

ARM Prison Outreach International

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"The Atrocious Mathematics of the Gospel" Matthew 20:1-16

Editor's Note: This "MM" is the seventh email message of 2010 in a series that ARM is sending as an encouragement to preachers, chaplains, and Christian workers around the world. This issue is the 103rd "MM" sent!!! All are archived -- just [click here](#) to see links to all messages sent since January of 2002.

This month's message is a message by Bill McCoy, evangelist of The Church at Sherwood, ARK. It is my prayer that this message will encourage you and those you teach and lead.

May God bless your labors! -- Rod Farthing, Development Director

"The Atrocious Mathematics of the Gospel" Matthew 20:1-16

In Philip Yancey's book, "What's So Amazing About Grace?" he refers to "the absurdity of the mathematics of the gospel."

Examples:

- 99 sheep in open field, goes to look for lost sheep
- perfume worth years' wages "wasted" on Jesus' feet
- widow gave 2 small coins – more than all others
- the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

19:16-30 Rich young Ruler, Disciples' response

parable – compound word "para" (along side, parallel), "ballo" (throw)
an earthly story with a heavenly message; apply main points, not details.

Clyde Snodgrass: "One of the 3 most difficult parables."

This morning we have sung about grace and the sermon is about grace. When we study any Bible topic it is best to begin with passages that directly address the subject and then go to other passages that shed light on the subject indirectly without mentioning the subject by name. There is no form of the word "grace" in the

text before us this morning, yet grace is the central point.

Mt 20:1-16

¹"For the **kingdom of heaven** (church) is like a **landowner** (God) who went out early in the morning to hire **men** to work in his **vineyard**.

(In many ways slaves were better off than day laborers.)

²He agreed to pay them a **denarius** for the day and sent them into his vineyard. (They had a contract.)

³About the **third** (9 am) hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you **whatever is right**.' ⁵So they went. (no contract)

"He went out again about the **sixth** (noon) hour and the **ninth** (3 pm) hour and did the same thing. ⁶About the **eleventh** (5 pm) hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

OBSERVATION: Some say this parable shows the possibility of death bed conversions. That is a wrong conclusion. God may allow a death bed conversion, but this parable does not teach that. These men responded at their first opportunity. They had not declined invitations to work earlier in the day.

⁸When 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.'

(Normally first hired first paid. If he had done that, it is possible that those hired first would never have known that those hired later were paid the same. There was a coin 1/12 of a denarius. Perhaps that is what they expected.)

⁹The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more.

(The all-day workers' emotions must have been on a roller coaster ride. First they were no doubt indignant when those who were hired last were paid first. But when

they saw that those hired last were paid for a full day they must have gotten excited with anticipation that they would receive more. But their excitement was diminished when they observed the same pay being given to those who hard worked longer portions of the day.)

But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²'These men 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.'

The word “grumble” is in the imperfect tense, which means that they complained not just once, but were in a constant state of grumbling. This helps us see what kind of workers they really were. They didn't say, “You have put us on a par with the late-comers,” Instead, they grumbled, “you have put them on a par with us.”

In other words, they were not only dissatisfied with what they themselves had received; they were also envious of what had been given to the others. They emphasized that they bore the burden of the work in the sweltering heat of the day. Compared to these upstarts, who only worked an hour, these workers thought they were worth a lot more.

¹³"But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

¹⁶"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."
(opposite order of 19:30)

What's going on here?

Not some allegory about the rejection of the Jews and acceptance of the Gentiles, or abuse of peasants by wealthy landowners. It is about the scandal of grace. How hard it is for us to embrace God's grace. What employer in his right mind would pay the same for one hour's work as he does for 12? Jesus' story makes no economic sense. Indeed it may even make us angry. That was His intent. God's grace cannot be calculated like a day's wage.

Yancey: “Grace is not about finishing first or last – it is about not counting.”

GOD'S GRACE IS NOT LOGICAL (v. 10)

Isaiah 55:6-9

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

⁷Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

⁹As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

v. 10 – “So when those came who were hired first, **they expected** to receive more.”

ESV – “**they thought** they would receive more.”

2 Ki 5:11 (Naaman, the leper, when instructed to dip 7 x's in Jordan)

“But Naaman was angry and went away saying, ‘**Behold, I thought** he would surely come out to me and stand and call upon the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.’”

Whenever God’s Word contradicts our logic, we must ignore our logic.

Many false doctrines are propagated by human logic. God is not restricted by human logic. However God’s truth is logical once we first establish the premise of His nature – holiness, justice, love

John MacArthur : “The charge of unfairness was not grounded in a love for justice but in the selfish assumption that the extra pay they wanted, was pay they deserved.”

Does the whining of the workers hired first remind you of someone else’s complaint? Lu 15:29-30 (prodigal’s older brother) “Look, these many years I have served you, and **I never disobeyed your command** (never?), yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours (not worthy of being called by name) came who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.”

