

“Do You Really Want a Gracious God?”

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Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

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Have you ever been in a Sunday School class, a Bible Study, sitting around a table in a restaurant or donut shop, or maybe at your own kitchen table and there is a discussion going on about a current event or something else that is happening. Inevitably the discussion involves some kind of faith issue. Someone says, “Well, that’s not what my Bible says,” or “My God would never do something like that.” Have you ever heard anyone say either one of those things? Have you said them yourself?

What the person means who says that is not that their Bible is different or their God is different, but their understanding of the Bible and of God is different. I can imagine someone hearing this story read and not knowing that it came from the Bible and say, “Well, my Bible doesn’t say anything like that.” Or “My God is nothing like that.” How interesting that during this uncertain economic time in which we’re living, we can’t pick up a newspaper or turn on the television without hearing dire reports about the economy, we have a lesson about God’s economy. You need to understand this. This is not a lesson on how to do business; this is not even a lesson mainly about the order of those who go into God’s kingdom, starting with the prophets in the Old Testament and then later teachers and finally us as Christians. That’s not mainly what’s this story is about.

Of all the parables of Jesus, some biblical scholars say this is probably the most authentic. Other parables were taught by other rabbis. We need to hear this lesson closely. You’ve heard it before and you probably know the setting. It was not unusual for landowners to go into the marketplace. Day laborers would be there and they would hire them just for that day, a day’s wage. We talked about this a couple of weeks ago—20 cents, a denarius, was about a day’s wage. This landowner comes and hires workers, returns and hires more workers, and more workers and more workers.

First lesson from the story is this. Everyone who went to the vineyard worked. Did you notice that? It doesn’t say that some went and did not work, it says everyone who went into the vineyard worked. True story, I knew a wealthy man one time who had several grandchildren. He was supporting most of them. One day he decided they needed to make it on their own. He made this agreement with them. Everyone needed to get a job. He said, “If you have a job by Christmas, I’ll give you \$25,000 for your Christmas present. That’s pretty good motivation, isn’t it? Some of the grandkids knew that Grandpa was a pretty good ol’ guy—“He’ll give me something whether I get a job or not.” Christmas rolled around and the ones who had a job got \$25,000 from Grandpa,

but the ones who didn't have a job got nothing. Guess what happened the next Christmas? All of the grandkids had jobs.

Everyone in the story worked, but they didn't work the same, did they? It was equal pay for unequal work. Should we really be surprised by that? A school teacher leaves home early in the morning while it is still dark outside. She gets there about an hour before the kids arrive. She is working to get her classroom ready. She has done lesson plans. She works with all her students throughout the day, hardly ever sitting down. At the end of the day she stays after work to get ready for the next day. Another teacher arrives about two minutes before the bell rings. She sits at her desk all day long, hardly every paying attention to the students. As soon as the bell at the end of the day rings it's a race between the students and that teacher to see who can get out first. Howard, do you recognize that? Everyone who's ever been a principal recognizes that. Those two teachers get paid the same. Is that fair?

A lesson about football. I know that this time of year some of you are interested in football. The pretty boys: the quarterbacks, the running backs, they all get paid more, don't they? Most of the guys who do the dirty work don't get paid nearly as much. It's interesting to me that lately something strange has happened. Offensive tackles, especially left tackles, are sometimes paid almost as much as the quarterback. It seems some teams have learned how important that is. For the most part, it's not fair. They don't get paid the same. Some of them work harder but they don't get paid as much.

I did some reading about the Heisman Trophy and learned a couple of interesting things. In the history of the Heisman Trophy, 73 people have received the award. All but four of those who received the Heisman Trophy were either quarterbacks or running backs; two guys who were called "ends" back in the old days and two guys recently who were wide-receivers received the Heisman. Everyone else was either a running back or a quarterback.

Back in the old days guys played both ways, offense and defense, but no one who ever played defense exclusively ever won the Heisman. It is supposed to be for the best football player, but it goes to the "pretty boys." If I mentioned the names David, Zake, and Sam without even saying their last names, some of you know that I am talking about the quarterbacks at Tulsa, OSU, and OU, David Johnson, Zac Robison, and Sam Bradford. Is it fair that they get more attention?

There is a lesson for us about minding our own business. My grandmother used to say, "You need to mind your own beeswax." Don't be so concerned about what the other guy is getting. Aesop tells a wonderful fable about an eagle that was flying one day. The Eagle looked up and there was another eagle flying a little higher. The eagle that was flying lower pulled out one of his own feathers and threw the sharp end at the other eagle, trying to cause him harm. He missed and got another feather, then an-

other, and you can imagine what eventually happened. There is a reason that envy is one of the seven deadly sins. There is a reason that one of the ten commandments is "Thou shalt not covet."

God does not treat us fairly. We are not created all the same. Some of us have what we call our "God-given talents" that the rest of us don't have. The requirements are not the same. One day, a man we call the rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Sell what you have and give it to the poor. Give it all away!" Zacchaeus came to Jesus and said, "I've given away half of all I have." And Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house." The requirements are not the same. A man was lying beside a pool for 38 years. Jesus came to this man and said, "Get up and walk." There were some money-changers in the temple cheating people. Instead of saying to them "Get up!" Jesus said "Get out!"

The requirements are not the same. God treats us differently. God doesn't treat us on the basis of fairness, but on the basis of grace. That can be troubling at times. You see, we love it when God deals with us mercifully, but how often do we want justice for the other guy? It was Shakespeare who said "If God dealt with us based on justice, none of us would see salvation."

There is something else I believe that bothers us even more. We want to earn God's love. An example: I have said to you many times before and I will again, I appreciate your being in worship. I do. I appreciate your making the effort to be here. Have you ever thought about this. Other people got up this morning and made the decision to do something else. They slept in, went to the lake, or did something else except come to worship. You got up early, got cleaned up and fixed up and came to church. Think about this. God loves the people who are not here every bit as much as he loves you. Doesn't that just sizzle your bacon? Doesn't that wilt your lettuce? Doesn't it bruise your apple? I've got one more. Doesn't that wrinkle your prune?

God loves those other people, maybe the ones who don't even love God, as much as God loves you. Wednesday night at the Bible study I said, "I like to think that God loves me because I'm such a good guy." In my better moments I know that's not true. God loves me not because I'm a good guy, but because God is a good God.

You might be thinking, "Then why did I make the effort to be here this morning?" You know the answer already. We don't come to worship to make God love us more. Because we come to worship we understand that God could not love us any more than God already loves us. That's the meaning of the cross. We come to worship out of gratitude, to seek God's forgiveness, to seek God's will, perhaps to learn something that will make us a better person, not to earn God's love.

As much as we want to put God into our box and earn God's love, God will not let it happen. God loves us on the basis of grace and through God's son the living Christ says to us, "Share this grace, share this mercy, share this forgiveness with each other. Share your faith with those who have no faith."

There is a saying in our faith that we are to love our neighbor, but if we don't love our neighbor enough to share our faith with our neighbor, do we really love our neighbor? How long has it been since you have shared your faith with another person? If you are reluctant, understand this, your neighbor is seeking and searching and hoping against hope to find God's love. But you know what? They believe it's too late. They believe that if they come in at 5:00 p.m. it will be too late. You can share this Good News with them. It's never too late. It's *never* too late. That's what this story is about. It's never too late, and you can tell them that this is a story in our Bible about our God. Amen.