

YOU RELATE TO GOD AND OTHERS GRATEFULLY

MATTHEW 20:1-16

God isn't fair. Praise the Lord! The only reason you and I can gather around the Lord's Table and partake of Communion is because God isn't fair. And thank God that He isn't! The good news of Jesus underlines the fact that God values something else even more highly than fairness. The Bible word for it is "grace" and a story Jesus tells helps us understand "grace."

We're studying several stories – or parables – that Jesus told. Each one is about something He called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven. That refers to a spiritual realm where Jesus rules and reigns as the King. It's the place where you and I connect personally to God, but it also expresses the heart, the mission and the passion of God Himself. It was Jesus' favorite subject. By listening to Jesus' stories, you get insight into this Kingdom. You understand what it means for Jesus to be your King and to live in His Kingdom. Jesus' stories don't always make you feel good about God, about life or about what it means to follow Him. They can be disturbing, troubling and confusing. They will definitely challenge what you think about God and what we sometimes refer to as "reality." Jesus' stories need to be interpreted – that's true. But the fact is that these parables have a way of interpreting you and me. In other words, they reveal how you think, how you approach life and what you value.

Let's look at Jesus' story for today. So this wealthy landowner needs his crop of grapes harvested before the rains come. There's great urgency about this task, because whatever isn't picked before the rains come is lost for good. One day, he goes to the town center and hires some day laborers. These are poor men who turn up every day with their tools hoping to get hired for just one day's work so they can get one day's wage – a denarius. It isn't much but it buys groceries for the wife and kids for one day at least.

The rich farmer shows up bright and early at 6 am and hires a bunch of these workers to harvest his vineyard. They agree to work for one denarius. So intent is the owner to get all of his grapes picked, that he goes back to town at 9 am, 12 noon and 3 pm to hire even more men. He promises only to pay a fair wage to these men who work less than a full day. He's so desperate that he even goes back at 5 pm and hires one last group to come and work for him for just one hour. The Jewish work day ended at 6 pm. Under this arrangement, everyone got paid at the end of the day. When all you have to support your family is one denarius, you can't wait to get paid weekly or monthly. This was what God's Word taught after all. "Never take advantage of poor and destitute laborers.... You must pay them their wages each day before sunset because they are poor and are counting on it...." (Deuteronomy 24:14-15 NLT)

I want you to imagine that scene with me. This group of men lines up to get paid with those who were hired last getting paid first. Those who began work at 5 or 3 or noon probably wonder what fraction of a denarius they will get. Anything is

better than nothing. No doubt some of them are concerned about their kids going hungry because Dad didn't bring home enough that day to buy a decent dinner. They shuffle up to the foreman feeling nervous and hopeful. Then, anxious eyes grow wide with astonishment and joy when he drops a whole denarius into their hands. "Wow," they say, "this farmer is one generous guy! A whole day's pay for less than a day's work!" The news of the farmer's generosity begins to filter back to the other men waiting in line – especially the ones who'd worked from 6 am that morning. They begin to get excited, wink at each other and slap each other on the back in anticipation. If the man is handing out a whole denarius for just a couple of hours of work – in some cases, just one hour – what could they expect to be paid for working the entire day? They step up to the foreman with confident expectation and hold out their hands eagerly. But, into each hand, goes just one denarius.

This does not go over well! They appeal to the wealthy landowner himself. "Hey, what's going on here? We work for 12 hours and we get the exact same amount as those lazy bums who worked just one hour. How is that fair? We've been out there in the blazing sun all day and those guys come strolling in to work for one lousy hour when it's cooled off, and you pay them as much as you pay us. What is that about?" The rich farmer's response is simple and direct, "Look, friends, you agreed to work for me for a whole day for one denarius. I paid you exactly what we agreed upon, didn't I? Now, if I decide I want to be generous to these other men, what's it to you? It's my money, isn't it? Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?" Granted, it's hard to find fault with the logic, but I can imagine those men trudging back home muttering and murmuring under their breath, "I don't care what he says, it's still not right. It just isn't fair!" So what does this story have to tell us about the Kingdom of God? Simply this: When Jesus is King, you relate to God and others gratefully. Two truths jump out to me in Jesus' story. Here's the first one:

LIVE WITH GOD BECAUSE OF GRACE

You live in a world that says hard work results in reward. That's the prevailing wisdom. In countless ways, you learn that the amount of reward in life is scaled to the amount of effort you expend. When you study diligently, you get better grades than people who study less. When you practice faithfully, you win more games than people who practice less. When you work hard at your job and make excellence your goal, you get moved up the ladder more quickly than those who care less. Sure, they're exceptions – we all understand that – but, by in large, this prevailing wisdom turns out to be true most of the time. So much so, that many times your self-worth and mine gets all wrapped up in this system of competitive effort and reward.

