

Equal Grace, Unequal Expectation (Matthew 20:1–16; Exodus 16:2–15)
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Let me start with a question that might be controversial. How many of us believe in fairness? Most of us probably would raise our hands. We think that working longer should mean earning more, and that greater sacrifices deserve recognition. If we've been faithful longer, we might expect greater privileges. Conversely, those who arrive later and work less should receive less. That feels just. If Jesus told this story today, some businesspeople might say, "Jesus, with all due respect, you've just undermined the incentive system!" In the parable, a vineyard owner hires workers at different times of the day. Some start in the morning, others at nine, noon, three, and the last hour of the day. The shocking part? The owner pays everyone the same—one denarius—regardless of hours worked. Those who worked all day grumble, which is understandable. But Jesus isn't giving us a lesson on payroll; He's prompting us to reflect on a deeper issue: how do we respond when God's generosity seems unfair to us? Here are five thoughts to consider.

1. We naturally keep score.

The earliest workers in the vineyard had a reasonable expectation. "We worked all day. They worked only one hour. Therefore, we deserve more." Their issue wasn't that they were cheated; the owner paid them exactly what they agreed upon. Their problem was that others received the same reward. This reflects a very human tendency to compare—our families, careers, homes, children, achievements, and ministries. Sometimes, even in church settings, we wonder, "Why did she get that responsibility?" or "Why was he asked to lead that ministry?" or "Why was he recognized instead of me?" I relate to this personally. After nearly thirty-five years in academia, I sometimes felt that key opportunities went to newcomers instead of me, leading to frustration, disappointment, and honestly, resentment. Recently, a

conversation with my former department chair, now in India, resonated deeply. He reminded me that God has given me a new, meaningful life in a different country, and this chapter isn't just compensation for past opportunities but a gift in itself. That helped me realize that focusing on what we haven't received blinds us to what God has already given us. The workers in the vineyard received work, an opportunity, and a denarius. Instead of appreciating these gifts, they fixated on what others received. Envy turns another's blessing into a sense of deprivation for us.

2. God's grace does not operate according to our calculations.

The vineyard owner essentially tells the workers, "Friend, I am not doing you any harm. Did we not agree on a denarius?" That reflects justice. However, he then asks a profound question: "Am I not free to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you jealous because I am generous?" This illustrates grace. The owner doesn't deny justice; he honors his agreement. Yet, he refuses to let justice limit his generosity. This is the core message of the parable. Grace isn't about equal effort but about God's goodness surpassing our expectations. The workers who arrived late had no bargaining power; they had no impressive resumes or claims. They simply trusted the landowner's generosity. Ultimately, the parable points us to salvation. We don't approach God claiming, "Look at my efforts," but acknowledging, "I received what I could never earn." Grace isn't a wage; it's a gift.

3. The manna in the wilderness teaches the same lesson: enough for everyone.

This is why the Exodus reading beautifully complements this Gospel. Israel, in the wilderness, is hungry and complains. God provides manna and instructs them to gather only enough for each person—no excess, no shortage, just enough. The manna symbolizes a radically different way of life: there is abundance, but hoarding is forbidden. Everyone receives daily bread—both the strong and the weak, leaders and ordinary people, those who

gather much and little. When excess is kept, it spoils. The lesson is clear: God's economy emphasizes enough, not accumulation. That's why Jesus teaches us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," not "Give me." Both the vineyard parable and manna call us to shift from individual gain to communal sharing, from competition to community, and from scarcity to generosity. God's question isn't just, "Did you get what you deserved?" but also,

“Can you rejoice when someone else receives what they need?”

4. The Prodigal Son reveals the same struggle in the heart of the elder brother.

This parable reminds me of the well-known story of the Prodigal Son. The younger son leaves home, squanders his inheritance, and eventually returns. What does the father do? He runs to greet him, embraces him, welcomes him, and celebrates. Meanwhile, the elder brother becomes angry, feeling it's unfair. He says, "I stayed home, worked hard, obeyed, and did everything right. Where is my celebration?" The elder brother is similar to the workers who arrived early at the vineyard, both saying, "I did more; why didn't I get more?" Jesus might be asking us: do we sometimes prefer God's justice over His grace? We accept grace when we need it, but when it's extended to those we believe don't deserve it, it makes us uncomfortable. We want God to be generous to us, but perhaps not to everyone equally—that's the challenge Jesus highlights.

5. Grace asks us to stop comparing and start giving thanks.

The workers in the vineyard teach us something uncomfortable. They received a full day's wage but couldn't enjoy it because they were focused on others. They watched and counted others' blessings, which highlights a major spiritual risk: assumptions that lead to resentment. When we believe someone should get what we think they deserve, or think our years of service guarantee a reward, we risk feeling bitter. Believing another's blessing diminishes our

own stops us from truly giving thanks. Jesus calls us to reflect honestly and lovingly as God does. God gives each of us gifts, opportunities, daily bread, and continues to give. The real question is not, “Why did they get the same as I did?” but “Can I rejoice that God's grace is abundant enough for everyone—including them and me?” God’s kingdom is a place of unending grace, not competition. It’s a vineyard overflowing with blessings, a wilderness of enough manna, a welcoming household, and a table for all. That’s why Jesus says, “The last will be first, and the first will be last.” He’s overturning our assumptions. In God's kingdom, we don’t need to prove we deserve more or keep score. Grace isn’t limited. There’s enough for everyone—early workers, latecomers, the elder brother, the prodigal, you, and me. So today’s simple invitation is to stop tallying blessings, receive God's grace, and give thanks. When others receive God's generosity, instead of questioning “Why them?” we can say, “Thank you, God, that your grace exceeds my calculations.” The good news of the vineyard is this: equal grace, varied expectations, but abundant generosity for all. Amen