

It's Unfair!

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[0 : 0 0] is to turn back to Matthew's Gospel, particularly Matthew's Gospel chapter 20 if you have your Bibles it's on page 987. For those of you who are visiting with us over the last number of Sunday mornings we've been looking at the theme of grace, that is God's undeserved mercy and His willingness to forgive us even though we don't deserve that forgiveness in our lives and the whole theme right up till Christmas time is going to be on God's grace and I hope it's not repetitive, I think we could probably be looking at this subject forever and not find it repetitive or maybe you would find my preaching repetitive on it but the theme itself should not bear repetition because it's so great and so glorious and the amazing thing that I've been enjoying and new enjoying I'm sure as he prepared the sermon for last week is how completely contradictory to our thinking and to our natural understanding that grace is, that the grace of God is completely the opposite of what we naturally believe. We've kind of got to expunge everything out of our heads that we think about natural love in many ways when we're thinking about God's grace, God's love and in a lot of ways and as I've been preparing particularly for this week I've found disconcerting a level of dis-ease, not disease but a lack of ease in preparing this theme because it's so counter-cultural, it goes against your own and my own natural inclinations and that's good and this parable of the workers in the vineyard which Tom read from Matthew 20 is exactly meant to do that, it's meant to make us uncomfortable, it's meant to make us think, wait a minute, what's Jesus trying to say here, what's he trying to get across to us and what is so significant about his teaching, we know that the disciples struggled with what he was saying and even with some of his pictures because they said, well wait a minute, that's impossible then, nobody can become a Christian, nobody can get into heaven, nobody can be saved as they said in the passage that Tom was reading and Jesus says, yeah that's impossible with us but with God all things are possible so he's wanting us to come to the place where we recognise the impossibility in a sense of what Jesus offers us and the amazingness, the amazing glory, the amazing beauty of his grace in our lives so we have this parable and I just want to continue on that theme today, I think it's a relevant theme for communion Sunday, even we may not, and our preaching be focusing specifically on the cross of Jesus today but we recognise and see this great theme of grace is central to that remembrance for us.

So the parable really is given to us in the context of a rich man asking who's going to get to heaven, who can get to heaven, the rich young man we're told, teacher what good thing must I do to get eternal life, so it's a great big spiritual question that everyone asks how am I going to get to heaven, how can I be friends with God, how can I be someone who will get to heaven, that's really the context of it and for us how can, if you're not a Christian, how can I become a Christian today if I'm not a Christian or how can I be assured that I will get to heaven when I die.

Now there's two very interesting kind of people that are in this story as well, we've got the good guy, we've got the rich man who is called a rich young ruler, so he's really everything that you would think would be quality for getting into heaven, he's the right kind of material, he's well to do, he's doing well for himself, as he says in his own words, he's kept the law of God, he's a nice upright bloke and he's guaranteed heaven isn't he, he's guaranteed heaven in God's eyes because he's really up there with everyone else and so there's the good guy, the rich man, but then there's also the disciples who tell Jesus but we've given up so much for you, we've given up everything to follow you, so I'm sure we deserve it as well, so you've got the rich man who maybe deserves heaven and then you've got the disciples who also maybe feel they deserve heaven, the good Christians and the good guys, the good people and it's into that context that Jesus is speaking because the theme of his parable in chapter 20 is really that grace, God's grace, God's undeserved mercy to us is very different from what we think about when we think about a relationship with God, so I'm asking you today just to invert everything and put it completely on its head in terms of thinking that you may and thinking that I may earn favour or may deserve God's pleasure or God's favour to get into heaven, so really what the parable is talking about is the fact that we can never be right with God, we can never enjoy heaven and a relationship with God, we can't be Christians if we come to him on the basis of our goodness, our merit, our deserving, we deserve this from God, God owes me a favour, God owes me this, I'm one of the world's good guys, it's not about our standing in the community, it's not about how good we are compared with other people as we've seen again and again, not interestingly is it Christians, for us if we are professing Christians, if we'll sit at the Lord's table today as Christians who have come to know Jesus Christ, nor does God owe us because of what we've given up as the disciples thought about, it's not on the basis of what I've given up, I've sacrificed so much to believe God really owes me so much,

