

The Table Of Grace

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Preacher: Pastor Scott Johnson

[0 : 0 0] Good morning. This morning's scripture reading is taken from the book of Matthew, chapter 20, verses 1 through 16.

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

About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, you also go and work in my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right.

So they went. He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. 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? Because no one has hired us, they answered. He said to them, you also go and work in my vineyard.

[1 : 0 1] 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. The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius.

So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.

When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 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 in 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? Take your pay and go. 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? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first and the first will be last. This is a word of our Lord.

[2 : 0 4] Thanks be to God. So would you join me for a word of prayer? Almighty and gracious God, we give you thanks for the gift that is this morning.

We give you thanks for the joy it is that we feel your spirit moving among us and in this place. As our hearts and eyes are open to the ways in which you are at work among us, continue to be at work among us now.

With our hearts open to you, Lord, we pray that you will fall fresh on us. Give us a word. Give us a seed that will grow. And bear fruit for the honor and glory of your name. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray.

Amen. So, the table of grace. You know anybody who chooses to be unhappy?

Like they work at it. Like something comes up and they just see the worst all the time. Like some people just kind of gravitate to the bad. Right?

[3 : 01] I've had some people like that in my life. And I see I'm not alone in that. Some folks who just tend to always assume the worst, presume the worst, think the bad thing is going to happen to them all the time.

And that's a mystery to me. Now, I won't say I've never done it. But when I see some folks who default that way, I'm always wondering kind of how it works that way.

I even see some folks like that in the body of Christ sometimes. And I just wonder why they're wired like that. But having confronted that, I want us to all think about sometimes where we choose unhappiness.

We're going to talk about a way that happens to all of us. And that gets a little trickier. Okay? Because there are things about the way we live, especially in 2023, that come into our world and they just snatch our joy.

The story that you heard Amy read for us today gives us a great example of this problem. And if you're someone who struggles with trying to keep your peace, trying to hold on to the good things that you know God is doing, then maybe this might help speak to you.

[4 : 18] Because, see, friends, what we want to talk about today is this thing that happens when we choose unhappy. You say, well, I don't consciously choose unhappy.

I think sometimes we do. And so what we got to do is unpack why that is. Here's how we get there. See, the thing about it is that when most of us go through life, we work hard to be fair.

Like there's this thing that we have, this assumption we make that we should go into the world and be fair. That when something happens to us that we don't think is fair, we're immediately put into all those negative spaces.

Yes? That we start to feel the anger, the frustration. We start to feel the depression, the sadness because something just wasn't right.

Now, let me ask you this. If you had to tell somebody what it meant to be fair, what would you say? Because fair is one of those hard things to try and explain.

[5 : 34] Like if I gave you a situation, I gave you a circumstance, I could say, okay, this is what happened. What would be fair? Most of the time people can answer that. But if I asked you to define fair, like if you were talking to a five-year-old and said, this is how you know something is fair.

It's hard to find those words, right? It's hard to find those words. But we know fair, especially when it didn't happen to us, right?

We can recognize what's fair and what's not. Let me tell you what the experts say the definition of fair is. You know, like all good folks, when you need a definition, where you go?

So I went to find the experts. So first, Merriam-Webster defines fair as this. It says, impartial treatment, a lack of favoritism towards one side or another.

I've got to be honest, that didn't feel very satisfying, right? That wasn't enough. So the Cambridge English Dictionary said this, the quality of treating people equally or in a way that is right or reasonable.

[6 : 49] Let me say that again. The quality of treating people equally or in a way that is right or reasonable. Now that one feels better.

Because when you think of any scenario, like I said, if I gave you a problem or a situation and said, well, what would be fair? You would do your best to be right and reasonable and say, we're going to do this equally, right?

So that one seems to work. Problem is we know that's not real life. I think anybody who lives in this world for more than a few days realizes that the world isn't fair.

