**By Grace Alone**

Based on [Matthew 20:1-16](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt20.1-16)

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Septuagesima

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Several generations ago, Tommy Douglas pushed for socialized health care in Canada, and he prevailed. For generations now, Canadians have been born and grown up in a society where they have never had to pay for a doctor. Imagine that tomorrow, the government decided to end free health care? Would the government be unjust to do so?

Do you, as a human being have a “right” to health care? I mean, do you think the government has an obligation to make sure that you can see a doctor for free? **Surely, it does as long as the legislation lasts, but as far as I know, there is no “eternal covenant for free healthcare.”** Can Canada stop providing free health care, the same way you can decide to stop giving to this or that charity as you please? Do governments, because they are governments, owe their citizens health care. Or in Tommy Douglas’ day, did the government decide to be generous, choose to use its revenue to help people get health care, even though it doesn’t have to.

If a man at the side of the street asked you for a money, you give him a loonie and he says, “I deserve more than that”, what would you call him. **You can hardly call him a beggar; maybe you’d call him an activist or something, but he’s not a beggar.** A beggar asks for what he has no right to. But this man, He’s not asking you for charity; he’s *telling* you to pay him what you owe. He’s not asking you to be generous or gracious, he’s demanding his rights.

Today’s scripture is a parable about how God works by grace alone. Jesus tells this parable, and it is often called “The Laborers in the Vineyard”. It could also be called the generous employer; the gracious employer…because the central message is summed up in the summary statement, “**I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?**”

In the parable God figures as an employer, who hires several strings of workers. The first workers he hires early in the morning and agrees to pay them a denarius. The rest he only agrees to pay “what is right”, which ends up to be the same amount as the first…a Denarius. Jesus gives astounding insight into human nature here and sets up the difference between gratitude and entitlement to make a theological point. God owes nobody anything.

By nature, God owes nothing to nobody. Yes, God created you, but he doesn’t *owe* you a living, he doesn’t *owe* you respect, he doesn’t *owe* you love. God doesn’t owe you good health, good weather, a happy family, a sufficient pension. **Maybe the government owes you these things; maybe your neighbor owes you these things; but God doesn’t owe you anything.** Because if, from the beginning, from his nature, God owed you anything, then he would not be, *could not be,* a God of Grace.

And this is where any honest human being stares into the void, and in fear seeks God where he may be found. The knowledge that you are a worm and not a man; that God who created you, **could by all rights throw you into the outer darkness as casually as you take out the trash is a startling reality**. God owes you nothing. And it is precisely because he owes you nothing, that when he gives you anything at all it produces in you gratitude that freely gives to God all praise, honor, glory and thanks.

The love and mercy of God is greater than any treasure on earth. If you’ve been conditioned to think that God owes you anything, you will appreciate nothing. Only when you first realize the truth that God owes humanity nothing at all, will you treasure everything you have for what it is, a gift from a gracious God because He is love. And everything he does is an outpouring of what He is and has to those who are not and have not.

In the parable, you will also notice that the employer is not putting up “help wanted” signs…as though he needs laborers in his vineyard. **And the fact that he later hires others *simply to give them something productive to do*, shows that this is not your typical business arrangement.** Not only does the employer give wages to these men out of grace, the employer hires these men out of grace. He calls them into his vineyard, the same way God calls you to life in his holy church…by grace.

I would be remiss not to point out that much of the “seeker-sensitive” and “contemporary worship” church movements of the last half-century make this mistake. They cast their man-made “vision for ministry” and operate as though God needs consumers to patronize his church, and so he also needs workers run his church.

“**If the church doesn’t change, we’re going to have to close our doors**”. You’d expect that from people outside of the church looking in, but I’ve been amazed to hear it more than a few times from Christians. Have they forgotten the faith that they actually think Christ’s church needs believers? No, believers need the church of Christ. So too, in this parable, the vineyard doesn’t need laborers, the laborers need a vineyard, and the employer, from his generosity, hires them to live and work under his care.

He hires them by grace…but he does agree to pay them a wage, the first workers a Denarius, the rest whatever “is right.” So too, by nature God owes us nothing…but also by nature He is gracious, loving, merciful and kind. That’s who He is. **To a beggar who asks for a denarius he will give it, to a worker who needs a job he will hire him.** He will not give or hire out of obligation, but only out of free unconditional love, according to what he sees to be right, and as he freely chooses.

God certainly makes promises with men and women and with his people Israel and with the human race. After the flood, he promised all humanity that he would never again flood the earth. **He promised Abraham that he would give him a son; He promised the whole world that whoever believes in His Son will have eternal life; He promised that by the wounds of Christ, we would be healed.** He promised his Son will preserve his people, and that the gates of hell will never prevail against His church on earth. He promised all these things and he owes them to all who call upon him. He owes them noe because they deserve it, but because He promised. And He is faithful and cannot deny himself.

Likewise, the employer promised to pay the first workers a denarius and he did. He promised to give the rest “whatever is right”, and he did. **The first workers claimed they deserved more than the others; the employer says: “No…**You received what I agreed to pay you, and you presume to much when you say how I should manage my money. Take your wage and go.”

So too the Lord will say to all who presume to say that anything they have they deserve. God is a gracious God, and if you do not know him by grace, you do not know the real Him. You will only know his wrath, his law, his judgment, and that’s not who He is. He will say, “**I have given you clothing, shoes, food and drink in this life. I gave you your daily bread in this life, take it and go away from me into the outer darkness.”**

But to those who would come last, who would work in the vineyard for an undetermined wage, who would not compare their work to others, but would receive freely the gifts of this life, daily bread through the sweat of your brow and the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ. **They will know the God of grace, the True Lord of heaven and earth who owes us nothing and gives us everything.**