit. Grace just happens. The only pre-condition of grace is that we show up and open ourselves to receive what God is giving and doing. When we do, we might begin to see our lives, our world, and our neighbors differently.

But wait! Let's look at this story from another angle and assume a waged-based point of view. Let's ask ourselves, "What if we're not where God thinks we are in line? What if we were hired last? What if, despite our confidence and hard work, we're not where we think we are? If that is true, this is great news. Then the Landlord's actions are the best news we have ever received. His actions are generosity beyond our wildest dreams -actions indiscriminate of our status. This is good news.

I like the way Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: "Depending on where you are in line that can sound like powerful

good news, because if God doesn't act by our standards of fairness, then there is a chance we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will make it through the doors even though we are last in line—not because of who we are, but because of who God is." That, folks, is grace – and great news.

What we find in the Bible, over and over again, are stories of a different justice, a different welcome, a different way of ordering our lives. Not only by merit, but by grace.

Think about it. In this parable, the landlord is right. The early and later comers are not that different from each other. Neither group owned the vineyard. Both groups needed a job and both were chosen, invited in, by no effort of their own doing.

There is, however, something that distinguishes the first with the later hired. Not what time they showed up to work, but the terms under which they entered the vineyard. The first hired entered the vineyard only after agreeing to the usual daily wage. They got what they bargained for. It appears that they settled for too little. They shortchanged themselves. Apparently the landowner was willing to pay more than the usual daily wage.

In their waged based view, they now had a standard of fairness AND expectations of the landlord. "More for us. And less for them" "We are different from and more deserving than they are." It's not fair to make them equal to us." "Perhaps not - but that's grace.

But notice. Those workers who come at 9:00, noon, 3:00, and even 5:00 p.m., did not negotiate for a wage. They entered the vineyard trusting they would be paid "whatever is right." Whatever is right is not determined by the first hired, but by the goodness of the landowner. Those hired later received more than they earned, more than they deserved, more than they had a right to ask or hope for. The Point? That's just what God does. "Whatever is right" isn't about fairness but about grace.

At this point in their journey with Jesus, the disciples hadn't quite grasped the non-logical nature of grace. They did not yet understand that they don't earn the rewards they expected, though Jesus was very generous with them. They were still jockeying for position, trying to earn Jesus' favor.

But later on, the truth dawned on them. So Peter, who asked Jesus, "what will there be for us?" later in his First Epistle writes, "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble". Peter knew that 'Whatever is right' will always be more than fair, more than we could ask or imagine. Why settle for the usual daily wage when God wants to give us "whatever is right" for our life, our needs, and our salvation?"

As Luis Leon puts it, "In a world of grace, we don't wish to beat out others, but instead pray for mercy. Not to out-perform, but serve others. Not to win over other religions, but to live out ours well. Not to worry about someone getting away with something, for we ourselves are getting away with something and still being rewarded. Not to broadcast where we are right and others are wrong, but how to live out our callings in grace-filled humility. Then it dawns on us how joyful life becomes when we understand this gift of God's grace rather than a reward for work well done."

I think you can see that the troubling part of this parable is the choice it lays on us: to live our lives in self-justification, or, to live our lives responding to God's unfair, ridiculous, world-altering generosity. To jockey for position, or trust in God's generosity; to not ask 'what number am I in line?', but to open our hearts in thankfulness that we ARE in line, and for the generosity that God has bestowed upon us.

On this Labor Day weekend Sunday, it is good to ask ourselves, 'to what degree am I living a wage based life rather than stepping into the vineyard of grace? What space am I creating in my heart for grace to emerge? What expectations about we deserve need to be released? Will I trust God with the freedom to pay whatever is right knowing that His ways are not my ways?'

Imagine if we let go of comparison, competition, expectation, and judgment. Our lives would be more God-filled, we would make space for the life of others to be more God-filled, and our environment, this parable tells us, would look a lot more like the kingdom of heaven. May we remember that as we experience God's grace anew by entering into the sacrament of Holy Communion.



Grace in a Wage-Based World

Dr. Alan Rodda
September 6, 2015


Church of the Palms

© 2015 Church of the Palms
3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323