

September 14, 2008

**SERIES:** The Good News, as Reported by Matthew  
**SERMON:** *But God, It Isn't Fair*  
**SCRIPTURE:** Matt. 20:1-16  
**SPEAKER:** Pastor Dick High

**Introduction:**

Many of us, if not overly familiar with, have heard the term “Google.”

**Google Inc.** is an American public corporation, earning revenue from advertising related to its Internet search engine, e-mail, online mapping, office productivity, social networking, and video sharing services as well as selling advertising-free versions of the same technologies. As of the end of June this year the company had 19,604 full-time employees.

(Without the reference to Google Inc., you may have thought of a different word, that although it sounds the same when pronounced, is spelled “**googol**.” That googol refers to the number 1 followed by one hundred zeros, indicating a very large number.)

The mushrooming success of Google, Inc. and its generosity in employee benefits draws hordes of prospective applicants. One way Google has weeded out applicants is publishing a 21-question aptitude test in a number of magazines. Here is one sample question that has been used.

“How many ways can you color an icosahedron with one of three colors on each face?” Perhaps you are mathematically and technologically astute and you understand that question. My first response was “Say what?!” It does help to learn that in geometry, an **icosahedron** is any polyhedron having 20 faces. (If you want to see an example of an icosahedron, just go to the Google web site and do a search!) Once you see a picture of an icosahedron then perhaps you can answer the question of how many ways can you color an icosahedron with one of three colors on each face? (It’s just simple math, right?)

Beyond the fact that I learned a new word, I’m really not drawn to invest time and energy in answering that question. But there are questions, indeed more difficult questions to answer, that are worthy of consideration. I’m thinking specifically of questions that are posed in some of the final chapters of the book of Job. They are questions that God Himself posed...to Job. These questions bring us face to face with the incomparable majesty and greatness of God and remind us that we have no basis for pridefully claiming we understand Him.

As I ponder the sheer volume of questions that God poses, let alone the questions themselves or even consider how I would begin to answer just one of them, I am reminded of what is stated in Isaiah 55:8-9. *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways*, declares the Lord. *As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

The purpose of such a statement is not intended to have us throw up our hands and respond “Then, why bother.” Rather, these words can be, depending upon context and circumstances, a rebuke, invitation, or encouragement to move toward aligning our thoughts with God’s. All of Scripture, because it is inspired by God, can be useful in presenting truth that, if embraced by us, can align our understanding of God with the truth of who He is. This clearly has **profound potential** to impact our minds, hearts, attitudes, and actions.

Today as we continue in our study of the good news, as reported by Matthew, I ask that you open your Bible to chapter 20, where in the first sixteen verses we find the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

This passage is one of many parables recorded by Matthew about the kingdom of heaven. If you recall, a definition of that phrase was stated as early as in our study of chapter 13. Here is what was shared.

The Kingdom of Heaven is...

- Not heaven itself.
- Not the millennial kingdom (the 1,000 year literal reign of Christ on earth).
- Not the church.
- It is the rule of God in the hearts and lives of His people.
- (It is "already, but not yet.") There are present and future realities to the kingdom of heaven.

In this particular passage the kingdom of heaven is likened to a landowner hiring individuals to work in his vineyard. Let's read.

*1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.*

*3 About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5 So they went.*

*He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 6 About the eleventh 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.'*

*8 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.'*

*9 The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When 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.'*

*13 But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don'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.*

The background and setting for this parable come from what would be a very realistic scenario to the audience listening to these words of Christ. When the season of the year for harvesting grapes arrived, the owner of significant property would go to the market place of the nearest town to hire what we would consider to be contract or temporary workers. It would be natural to discuss payment amount and terms; at that time a denarius was the standard daily wage for a foot soldier or a day laborer. The fact that payment would be made at the end of the day was in concurrence with Old Testament instruction (in both Leviticus 19:13 and Deuteronomy 24:15).

