

Will we receive grace?

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[0 : 00] Let's share a prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence.

! May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher,! and your great glory our supreme concern. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I want you to imagine a darkened room, one where heavy shutters have been placed over the windows to block out all the light from outside, so that it's totally dark.

Now these shutters have been designed in just such a way that they can let just a sliver of sunlight through. So imagine that there's a beam of white light cutting across the room, making a thin line on the wall opposite.

Let there be light. Now imagine holding up a prism into that beam of light, so that it splits into a rainbow, and that the far wall is now filled with colours, with fiery reds and oranges, deep blues and cool indigos.

[1 : 27] This is one of the experiments into optics that Isaac Newton did in 1666 while the University of Cambridge was closed during an outbreak of plague.

And with it, he proved that white light was made up of a spectrum of colours, that ordinary sunlight contained the full rainbow, if only we could see it.

And Jesus uses today's parable like a prism. He takes the pure white of God's grace and shows that that grace is so rich that it contains many shades and many colours.

And he spreads them out for us to see, like a colour spectrum on a wall. All the characters in the story are a different facet that reveals a different hue of grace.

The labourers hired at different times of day. The 11th hour workers who no one else will hire. The ones who complain about other people's pay.

[2 : 33] And the vineyard owner himself, generous and free. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, in chapter 13, when his disciples ask him why he teaches in parables, Jesus replied that it was because some would not understand and would not see or hear the message, but others would be blessed to do so.

He tells them, blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear. In a rich parable like this one, each of us will be attuned to hear or see different parts.

What have your ears been blessed to hear? As Jesus turns the prism in his hand to cast colours this way and that, what have your eyes been blessed to see?

Which character is the flash that you notice? Which band of colour falls gently across your face? I'll describe the brightest hues that I can see, and I pray that that lets you see where the colour that you've been blessed to see fits into the whole rainbow.

The spectrum of workers, each of them hired at different times, is a line-up that asks us to pick ourselves out of it. When were you called into the vineyard?

[4 : 13] Were you one of the workers called early in the morning, who has laboured loyally throughout the day? Maybe you were brought up in church. Maybe a parent or a Sunday school teacher was the one who introduced you to Jesus.

You accepted the Denarius Today contract and didn't look back. Or maybe you've come a little later in life. One of the workers called at the third hour or the sixth, about noon, in your teens or twenties or thirties maybe.

Did the contracts on offer elsewhere just not seem quite as good? Was the call to the vineyard a rescue from standing idle? A call that gave purpose, that gave direction?

Perhaps the day was drawing on, the ninth hour, the eleventh. Maybe you tried working elsewhere and found that the work didn't satisfy, or that there was a restlessness that only found peace in the vineyard.

Was it the start of sunset that made you listen to the owner's offer after having passed by his calls in the morning? Or maybe you were like those workers at the eleventh hour who say that they are waiting because no one has hired them.

[5 : 38] Maybe no one else would have you. Maybe, despite waiting and searching and looking, it was only the owner of the vineyard who would take you in.

Maybe you have only just heard the owner's call and have only now come into the vineyard to see what the work is. If so, welcome.

Welcome. Welcome to the vineyard. On the colour spectrum, you can find a range of hues between any two points and you can subdivide them or remix them endlessly to find just the precise shade that you want.

And the same is true with this spectrum of vineyard workers. We can come up with variants that fit us exactly. So I was brought up in the church, but I fell away in my teens and I came back in my 20s.

So I suppose I'm an early morning worker who went on a long coffee break before lunch. And I think if Jesus were telling this parable again today, I think he would update it with lots of clever modifications around flexi-time and working from home and hybrid offices and all those other things.

[6 : 52] And there'll be some variant like that that will fit you perfectly and will capture your journey to the vineyard. Whichever worker we are, wherever on the spectrum our particular colour is, we all receive the same grace.

All labourers get the same pay. However complicated the vineyard's hiring process might be, the payment system is wonderfully simple.

We all get the same grace. However long we've been in the vineyard, whatever work we've done or not done, we all get the same grace.

Jesus tells this parable as part of explaining how, as he said in both last week's reading and this one, the last will be made first and the first will be made last.

And one way that God makes this happen is by making us all equal in grace. We all get the same grace because it turns out that grace is not something that we earn.

[8 : 05] It's not something that we can deserve or have to work towards or struggle for. It's God's free gift to us. The joke that's underneath this parable is that for all it's about workers and their pay, the labourers aren't actually earning anything at all.

They're getting something freely given. It was simply in responding to the call, in being willing to receive, that they opened themselves up to the gift.

It wasn't the amount of work that they did. It wasn't bearing with the burden of the day or with the scorching heat or in not doing those things. They all got the same pay.

We all get the same grace. And this means that we don't need to worry whether or not we're doing enough to merit God's grace.

The gift of grace is rooted not in what we do or what we don't do, in how often we pray or go to church or do good deeds or show that we love our neighbour, but in God's love for us, which we do not need to earn.

[9 : 24] We are all loved by God and so we all get the same grace. This means that we don't need to fret about whether or not we're being Christian in the correct way, whether our journey to the vineyard is the right one.