I deserve so much from him and it's a challenge to all these things and also to our assumptions about God, the revolution of grace, of Jesus Christ teaching and of His gift to us in salvation, remember it's a gift to us, we can't earn it, we can't deserve it, it's something we don't deserve but He really gives to us when we come to Him in faith, so that's really the theme, so you have this parable okay and it's quite difficult maybe for us to understand the context of the parable because it's so very different from our own society but anyway what we do have here is about this vineyard owner who is probably pretty well to do and he goes out in the marketplace in the morning to get casual labour to work in his vineyard for the day and he seems to be a good bloke because he goes himself, he doesn't send someone else, he goes himself out, he's concerned about the lack of employment for the guys who are hanging about the marketplace so he goes in the morning and he goes at lunchtime and he goes at three o'clock and he goes with one hour to go and he says what are you guys still doing here and he says well no one's employed as well come with me and work with me for the last hour and he probably isn't too worried about in terms of efficiency and getting as much as he can if he's employing these guys at the last hour, it's not really about efficiency but at the end of the day he pays them for what they've done and he pays the guys who have been there for the whole day the amount that he agreed to pay them or they agreed together that he would give them at the end of the day but he also pays all the other guys who worked half the day, quarter of the day, an eighth of the day or just the very end of the day, he pays them the same amount and the guys from the beginning of the day are really incensed by this, what do you mean that's hugely unfair and I wonder if I took a straw pole of everyone and asked you to put your hands up today whether you would also think, well I'm fair really, it's not really a good way to go about things but that is exactly what Jesus is doing, he's provoking us to think about grace in this story that he tells us, this is not a story that Jesus tells us about social justice okay, he's not giving us a story here that's laying out employment principles, he's not dealing with these issues in this story, what he's doing he's speaking about grace and he's trying to make people, the disciples and the rich man, he's trying to make them think about his grace, now what's very interesting in this story, well one of the things I think that's very interesting in this story is that these all day workers, I'll call them the all day workers, if they had done their work and the landowner had come at the end of the day and given them their pay and no one else was taken on they would have been perfectly happy, would they not?

They wouldn't have been any problem because that's what they agreed to work for and that was the normal practice and they would have gone home happy at day's work, what's more there might even been some work for them tomorrow that they could go back and enjoy but the problem comes in with these other workers who come along, that's when they begin to get dismissive and angry and frustrated and envious and questioning, what right have these other guys to get any money from the landowner and so we need to look at this parable in that context, the context of what the landowners doing, the vineyard owners doing and the response of the all day workers which often parallels our own response to God's grace in our lives.

[10:15] So God uses it to highlight very often how we respond to grace. So can I spend a few moments just interpreting the parable? Because Jesus is challenging us to think about several things, he's challenging us to think about our own opinion or the opinion of ourselves before God.

You see these all day workers thought they deserve more, they deserve much more than they were getting. And very often we in our relationship with God think the same thing, we deserve to get to heaven, we deserve to be saved, we're the good guys, we're the guys that God should could and could and must save.

We may be even sitting here as Christians and we're good Christians, God owes us, we deserve it from God and yet grace in our lives turns that thinking on its head and says, I'm lost and I'm a failure and I'm needy and I'm so thankful and grateful for what Jesus has done for me and that he freely and fully forgives me for who and what I am.

It kind of moves our attention from comparing ourselves to others and being angry before God and recognizing that he gives us, he gives us his forgiveness as we receive.

I think Neil spoke about John Newton last week saying he realized he had to ask for the forgiveness that he didn't deserve and that's where we come to when we become Christians, we recognize we receive the forgiveness, we actually don't deserve it.

[11 : 55] If we deserve forgiveness it ceases really to be free forgiveness doesn't it? So it's a challenge there into our opinion of ourselves before God. It's also a challenge to our opinion of God himself.

The rich man and the disciples had their own ideas of who God was and the kind of God he was. The rich man thought he just needed to keep the commandments and that would be fine and he reckoned he was there already and the disciples reckoned that God would honor and bless them simply because of all they'd given up.

But who is God as he's revealed in Scripture because that's what we remember and recognize and know today that God is a revelation, he's revealed in Scripture to us.

And what does he say to us? He says all I want you to do is come to me with one thing. You can bring only one thing into my presence.

That's your sin, bring your guilt, bring your need. So the only thing I want, that's the only thing there is to bring.

[13 : 05] You have, he says, through his word, through his gospel, through his death on the cross which we will remember shortly, he says you have in and of yourselves nothing to offer me that will make you right with me.

The sin is too deep, the guilt and the rebellion is too far gone. There's nothing but your rebellion and your sin. But I'll forgive because of what Jesus has done because he has paid the price.

That's astonishing. I said, it's not against everything that we have ever considered that we want to bring something into God's presence that will make him love us and make him accept us.

He says, I don't want anything. I love you anyway, but bring your sin and your guilt and I will deal with the rest. He chooses to offer us his grace and it's not based on our merit or on our earning from him.

He is perfect, he is sovereign and all he's doing is inviting us to himself on the basis of our needs rather than on merit.

[14 : 08] And that is really what he's saying so much here. But he's also saying that we need to consider our attitude to other people. And I think this may be a slightly ignored element in this parable.

The attitude of the all day workers to the other workers is what really affected them and changed their whole concept and understanding of God and of the whole situation.