It would not necessarily be surprising that the landowner would return to the market place repeatedly throughout the day. Perhaps when he first went at around 6 a.m. he had hired all who were available. Depending upon the urgency he sensed in getting his grapes harvested there may have been the need for additional workers. Those who are in the market place at a later time could have been from an adjacent village where the need for workers was less, and learning that they were not needed there had walked to another village.

The **primary surprise** in how Christ relates this parable is introduced in verse 8. The anticipated and typical procedure would have been to begin payment with those who had been hired first (and thus, obviously, worked the entire day). But the instruction given by the landowner to his foreman is clearly contrary to that. Payment is to begin with those hired last and then in reverse order up to those who were hired first.

If payment was made, as today, with a check, sealed in an envelope or deposited directly into a personal account there would have been far less possibility of comparison. But, assuming that all laborers had gathered around the foreman, by paying first the workers hired last, those hired first would have had opportunity to not only see what was being paid to all the others, who had worked less than a full day, but also to begin to think about what was happening!

Notice, please, what is stated in verse 10: *So when those came who were hired first, they **expected** to receive more.* It was their belief, the thought that they now held in their mind, was that they would receive more. But let's recall the *agreement* stated in verse 2. That is the root term for our word "symphony." The landowner and those hired in verse 1 were in **accord** with each other, there was **harmony** in their understanding. Further this word is in the form of a verb that communicates something that was settled; it was nailed down.

Imagine, in our day, a manager who hires workers agreeing to pay them \$40,000 per year. Contracts are signed and they proceed to do the work for which they were hired. Then two weeks before the end of the year he hires others to do the same job, and pays them \$40,000 for two weeks of work. Although that can be viewed as an unlikely possibility, if it were to occur, would the thought of "that isn't fair?" cross anyone's mind?

Imagine that you are (or know) a skilled running back, but you've been second on the depth chart for three years. Finally your senior year is here and it appears that it will be your opportunity to play a significant role on the team. Then a new recruit joins the team and earns the starting role, relegating you again to sitting on the bench. Would you struggle at all with fairness?

Or imagine that you have faithfully worked at your job for five years, accepting minimal raises because you've been told the economy is tight. Then somehow you learn that a recently hired employee has a starting salary equal to your current salary. Would you struggle at all with fairness?

It is the surprising turn in the development of the parable in verse 10 that provides the point at which we can focus on two significant Scriptural truths. Because the parable is **really not about wages at all**; it is about grace, the grace of a sovereign God as the basis for people being brought into **and** working within His kingdom!

Grace is such a foundational kingdom principle.

Here is a definition of grace that has been penned by Charles Swindoll: "Probably, the most popular two-word definition is 'unmerited favor.' To amplify that a bit: Grace is what God does for mankind, **which we do not deserve, which we cannot earn, and which we will never be able to repay.** Awash in our

sinfulness, helpless to change on our own, polluted to the core with no possibility of cleaning ourselves up, we cry out for grace. **It is our only hope.**" (Growing Deep in the Christian Life, Charles Swindoll, pg. 215)

I want to return for just a moment to an earlier thread in today's message. It is the challenge expressed in Isaiah 55 that there is variance between our thoughts and God's thoughts. Could that be said, at least on occasion, about us? Are our thoughts about, our perspectives about, our understanding of grace the same as God's? The implication of this parable is that such is not always the case? We're told in verse 11 that when those hired first received payment of the agreed upon denarius, they *grumbled!* The term speaks of dissatisfaction, indicating **a verbal protest against a perceived distasteful action.** The word carries the suggestion of injustice. Can you see that in the words spoken in verse 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.'* This is something of a struggle for those who have been longest in the employ of the landowner! Could this be a warning to those of us who have been believers in Christ the longest, that we need to guard our attitude about God's grace to us, in comparison with what we perceive to have been lavished on others?

