

Daily Discipleship

Sunday, September 18-24 (A) - Matthew 20:1-16

The Challenge of Discipleship: *Grace*

Focus Question: *What surprises you about God's grace?*

word of life

"[The landowner said], 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'" Matthew 20:15 (NRSV)

Read Matthew 20:1-16

1. *What are the surprises in this parable?*

The whole issue here is fairness. The owner and the workers had an agreement (Greek word *symphoneo*). The first workers were to be paid what was fair—a day's wage (a *denarius*). The owner promises to pay the others hired "whatever is right" (20:4). To the surprise of all, they are also paid a *denarius*.

Is this fair? The first hired don't think so. The owner responds to their complaint: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (A more literal translation would be, "Or is your eye evil because I am good?" 20:15)

2. *Was the landowner fair?*
3. *Was he required to be fair?*

The generosity of the landowner goes against what is seen to be fair. Similarly, God insists on acting out of grace. Fair or not, God gives all things freely. The words beginning and ending this parable challenge disciples of every age. In God's kingdom, "the last will be first, and the first ... last." (19:30, 20:16)

4. *Is God "fair" in God's generosity? Why or why not?*
5. *If God was fair and gave each person what he or she deserved, what would that mean for you?*

The Greek word for "friend" used in the parable (20:13) is only used three times in the New Testament – all in the Gospel of Matthew. In the parable of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14), the king uses this word to address the man without the proper wedding garment. The other occurrence is found in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus addresses Judas as he betrays him (Matthew 26:50). In all three, the word suggests a relationship in which the hearer has very nearly offended or scorned the speaker. (Translating the word, "Look, pal," might more aptly convey the tone of the word.)

As the first laborers grumble about the unfairness of their employer, the landowner reminds them, "Look, pal, I agreed to pay you a *denarius*, and that's what you were paid." The challenge for the workers who endured the day's labor is the owner's seemingly unfair generosity.

6. *How is the reaction of the laborers typical or atypical?*
7. *With which group of laborers do you most identify? Why?*

Jesus begins this parable, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner. . ." Take a moment to ponder the kingdom of heaven.

8. *How is the kingdom of heaven like the landowner?*
9. *Complete this sentence: "For the kingdom of heaven is like. . ."*

word among us

The following is a true story. A campus pastor was teaching a college course on the life and teachings of Jesus. As the date for the final exam approached, the class spent several hours reviewing the material. Some students requested extra individualized time with the pastor. Other students met in peer study groups, cramming for the test. One student, realizing she had to be gone the day of the exam, arranged for a make-up exam, only to be told that the make-up test would be much more difficult.

The day of the exam arrived; students sleepily filed into the room, obviously tired from a night of little sleep and lots of study. The campus pastor walked in, looking very serious. “Before we begin, I would like to read a passage from the Gospel of Matthew.” The parable of the laborers in the vineyard was read. The pastor closed the Bible and said, “This reading says that it’s all a gift – it’s all grace. So you’ve all made an A on your exam, and you’re free to go.”

The students sat, stunned, for a moment; and then something unexpected began to happen. A murmur arose from the class – a murmur of discontent. “You mean we studied all this time for nothing, and those who didn’t study or even show up today get an A too? You’ve got to be kidding! It’s just not fair!”

1. *How would you have reacted?*
2. *What was the campus pastor trying to teach the students?*
3. *When have you experienced a grace moment?*

Our whole working lives are based on an agreement that offers fair wage—we do something in order to *get* something. In the world of work there is no such thing as a free lunch.

4. *At work, are people treated more with grace or justice? Explain.,*
5. *Tell this parable with modern-day images.*

It’s no wonder we struggle with God’s grace. Without counting the cost, God continues to give unmerited love. There is something inherently unfair in the whole idea of grace. Is it fair that, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”? Is it fair that the gift is for all of us, active members, attending every workday at the church, every worship service, and also for those of us who may be inactive members, seekers, or “back-sliders”? Remarkably—for us, for all of us, “God so loved the world....”

6. *How do you explain grace to another person?*
7. *How have you been able to receive the gift of God’s grace in your life?*

It’s just not fair, this grace upon grace. It’s just not fair, and thank God it’s not!

8. *What in this parable do you find challenging as a disciple of Jesus?*
9. *How might you extend grace in the coming week?*

Prayer

Gracious God, grant us your grace. Amen

Dig Deeper

Ephesians 1:15-23

last word

This week, give
God’s grace away
—on purpose.



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