**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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Today’s sermon is based on the parable of the workers in the vineyard. I think it should be called, the parable of the gracious employer, because that is what the parable is about, the grace of God.

In the world today, there is a debate over effort and privilege. A few generations ago, south of the border anyway, most people held to the idea of “The American Dream”. The American Dream was essentially this idea, “if you work hard enough, you can be whatever you want to be, do whatever you want to do and thrive.” It carried with it the idea that if you aren’t who you want to be, it must be your fault, your lack of effort and initiative.

Lately, this “American Dream” has been challenged by a philosophy of privilege. This says that people don’t necessarily get what they deserve in America (or Canada) because it's not a “level playing field out there. White males in particular don’t have to try half as hard to achieve success in this society, than anyone of a different race or gender. Society gives them superior status, “privilege”, while indigenous people, for instance have to carry around stereotypes of failure that makes it much harder for them to be accepted and given chances to succeed. Even if they are just as hard working, society values them less from the start.

Today’s parable centres upon the notion of grace, the idea of unearned success. In the parable Jesus tells, no one is given greater success. Everyone is paid the same, in the end, and that’s a cause for scandal.

The parable says that the master of a house, the employer, hires workers, first at the beginning of the day, then more throughout the day, and finally some at the eleventh hour. The first round of workers he agreed to pay a denarius, and as for the rest he didn’t say how much he’d pay them. But you understand the idea. It makes sense that, all other things being equal, the laborers who worked longer deserve more pay. But in the end they get the same pay as those who worked only an hour. The master says, “It’s my money, don’t I have the right to pay as I see fit.”

Consider for a moment, that employers cannot say that today. If you owned a business, and you paid two people different wages for the same work, sooner or later somebody is going to cry “discrimination.” If it’s a woman who gets paid less than a man, “discrimination.” If it’s an indiginous man who gets paid less than a white man “discrimination.” And maybe it is, maybe it isn’t, but either way the master will have a lawsuit on his hands.

But in Jesus day, not so. And just consider how Jesus’ whole parable seems to hinge on this verse, “**Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me.”**

Jesus says in the parable that the master has the right to do what he chooses with what belongs to him. This is important, because if he doesn’t have that right, the master can never truly be charitable, truly merciful, or truly selfless in giving. God rewards everyone in his vineyard, not according to their abilities, or their status, or their effort, or how long they’ve served him. He rewards them freely, without reference to status, wealth, or privilege because he is gracious...and to be gracious means to give freely to someone who hasn’t earned or deserved the gift.

So, the meaning of the parable is this. God gives freely to all people, even evil people, because he is gracious. It may look like he gives crops to the hard working farmer and not to the lazy farmer. But neither farmer will grow an acre without God’s blessing. So too, a non-white woman might have to work twice as hard as a white man in our society, but neither will burst the glass ceiling apart from the will of God. And both will receive, in the resurrection the very same prize and salvation regardless of effort.

The real gift in the parable then, is not just the denarius. The denarius is a wage earned. The real gift is the call to work in the vineyard. The real gift is the call of God to join the one holy christian and apostolic church. And that gift is offered to all. Some refuse the call and remain children of wrath. Some receive the call and yet begrudge His generosity and hold their brother in contempt. They, like the pharisees, like the early workers, have received their reward in this life, and forfeit their treasure in heaven. Notice how those who complained receive their denarius, but are then sent out of the vineyard. This means that even those who receive good in this life might not enter eternal life.

But to all who accept the call into the vineyard of the christian church, and who work regardless of privilege or coveting your neighbor, even if your call was late, the eleventh hour...you will not only receive your denarius in this life, but will be counted first in the life to come, and inherit eternal life.

All this to say, God has authority over everything. If you think he is unfair, then you forget this simple fact...God is true and everyone who says otherwise is a liar. God is right and everyone who says otherwise is wrong. This is necessary for Him to be a gracious God. Only if He saves freely, can he be merciful. According to His own Law, God was bound to damn all of us to hell because of our sin. If he didn’t he would be unjust according to his own law, rewarding our evil. But he didn’t want to. He wanted to save us. And he wanted to save us freely. So he made a way so that his salvation could be freely given. He sent his only son to die on the cross for our sins, freeing Himself to save us by grace. Because of His blood, Satan can’t accuse us before God. He can’t say “God must hate you because of your sin.” Apart from Jesus’ blood that is right. Without Jesus sacrifice, God must hate us. But covered in the blood of the lamb, he may love us freely.