Does this "grumbling" sound familiar to anything that was examined in last week's sermon? After interacting with the rich young man as recorded in Matthew 19:16ff., In verse 23 Jesus states that *it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.* The disciples' astounded response recorded in verse 25 was *"Who then can be saved?"* In verses 26 Christ's responds that, **"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."** That is a very clear statement that entering into the kingdom of heaven occurs only on the basis of the grace of God. God is the only One who can accomplish the salvation of anyone! But not only is entrance into the kingdom of heaven by grace, **so too** life within the kingdom of heaven must be understood **and** lived out on the basis of grace.

That is the issue that arises when Peter asks in verse 27, *"We have left everything to follow you! **What then will there be for us?**"* If I may expand that thought, just briefly: **For us**, who have been among the first to follow you, Jesus; **For us**, who have made significant sacrifice; **For us**, who in essence have "borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day?" **What about us; who are in relationship with you, Jesus?**

I believe the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20 is given as a reminder to Peter, and us, of the foundational reality of grace. Even as the context in Matthew 19 states, there are benefits, both now and in eternity, from being in a personal relationship with Christ. Passages like I Corinthians 3 give additional understanding to that reality. But even in that passage, the reminder is clearly made that **there ultimately is one foundation** upon which the believer lives; grace! No one is deserving of being in the kingdom of heaven. No one can earn their way into the kingdom of heaven.

Further, if we view the landowner in the parable in Matthew 20 to be a representation of God, then we need to be cautioned about questioning God's gracious **and sovereign actions** in bringing people into the kingdom of heaven. As stated earlier, the implication in the grumbling of those who labored in the vineyard the entire day is that the landowner was being unjust. Because I see here a glimpse of God's sovereignty, such grumbling is stating that I have placed myself in the position of judging the actions of a sovereign God and calling them into question!

**Christ desires** that the very closest of His disciples understand both His grace and His sovereignty. It is the latter that is specifically in focus in verses 13ff. *'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. **I want to give** the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am **generous?**'*

The word which begins the landowner's reply, "friend," is used in the New Testament only by Matthew, and only three times. One occasion is in Matthew 22:12, which is another parable about the kingdom of heaven. The second occasion is right after Judas kissed Jesus to identify Him as the one to be arrested. Christ's response to that action is found in Matthew 26:50; "*Friend, do what you came for.*"

The Kittel Theological Dictionary of the New Testament makes the following comment about the use of this word. "...in all three cases it is more than a mere form. It **always** denotes a mutually binding relation between the speaker and the hearer which the latter has disregarded and scorned. In all three cases the hearer is guilty of regarding the mutual obligation egotistically, as though it committed only the other party."

In other words, in a context where believers in the kingdom are saying "What have you done for me lately, God?" the response of Jesus is to challenge us regarding our **selfish perspective** which reveals a significantly mistaken or forgotten understanding of God's grace and sovereignty. When we truly understand grace, and the Giver of grace, it is incomprehensible that we'd grumble; but we do!

We don't have a basis for declaring that God is unfair, that He does not keep His word, that we know better how to "manage" His affairs. There is no basis for thinking we can deny Him the right to act in generosity as He desires. When we find ourselves in any of those thoughts it is an indication that we don't fully grasp a true understanding of God's grace and sovereignty; perhaps because we are thinking selfishly about our relationship with God.

I know that our time is fleeting, but I want to briefly consider some additional musings about the grace of God. These are just some of the Biblical implications of grace. (If you want a broader picture find a concordance and look up other New Testament passages that use the word "grace.")

## Extended Musings on the Grace of God

- The Error of Presumption (Romans 6:1-2)

*1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?* Romans 6:1-2

If grace is that great, if it's "coverage" is that broad, they what's the big deal about sin? **Has that or a similar thought ever crossed your mind?** While we have the need to grasp and live in the wonderful reality of God's grace, we need to be alert to the potential of misapplication or a misuse of grace.