And most of us have kind of learned that. We've learned to live in it. And we don't like it. As I said, those feelings hit when we get those situations that remind us that the world isn't fair.

Now, here's our challenge. Because fair is this standard we kind of strive for.

[7 : 52] But we know that fair isn't what happens. And we spend so much time sort of out of sorts. In this sense of perpetual discontent.

That we kind of keep running into thing after thing that reminds us that this is not how it's supposed to be. It gets worse. Because when you look at this story that we read today, God reminds us of something about fair.

And I think if we hold on to the lesson that God is teaching us about fairness, we might actually be in a better place. So this story, it's a teaching of Christ.

He tells this parable. And he talks about the idea of the last will be first and the first will be last. That's what he says before he teaches this. He also says it at the end of the story.

And you need to keep that bookend around you. Because that helps you understand the message he's trying to communicate. This story doesn't take a whole lot to unpack. Right? So we've got this idea of a person who's got a vineyard that needs worked.

[9 : 04] So he goes into town and he's looking for workers. He finds them. So he hires first guys right away at the beginning of the work day. Then he goes back.

Because apparently there's so much work to be done. He finds some more. Sends them into the field as well. Goes back a third time. And what's interesting about the third time is he still sees workers there.

And he says, well, why aren't you guys working? He says, because nobody's hired us today. He's like, well, I still have stuff to do. Come on with me. Now, to understand this story and why it hits the way it does.

Is that a day in the culture at that time usually began around 6 a.m. They kind of ran their day from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. And so he hires people at the beginning of the day.

Think of it as like sunup to sundown kind of. Okay. And so they went out and he got people to start. Then about three hours later, he goes back and he gets the second group.

[10 : 08] And you hear this depending on what translation of the Bible you use. That he goes and gets the last group at about 5 o'clock. Okay. And so everybody's working.

But let's remember something important about the deal. When he goes and gets everybody, when he goes and gets the first group, he tells, they negotiate the rate.

He says, I will pay you a denarius. A denarius was a coin that was pretty much a day's labor. That's what they used it for. So I'll pay you one of these. Come and work for the day. Okay.

Now, here's where this thing gets muddy. If you have your Bible, we're going to pick up the story in verse 9. So we're in Matthew 20. Story begins in verse 1.

But we're going to pick it up in verse 9. Okay. So the landowner has hired all the people. Day's work is done. Says, come on, we're going to pay everybody now.

[11 : 07] So everybody's in line to get paid. And he says, we're going to start with the guys who just got here. Work our way to the guys who were here first. So, verse 9. The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius.

So when those came who were hired first, the 6 a.m. group, when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each of them also received a denarius.

When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. These who were hired last only worked 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.

In other words, this isn't fair. Now, I want you to think about that for a minute.

This idea of not being fair happened because of something that we all do. Something that's an innate part of our culture in 2023. Always has been pretty much throughout human culture.

[12 : 25] And it's really the key to why so many of us choose to be unhappy. Because what happened here is they compared themselves to each other.

There's a great quote by the president, Teddy Roosevelt. He's attributed to it. Can't prove that he said it, but he's attributed to it. Some people actually, this is one of the ones that sometimes people think is in the Bible, but isn't.

And here's the quote. Comparison is the thief of joy. I want you to hear that again.

Comparison is the thief of joy. And here's why that's true. Because these guys who had agreed to work for a denarius, that was the deal.

And they went and they worked the day and they got exactly what they were promised. What they agreed to. But because they looked over here and saw somebody else get the same thing that they felt they didn't deserve.

[13 : 46] All of a sudden, the denarius in their hand isn't good enough anymore, even though that's what I said I wanted. Even though that's what I said I would work for.

And now all of a sudden, it's not good enough. Comparison is the thief of joy.

And where we are now is that so often many of us, despite all the good things that happen in our lives, despite what God has done, when we start looking around us, all of a sudden, things we have just don't seem good enough.

Because we measure what we've been given by God against what that person has. Comparison is the thief of joy.