GOD’S GRACE IS NOT LOGICAL

(v. 10)

GOD’S GRACE IS NOT PREJUDICIAL

(vv. 13-15)

- We All Need All Of It

“It’s me, it’s me, O Lord, standin’ in the need of prayer”

Parable of Pharisee & Tax Collector

Lu 18:9-14

- It Is Equally Available to All

19:25

The rich do not have an advantage as the disciples thought.

In fact, wealth, power, & popularity are, more often than not, hindrances for obeying the gospel. 1 Co 1:26-31

If you are ever envious of other Christians who seem to have been blessed with more than you – money, intellect, talents, physical features, opportunities – remember the words of Jesus: “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more” (Lu 12:48b).

GOD’S GRACE IS NOT LOGICAL

(v. 10)

GOD’S GRACE IS NOT PREJUDICIAL

(vv. 13-15)

GOD’S GRACE IS NOT PROPORTIONAL

(v. 14)

The full day workers got exactly what they were promised. Their discontent arose from the scandalous mathematics of grace, when he wanted to do whatever he wanted with his own money, when he wanted to pay late-comers the same as he paid them.

God’s grace is available only on an “all or nothing” basis. Just as Jesus told Nicodemus, “He gives the Spirit without measure” (Jn 3:34), likewise God gives His grace without measure. Not only is God’s grace is not available proportionally, we all need all of it. None of us can get by with less than 100%.

Most Christians identify with the workers who put in a full day’s work, rather than with the workers hired near the end of the day. We think of ourselves as responsible workers. The employer’s strange behavior baffles us. God dispenses gifts, not wages.

Rom. 6:23 “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

None of us gets paid according to merit, for none of us comes close to the perfect life that God requires.

The words “deserve” or “earn” do not apply

Those hired first failed to see God’s grace for the latecomers and, worse yet, failed to see God’s grace for themselves.

We are not employees, we are slaves. We don’t deserve anything.

Lu 17:7-10 Unprofitable Servants

⁷"Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? ⁸Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? ⁹Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' "

Grace reminds us that God owes us nothing. But Lu 12:37 "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve him."

How is it that grace can be the occasion for anger? Why do people find it difficult to rejoice over the good that enters the lives of others? Why do we spend time calculating how we have been cheated?

Is it because we think there is not enough of God's grace to go around? I think it is because we think we deserve more than others. We begrudge God's grace when it is shown to folks we think do not deserve it.

It is reported by reliable sources that Jeffrey Dahmer, the cannibalistic serial murderer, became a Christian in prison before He was murdered. While no live human knows whether or not Dahmer's conversion was real, it is a fact that he could be saved. When you get to heaven, if you find Jeffrey Dahmer there enjoying all of the assets of heaven that are available to you, will you begrudge him of it? Some have said that this parable teaches "that no one will get less than promised but that many more will get more than they deserve." I disagree. We will all get more than we deserve, much more than we deserve.

Les Miserables

Jean Val Jean - sentenced 19 yrs. hard labor for stealing bread, finally earns his release

Convicts had to carry identity cards. No inn keeper would take him in. 4 days wandering, kind bishop & his sister had mercy on him. He laid on a bed more comfortable than he had ever experienced. He waited until the bishop & his sister were asleep, got up & rummaged through their belongings, found the family silver and took off. Next morning 3 policemen showed up at the bishop's door with Val

Jean in tow ready to put him back in jail for life. The bishop: "So here you are! I'm delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They are silver like the rest. They are worth 200 francs. Did you forget to take them?" Val Jean's eyes widened. He was looking at the bishop with a look that no words could convey. The bishop to police: "Val Jean is no thief. The silver was my gift to him." When the police withdrew, the bishop did give Val Jean the candlesticks and said to this still trembling ex-con, "Do not ever forget that you have promised me to use the money to make yourself an honest man."

The power of the bishop's act defying every human instinct for revenge changed Val Jean's life forever. A naked encounter with forgiveness melted the granite defenses of his soul. He kept the candlesticks as a precious memento of grace and dedicated himself to helping others in need.

CS Lewis: "To be a Christian is to forgive the inexcusable, for God has already forgiven the inexcusable in you."

God in His grace would place Rahab the harlot in the messianic line, a coward like Gideon to be a mighty warrior, a murderous zealot like Paul to be the greatest missionary ever. What kind of god chooses people like you and me to not only be His children, but to be His coworkers in His surprisingly gracious kingdom? Would you choose yourself?

Rodney Danger-field: "I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member."

But God chooses us to be members -- a God who takes our 5 loaves and 2 fish service and multiplies it so His kingdom will be on earth as it is in heaven.

Remain faithful unto death .." Rev. 2:10B

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In 2009, ARM donated almost 32,000 FREE Bible courses to prisoners -- 88 per day!**