The workers didn't mind as long as it was on their terms, their way, and that no one else broke into the kind of exclusive relationship that they had with the landowner.

Sometimes we can be like that, can we not? In our attitude to others. I don't mind who God pours out His grace on as long as it's me and the kind of people that I like.

And we want a sense of exclusivity with God and we're unsettled by others who may come in and challenge that idea of who is worthy and who deserves His grace.

[15 : 16] This parable was a massive challenge to the people of Jesus day. It was a massive challenge to the Pharisees who didn't like the tax collectors being given grace and being given forgiveness.

It was a massive challenge to the disciples who were Jews who weren't really too interested in the Gentiles and those who were not Jews becoming a part of the covenant of grace.

But it's a great challenge to us as well in our thinking of two words and about other people. Grace changes the way we look at, the way we think about, the way we act with other people because we've received God's unmerited favour ourselves.

So that's kind of the interpretation of the parable. Can I give one or two biblical examples of grace just to nail the whole point home that it's not about how long we've been coming to church, it's not about how nice and good we are in ourselves.

However significant that is in life and I'm not saying it's not significant, but it does nothing to make us right before God. That's why we need the cross.

[16 : 24] That's why we need Jesus Christ. But can I give one or two Bible examples of grace? We can't earn our friendship with God, we can't earn heaven.

We are by His way not the good guys and as good Christians we need to watch the temptation to say to God, God you owe me.

You owe me because of what I've given up. You owe me because of my Christian faith. You owe me because I now serve you and we do and I have a huge problem with that in my own heart and life.

But look at the examples of grace in the Bible. Abraham, a liar. Jacob, the cheat and the fraudster. David, the weakest of the brothers, became an adulterer and a murderer.

Solomon, serial polygamist idolater. Rehab the prostitute. Ruth, the outsider, the immigrant. Peter, the cocky kind of disciple.

[17 : 20] Disloyal when it really counted with his master. Thomas, huge ongoing doubts in his life. All murdering the Christians in the early church before God dealt with them.

Me, you. Mostly nobody's in this world's eyes. Maybe sometimes we are somebody's in the world's eyes. But even if we are somebody's in the world's eyes, we recognise that we're not before God special compared with other people.

He's dealt with us with equality and he's dealt with us because he loves us and he deals with us in grace.

And that's a great thing. That's the teaching of God's Word in our lives and our hearts. And until we understand that, we will always struggle more with the Christian faith than we would otherwise do.

So just before I finish, can we apply some of that teaching to our own Christian lives today more fully?

[18 : 27] First of all, we need to apply this truth, this ongoing truth of grace which we're nailing or trying to nail in these Sunday morning services in our own thinking, in our own mentality so we understand more of Jesus and understand more of salvation and more of what it is to be a Christian.

In our theology, we need to apply this truth of grace so that we don't have a God which is a great temptation, I think for all of us, to have a God who is a God of our own making.

When we make up an idol really, one that we've moulded ourselves because it's a God who's easy or a God who we can stick in our back pocket and a God who we maybe only can need to wheel out once a year at Christmas time or at Easter.

That makes no demands of us, that makes no challenge to us and that really isn't a real person, it's just, well that's your God and if that's your God that's fine, this is my God and I worship Him in my way and you can worship Him in your way and we can think and make up who He is because He's really not real anyway, He's kind of make believe.

But we believe Scripture when it says it's the revelation of God and it's God revealed not only because of its self-authentication but because it speaks of Jesus as God in the flesh and the challenge is for us to consider this God who says He went to the cross and died on the cross for people today.

[19 : 54] Not just for people to think, it wasn't just a kind of aberration, it wasn't just a mistake but that was at the core of everything that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was because we need that grace, we need someone to die in our place to take the punishment for our sins, we can't do it ourselves and that is what God speaks about in His Word that we are broken and lost, worse than we can ever imagine but more loved than we can ever dream about.

Will we bow the knee to that God or will we say, I'm not going to have a God like that reign over me, He's not going to be my Lord, I'll just keep on believing in my own kind of God.

But is that God who is the real God? So in our theology, but also can I say in our attitude to Christian service, I'm speaking particularly here to myself and to my fellow Christians here who have put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Christians we can often be like the disciples, can't we, where we go to God in our lives and we say, look God I've given up so much to be a Christian, have I not earned it?

Have I not earned your favour and blessing? I'm really doing great here for you, I've given up so much and that's what the disciples are saying in verse 27 of chapter 19, Peter being their spokesman, Lord we've left everything to follow you, what will there then be for us?

[21 : 21] Now Jesus in reply to them says, you will know great blessing, you will know untold blessing, he says, but it will not be because you've earned it, it is because I gift it to you, it's my gift to you, it's not something that we can earn.