Why do some people choose to be unhappy? See, our problem is this.

[15 : 04] God has given so much. Freely. Generously. Some might even say recklessly.

And yet, we are all too happy to receive from God. We will take it and we will take most of it with a smile on our face.

But the problem is, is that God will give us these things and then we'll look at what God has given to somebody else. And all of a sudden, what God has given to us isn't enough anymore.

All because we decided that that person over there has something and I got this. What really takes us to another level is when we start thinking about this from a grace perspective.

Okay? So, as we start dealing with this from a grace perspective, let's hear what the landowner says to those complaining workers.

[16 : 14] The landowner says this. I'm not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take what I've given you and go.

I want to give the one who was hired last the same thing I'm giving you. Don't I have a right to do what I want with what's mine?

Or are you envious because I'm generous? That last sentence hits hard. Are you envious because I'm generous?

See, this story doesn't take a whole lot to unpack. Jesus is teaching us this story and he's using this landowner as a stand-in for God. And here God is giving freely.

And God gives recklessly. But these folks who have received from God over here exactly what they asked for think somehow this isn't right because somebody over here got something good from God too.

[17 : 27] Now, this notion of grace really messes this up. Because grace, most of us who have been in church for a while learn a definition of grace.

And it goes like this. Grace is when God gives you good things. I'm just going to stop there. Because I know some of you wanted to add to that.

Right? Some of you are ready to add to that. Grace is when God gives you good things. Grace. Okay. So, we get real happy to receive.

We get real happy to say, thank you God. You are so generous. You are so loving. That's awesome. But it's that last part that gets us in a twist.

Grace. Because the last part of that definition is God. Grace is when God gives you good things you don't deserve. And it's that deserve piece that turns this whole card upside down.

[18 : 42] Because the implication of that sentence, and I'm not even saying that the definition is wrong. But the implication of that sentence implies that there are some good things that you do deserve.

Like the grace part is a bonus. See, there's these good things you do deserve. And then grace is when you get something that you don't deserve.

What exactly do you think you deserve from God? What exactly have you done that is so special that God has to go reach into his pocket and go, you're right.

I owe you that. See, this is where we get it twisted.

Because, friends, most of us, I believe, understand that God doesn't owe us a thing. Never has.

[19 : 43] It's all about God's grace. And always has been. And when we remember that we didn't earn any of this from God's point of view.

We didn't earn any of this from God's point of view. God does this because God is loving.

God does this because God is generous. God does this because God is forgiving. God does this because God is hoping that you will continue to take the steps towards God that God knows you can take.

But it isn't so much you, by the sweat of your own back or the work of your own hands, have earned something from God. Because we are all sinners.

Each and every one of us. None of us goes to heaven because we deserve it.

[20 : 54] We go to heaven because Jesus is who Jesus is. And we have to remember that.

And that's the challenge when it comes to understanding this thing about grace. Because when we start to compare ourselves to others and want to tell God what God has to do with God's stuff.

Nope, I get to go. She doesn't. Or I get this place and she gets that place. That is not how this works. That is not who God is.

And these things that have crept into the way we think. These things that have crept into the ways we understand God. That have made people think that, oh, I have all this because God loves me.

And I guess those people who don't have those things, God must love less than me. Those are lies of the enemy. None of that is scripture. See, the thing is, when we talk about these things we deserve from God, it blows up the whole program.

[22 : 13] Because that is a lie. See, the thing is, a lot of us, when we talk about being treated unfairly, something bad will come into our lives. Somebody will get a medical diagnosis.

Or, say, a car will get stolen. Or somebody will wreck something in your life. And all of a sudden, it's like, God, why would you do this to me? And we start to get upset because we think this isn't.

But you know the implication of that? That means all the good things that God has done for you. That roof over your head. That great job.

That loving spouse. That's all of those things in your life. I guess you believe you deserve those from God. See, that's where the whole thing gets twisted.