- Boasting In Weakness (II Corinthians 12:9)

*But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.* II Corinthians 12:9

Our understanding and appreciation of grace is sometimes greatest amid those situations when we are **most** aware of our weaknesses and need. While each day we have reason to give God endless praise for His grace, the reality is that sometimes we are more aware of the impact, effect, and benefit of grace than at other times. If you are keenly aware today of your weakness and need, may you be equally aware of God's sufficient grace **for you!**

- The Motivation Toward Godliness (Titus 2:11-13)

*11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. 12 **It teaches us** to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13*

*while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...*  
Titus 2:11-13

These verses give an answer to the questions of Romans 6:1 (“Shall we go on sinning...?”) An understanding and appreciation of grace provides **motivation** for the pursuit of a life-style that reflects the character of Christ. The apostle Paul is an example of this. In I Corinthians 15:9 & 10 he states: *For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But **by the grace of God** I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked **harder** than all of them – **yet not I, but the grace of God** that was with me.*

- A Critical Aspect of Prayer (Hebrews 4;16)

*Let us then approach the **throne of grace** with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and **find grace** to help us in our time of need.* Hebrews 4:16

It is interesting that the “throne of grace” is here given as a descriptive phrase for coming to God in prayer. So much about prayer operates in the realm of grace: the very possibility of prayer itself, the actions of God to provide an open invitation to approach Him, the sympathetic intercession of Christ on our behalf, and the finding of grace in answer to our prayer. Those factors draw me to prayer more powerfully than any sense of guilt or rebuke.

- An Area for Growth (II Peter 3:18)

*But **grow** in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.* II Peter 3:18

In commenting on this verse William Barclay writes: “The Christian must daily experience the wonder of grace, and daily grow in the gifts which grace can bring; and he must daily enter more and more deeply into the wonder which is in Jesus Christ. It is only on a firm foundation that a great building can tower into the air; and it is only because it has a deep root that a great tree can reach out to the sky with its branches. The Christian life is at once a life with a firm foundation **and** with an ever outward and upward reach.”

This past week I read about an incident where a man and his friends had gone to a restaurant in Georgia for an “all you can eat rib night.” After the meal, as they returned to their cars, he reached into his pocket to get his keys. When he did not find them he retraced his steps and realized the keys had been thrown into the trash!

“It was a long walk home, and my friends certainly weren’t going to do my dirty work for me. So I dove in. I fished through bones, beans, barbecue, corn, cake, coleslaw, and a host of saliva-soaked napkins. A shiny layer of trashcan slime had coated my arm before I finally grasped hold of those precious keys.

In later reflection on this experience he stated, “I think about our dumpster-diving God. I mean no disrespect by calling him that. On the contrary, I have a soaring admiration for the infinite God who left a pristine, sinless heaven to search through the filth and rubbish of this fallen world for something precious to him – (you and) me.” (David Slagle, Decatur, Georgia)

There is a **one word summary** for why God sent His Son... And for why Christ submitted to His Father’s will and was obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross... And for how God can offer to us the gift of eternal life, something that we can never, never earn or deserve... It is the word “GRACE!”

Romans 3:10-12 it just one passage of Scripture that reminds us that eternal life can never be earned or deserved when it states, *There is no one righteous, **not even one**; there is no one who understands, no one*

*who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, **not even one.***

**Because eternal life cannot be earned or deserved because we are sinners, it must be received as a gift, a gift of grace.** That is affirmed in Ephesians 2:8-9 which state: *For it is by grace you **have been saved**, through faith – and this not from ourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.* Ephesians 2:8-9

If you are one who has already humbly and repentantly received this gift of grace may your thoughts and attitudes and actions be more and more permeated with the reality of God's grace.

If you have not accepted God's gift of forgiveness of your sin and the promise of eternal life, may this time of focus on His grace stir your heart to a response of confession and receiving Jesus Christ personally.