So the great temptation is in our lives and none more than for a full time Christian worker like myself is to say that I'm doing God a favour, I'm really working hard in the kingdom, God ought to, God owes me.

And we can say that so easily in our service in the church, you know the new elders in Deacons you can say in your service in this act of leadership, well I'm going to really be giving up here for God and God owes me, God will never owe us because he's poured out and poured out his grace on us and anything we do is simply a gratitude and because we recognise what he's like and what he's done for us.

We can't earn and deserve God's favour by serving him as Christians, it's about our motive and our desire and our longing to do it.

You find yourself really grumpy when you're serving God, really grumpy with everyone else who doesn't serve as well as you do. It's time to sit at the foot of the cross again, isn't it?

[22 : 46] It's time to remember and recall and remind yourself as I need to remind myself of the unpayable debt of love that we owe to Jesus Christ and not just kind of serve Him with dragging feet and serve Him with an eye to our wallets or an eye to the prize that somehow we think and we look to deserve.

So in our application to Christian service, but also I think, so think about the Lord's Table. Now we, in the free church, we set apart a section which we kind of regard as the table.

I think today we're going to be struggling, I think it's going to be too many folk, but that's fine, that's quite a lovely problem. But the Lord's Table, sitting at the Lord's Table is a profession to us of participating in the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine is an assertion, a confident assertion that we've taken the Lord Jesus Christ to be our Saviour.

We drink the wine and we eat the bread and we're saying He's my Saviour, I recognise my need, I recognise my need for forgiveness and I'm happy to confess that and sit at the Lord's Table and I owe Him everything because of that and it's a great place to be.

But I think sometimes we need to watch ourselves also that we don't sit at the Lord's Table with the Lord's people and say, I've really earned my place here. It's now my right to be here because well, I've done my Jews, I've sat through hundreds of really dull sermons and I think as a reward for that I definitely should be allowed to sit at the Lord's Table as if it's kind of promotion in the Christian life.

[24 : 34] We're kind of ordinary people for a while, hang around the church and then we're promoted to the Lord's Table because we're special, we've earned it and it's not the biblical message in any way whatsoever.

And we can also be judgmental as we sit at the Lord's Table of others who are there. Well, it's a bit strange that they're sitting at the Lord's Table, they've only been in church five minutes. They haven't earned a right to do that.

We can be envious of God's work of saving grace and other people's as we're left behind ourselves. These people aren't of the same class, they're not of the same background, they do the same understanding and we can be dismissive of those in whom God is working just as the workers were dismissive of the other people also.

I want exclusive people like me in the church and at the Lord's Table. Where is grace? And our understanding of grace as we sit before this throne and also maybe as we apply it to evangelism, to the gospel that we share with other people.

Do we recognize and remember that we don't ourselves make judgments who we think deserve and earn the right to hear the gospel from us? They're my kind of people. I would like to see them in church.

[25 : 54] I'll share the gospel with them but these other people will certainly never be saved. They'll never become Christians. There's no way possible. And we question the people God puts in our place.

We question God's choices. We want decent folk, nice folk, not broken folk. We can become spiritual snobs when we think about grace because we don't truly understand it in our own hearts.

So grace is a hugely significant issue for ourselves. And to be part of God's family in the church is an honour and a privilege.

We haven't earned it, not one iota by our goodness or as Christians by our sacrifice or by what we've given up.

It's God's gift to us. And that is truly challenging to me as a Christian of 30 years and I'm sure to you also as you consider your own heart and the tendency in our own hearts to feel really before God much better than we are that Jesus maybe didn't need to die in the cross and that it's excessive.

[27 : 09] It might have been good for some but maybe not for me. It's His great gift to us. If you do sit at the Lord's table today and participate in the Lord's Supper, you will do so as one who has received grace as a gift from God.

You remember the Lord's death on the cross because there you see greater love as no man in this than he lay down his life for you because you've taken him as your own saviour.

It's not a ritual that we just participate in. It's not a religious act that makes you any better before God. It's not something that earns you merit or favour or brownie points with him.

It's for those who have taken Jesus as Lord and saviour. If you haven't done that, then please if you're sitting where the bread and the wine will be passed, just pass the cup to the next person.

Don't feel embarrassed by that. But do consider the message of the gospel and the message of grace and the message of hope and forgiveness that there is in Jesus Christ and that that is the hope and forgiveness that continues to change people's lives today.

[28 : 22] It's as relevant for the city of Edinburgh today as it was for the people of Jesus time because we all stand in need before God our maker and his grace and his answer to our need is so full and free and remains a gift that we share and tell other people about.

And hope this evening to look at Beginner Study of Acts, the early church, and look to do that exciting book and the times in which it was written.