What we have to recognize is when we see this in this light, when we see this through this perspective, what it should do for us is to convict us in a way that holds us in this place of humility.

[23 : 30] That forces us to remember that it is God that is making the difference, not us. That it reminds us exactly of what we sang earlier today.

How amazing is it that the almighty, sovereign, holy creator of the universe still loves you like this, just as you are.

That's amazing. That's what's so powerful.

That's what's transformational about the love of God. Is that in spite of my imperfection, in spite of my weakness, in spite of my sinning over and over again, in spite of my failing over and over again, God still pulls out a chair for me at God's table.

You've heard me say this before. When I lead communion, one of the things I regularly talk about is the fact that this isn't about your worth. This isn't about you deserving it.

[24 : 46] That you didn't say the right magic words or anything like that. This is about the fact that God loves you. This is about the fact that Jesus wants to be in this moment with you.

Let that sink in in a fresh way. This notion of a seat at the table is a big thing in our culture, isn't it? We often talk about needing a seat at the table.

Deserving a seat at the table. The thing is, at the table of grace, you don't get a seat because you deserve a seat. You don't get a seat because you earned a seat.

You get a seat because God loves you enough to make sure you have a seat. That being the case, let that notion of grace hit different today.

Let it remind you of how deeply and how amazingly you are loved. See, there was this wise woman of faith. She has long joined the church triumphant.

[26 : 00] But she taught me something really powerful once in a Sunday school class. Her name is Miriam. And as I said, she's gone to be with Jesus several, several years ago.

But what Miriam used to say, and this was one of her go-tos. She said, if you think God hasn't given you what you deserve, you probably ought to be thankful. See, it's the transformational blood of Jesus.

Not the sweat of your own back. That gets you a seat at this table. Be people of grace.

Be people who extend the table. And not those who close it off. Be people who strive for justice. Just as much as we live love.

Because that's how a world that's so unfair will come to know that fairness is not what changes things. It's grace.

[27 : 32] Amen. And amen. Loving and gracious God, we thank you that you do love us beyond all reason. That you love us far beyond our earning and our deserving.

Lord God, we know that we have all fallen short. But your love never falls short. That we may feel that the world treats us unfairly.

But you will always deal with us justly but lovingly as you look at us through the eyes of Christ. Lord, we cannot thank you enough with words.

We cannot thank you enough with gifts. But Lord, let us give our hearts in a fresh way today. As we come to the table of grace. And receive what you freely give.

As it changes us. Fills us. And nourishes us once more. Amen. Amen. It is a tremendous gift to know amazing grace.

[28 : 36] It is a tremendous blessing to know amazing love. When you have both flowing in your heart through Christ, there are no words. All we have to do is live our lives that show that it is real for us.

As we live our lives and live our faith this week, there are several opportunities for you to put your faith into action. We have Bible study coming up this week. That is the tough stuff at 7 p.m. on Thursday.

We'll be talking about what the scriptures teach us about heaven. So we're looking forward to that conversation as well. We also have the fall social coming up next Saturday. So if you are able to help serve with that or want to come out and greet some of our community.

And help build those relationships that too would be a great thing. And of course, fish fries are coming. And so if you have not yet signed up for a way in which you can contribute to that big ministry, please make sure you find the clipboards or find Louie or Mary or me and talk about what it is you might be able to do.

So much before us as we try to serve others. Please use your bulletin as a resource and find out ways you can put your faith into action. Now let's receive our benediction. The table of grace requires much of us.

[29 : 48] It insists that we withhold judgment from those who seem to be taking the way out. Or don't have to work as hard as we do. Grace is a great equalizer.

None of us are above receiving it or exempt from needing to give it. Perhaps the hardest grace of all is the grace we must give ourselves. The grace of God abounds.

The invitation of Christ is wide. The power of the transforming spirit will surprise us every time. Now may the blessings of grace you find here go with you and move through you to others wherever you go this week.

And all God's children said, Amen.