It's easy to interpret all of reality this way and even the ultimate reality of God and how he relates to human beings is expected to conform to it. If you do this and that, God will reward you. If you work hard at being a Christian, God will bless

you spiritually. If you tithe your income to the church, God will bless you financially. If you would just take this whole God thing more seriously, God will be obligated to make life work out for you. Oh, really.... Jesus' story questions that all too common way of thinking. God isn't about fairness. And you need to thank God every day that He's not about being fair!

People in the Bible learned the hard way that God isn't about fairness. Just read the book of Job. Jeremiah, one of the Old Testament prophets, put it like this, "You are right, O God, and you set things right. I can't argue with that. But I do have some questions: Why do bad people have it so good? Why do con artists make it big? You planted them and they put down roots. They flourished and produced fruit. They talk as if they're old friends with you, but they couldn't care less about you." (Jeremiah 12:1-2 MSG) One the one hand, you know that God is just, holy, right and even fair. On the other hand, sometimes the way God operates leaves you feeling a bit confused and frustrated to say the least.

Maybe you identify with those poor, hard working guys out there working among the vines since 6 am – drenched with sweat, backs aching, fingers numb. It feels like they got a raw deal, doesn't it? Doesn't the rich farmer's explanation seem unfair even though it's logical enough? Don't his actions strike you as being unfair regardless? If he wanted to be generous, why not be generous to the guys who'd worked the longest and hardest? If the rich farmer is somehow a picture of God, is Jesus saying God is like that?

Jesus says that life in the Kingdom of God doesn't so much oppose fairness and justice as it transcends them. Your relationship with God has nothing to do with your rights or standing up for your rights. You don't have any. No, instead, the whole thing hangs on grace and what God has done for you from first to last. You don't somehow merit a relationship with God because you earned it. God doesn't begin a relationship with you on the basis of some achievement.

Jesus underlines something here that you and I forget all too easily: God owes you nothing. In fact, if you want to talk about something God owes you or would be just and fair to give you, it's this: hell for all eternity. Justice and fairness demand your life! "For the wages of sin is death...." (Romans 6:23 NLT) Now, the Bible teaches that God respects justice so much that He allowed Jesus to take your place on the cross. But, let me ask you, was that fair? Was it fair to put the guilt of every human sin upon the soul of One who'd never sinned? Was it really fair that Jesus pay the penalty for your sin and mine?

The terminal wing of a hospital may seem like an unlikely location for active evangelism, but that's where the "Last Minute Ministry" was born. The ministry began when a friend of Pastor Chuck Kent asked him to visit his dying, 92-year-old great-grandfather in the hospital. The elderly man, Elwyn, was agnostic. Chuck met with him and asked if he could share one of Jesus' stories. He told him this parable we're considering today. Elwyn was in the "11th hour" of his life;

that day he prayed to make Jesus the King of his life. A week later, Pastor Chuck conducted Elwyn's funeral. One hundred family members and friends heard about Jesus at the service. Chuck got special permission from the hospital to visit others on the terminal floor. He went room-to-room, asking each person if he could pray with him or her and then sharing this same parable. In one month, he visited 15 people, 8 of whom made Jesus King. During one of those visits, Chuck talked to a comatose man who had only a few hours to live. The man was unable to speak or open his eyes. Instead, Chuck lead him through the prayer of salvation by having him squeeze Chuck's hand one phrase at a time. Two hours later, the patient died. Pastor Chuck says, "People on the terminal floor are a lot more realistic about eternity."

The good news of the Kingdom is about grace not fairness! You can't ever be good enough. You can't achieve, earn or merit this eternal relationship with God. It's a gift from first to last. Everything God does is an expression of His grace. For you computer types, grace is God's operating system! "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23 NLT) Do you really want fairness from God? Or, are you glad that, at the end of the day, God doesn't insist on fairness? I don't know about you today, my friend, but I'm very glad that God is not fair to Rick Breusch! I don't come to this Table today because I've earned it or deserve it. I come by the personal invitation of King Jesus despite the face I've done nothing to achieve what it represents: complete forgiveness... total acceptance... eternal life now and forever. Thank You, God, for being so wonderfully unfair!

Instead of demanding God be fair, why not praise Him for being so good? Celebrate God's goodness instead of demanding God's fairness. Your relationship to Him doesn't depend on your goodness, but His. God does want to bless you in countless ways, but not because you've somehow obligated Him to do so... or ever will. When you come to realize that God wants to treat you the way He does because of His goodness, you get liberated to live with Him, to Him and for Him because of grace and grace alone. Here's a second truth:

SERVE GOD BECAUSE OF LOVE

One person nailed it when he said, "God has three sorts of servants in the world: some are slaves, and serve Him from fear; others are hirelings, and serve for wages; and the last are sons, who serve because they love." So what kind of a servant are you? I believe Jesus' story forces you and me to consider that question. The first point might be unexpected but it's important: you are right to expect and anticipate great rewards in serving King Jesus. The context of Jesus' story really matters here. Back in the previous chapter – Matthew 19 – Jesus had a challenging conversation with a rich, young man who just couldn't give away his wealth in order to follow Jesus. Peter observed that exchange and asked Jesus, "We left everything and followed you. What do we get out of it?" (Matthew 19:27 MSG)

Now, before you write off Peter as being hopelessly dull and unspiritual, remember that he literally left everything to follow Jesus: his business, his income, his home and his family. It's interesting to me that Jesus doesn't challenge the idea of a reward or rebuke Peter for asking that question. Instead, He says that there are very real and wonderful rewards for serving God. "And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life. But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then." (Matthew 19:29-30 NLT)

That sounds very similar to how Jesus ended the parable we've been studying: "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last." (Matthew 20:16 NLT) That brings up a second issue: When it comes to serving and getting rewards, God is not forced into your definition of fairness. So why are you a Christian today? Why do you get up on Sundays and come to church? Why do you do stuff around here? Why do you put money in the offering plate? Why do you practice sexual purity? Why do you care about spiritually lost people or want to serve the poor? Is it fear? "If I don't do those things, God will punish me and make my life miserable." Is it because you think you have a kind of understanding with God? "If I'm reasonably faithful in all those areas, God will bless me and prevent really bad stuff from happening to me. The more I do and the longer I do it for, the more God will be obligated to bless me. The less I do and the more I screw up, the less obligated God will be." Oh, my, there's that fairness mentality creeping in once again! God will have none of it.

Whenever you serve King Jesus out of fear or because you think you can obligate God somehow by doing so, you miss the reason for serving. The solution is not to stop serving, but to change your attitude about what it means to serve the King. I've served Jesus most of my life. So have most of you today. Most of us here today are like that first group in Jesus' story – the 6 am types who had such a big hang up with God being gracious! I'm keenly aware that Jesus' story is aimed right at you and me. The longer you serve Jesus, the easier it is to slip into that "God needs to be fair to me" attitude. I need to make sure I serve Him out of the one and only proper motivation: love. That's it.

Love is the only appropriate response to grace. Love doesn't worry about doing too much or too little. Love isn't looking around to see if God is blessing others more than you and getting all peeved and jealous if it seems like He is. Love doesn't say, "Well, shoot, I've served God longer, so He ought to bless me more!" Love rejoices when God blesses those who seem least likely to deserve it. Love keeps on serving even if no one notices much. Love doesn't expect a return, but if it comes, love is always truly grateful. That's because love never feels like it's done quite enough; it always wants to do more. Jesus captured the essence of it when He said, "In the same way, when you obey me you should say, "We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty." (Luke 17:10 NLT)

Denise Banderman left work early so she could have some extra, uninterrupted study time before her final exam in a youth ministry class at the Christian college she attended. When she got to class, everybody was doing their last-minute studying. The teacher, Dr. Tom Hufty, came in and said he would review with them before the test. Most of his review came right from the study guide, but there were some things he was reviewing that Denise had never heard. When questioned about it, he said they were in the book and they were responsible for everything in the book. They couldn't argue with that. Finally it was time to take the test. "Leave them face down on the desk until everyone has one," Dr. Hufty instructed, "and I'll tell you when to start."

When they turned the tests over, the students saw, to their astonishment, that every answer on the test was filled in. Denise's name was even written on the exam in red ink. At the bottom of the last page Dr. Hufty had written these words: "This is the end of the exam. All the answers on your test are correct. You will receive an A on the final exam. The reason you passed the test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test did not help you get the A. You have just experienced...grace." Dr. Hufty then went around the room and asked each student individually, "What is your grade? Do you deserve the grade you are receiving? How much did all your studying for this exam help you achieve your final grade?" Then he said, "Some things you learn from lectures, some things you learn from research, but some things you can only learn from experience. You've just experienced grace. If you know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, your name is written down in a book, and you had nothing to do with writing it there. That is the ultimate grace experience."

When Jesus is King, you relate to God and others gratefully. You live with God because of grace. You serve God because of love.