There is a whole spectrum to choose from, a complete continuum of fellow workers in the vineyard, and we all get the same grace.

This means that it is never too late to respond to the call to the vineyard. The gate is never closed.

When we say that something was at the 11th hour, we usually mean that it was almost too late at the last minute, just before the deadline. We want to avoid doing things at the 11th hour.

It's a phrase that conjures up tension, anxiety. But that phrase, the 11th hour, comes from this parable. It shouldn't make us think of nearly missing deadlines.

[10 : 32] It should make us think of deadlines being extended. In a normal hiring round, the workers who didn't respond early in the morning would have missed the cut-off.

But the owner of the vineyard comes back to the marketplace again three hours later, and three hours after that, and three hours after that. God will call us again and again and again.

It is never too late. We can never miss out, because we all get the same grace. So maybe the colour that shines towards you from the prism of this parable is that assurance that God's grace

does not need to be earned, that whoever we are and whatever we've done, it's never too late to come into the vineyard.

The assurance that there is no danger, no possibility of slipping beyond God's grasp. Or perhaps the beam that catches your eye is the vineyard owner himself.

What does he tell us about the character of the grace-giver? Certainly, the vineyard owner doesn't seem like most employers that we see in the world.

[11 : 54] The relationship between workers and employers, between labour and capital, is a perennial issue in economics and in politics. So just this week, the Westminster Parliament debated a new employment rights bill.

There tends to be one after a change in government. Different attitudes to the respective rights of workers and employers is part of what defines the political spectrum from left to right as we know it. And so governments of one shade or another will tend to shift the balance in one direction or the other. But the owner of the vineyard doesn't seem to fit with either the pro-owner or the pro-worker ideas of how employment should work.

For one thing, he throws out the idea of equal pay for equal work. He ignores the union rep that comes to complain about the unfairness of the flat pay structure. He insists that he has the right to do with his property whatever he wants.

He justifies himself by saying that he's sticking to the letter of the contract that had been signed. But if this sounds like the kind of freedom claimed by venture capitalists and libertarians, then the vineyard owner doesn't use that freedom according to the expectations of supply-side economics and free markets.

[13 : 19] He doesn't use his economic power for his own enrichment or to increase shareholder value. He's not trying to use technicalities to get out of paying his contractors.

Although efficiency and ruthless deal-making are often held up as things that business can teach the rest of society, the vineyard owner doesn't really display much of either.

Instead, he uses his power to show, as he says in verse 15, generosity. He uses the ambiguity of his promise to the workers that he hires later in the day to pay them whatever is right, not to pay them less, but to pay them more.

He chooses freely to give all the workers a full day's pay. This may not be what market efficiency dictates, but it's what is right.

All the workers deserve a living wage. So in the vineyard owner, we see a God, a grace-giver, who is free, faithful, and generous.

[14 : 34] God gives grace freely because God is not bound by merely human notions of payment and reward, of mere transactions, but instead transcends them to what is right and just.

God gives grace faithfully because while God is not bound by human ideas, that freedom doesn't become fickleness.

God sticks to God's promises, to what God has said. God is bound by God's own word. God gives grace generously because God's promises are not fulfilled begrudgingly or only on a technicality. But with a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over. So maybe what you are blessed to see in the range of colours that the vineyard owner casts is a rainbow like the one shown to Noah in Genesis.

A rainbow that symbolises God's faithfulness to God's promises, that shows God's covenant of care with all creation. It's God's faithfulness that gives us the confidence to trust in grace alone, to let go of all other cares or concerns, to go all the way with Jesus, to trust completely in a God who is free and faithful and generous.

[16 : 09] But maybe, as Jesus uses this parable to show the rich range of God's grace, as he uses it as a prism to create a show of many colours, what draws you is not the spectrum of the workers made equal in grace, or the deep and rich hues of the grace giver, but the clashing colours towards the end of the parable.

The workers who complain, who grumble at the master of the house and say, these last only worked one hour, and you've made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

These are labourers who have worked the whole day, and so they think that these latecomers don't deserve the same reward that they've got.

This is the sting in the tail of the parable, the sting in the tail of grace itself, that other people get it too.

The forgiveness and blotting out of our sins, that seems great, but the forgiveness and blotting out of other people's, steady on now, this Lent, we're thinking about going all the way with Jesus, all the way to Calvary and the cross.

[17:39] There's a temptation to look at others and think, well, I reckon they've only gone part of the way with Jesus. It's so easy working in the vineyard to feel that we've done it properly, we responded at the right time, we've done the right work, we've done the hard work, that we've gone all the way.

But other people, other Christians, well, they've come late. They don't work as hard. They tend a different kind of vine. they don't really get the same kind of grace we do, right?

That difficulty of accepting that we really do all receive the same grace, not just ourselves, but others too, is common enough that Jesus brings it into another parable.

In the parable of the prodigal son in Luke's gospel, the elder brother who stayed cannot understand why his father welcomes back with joy the son who left.

That sting in the tail in both parables is directed not at non-believers, but at believers trying to get them to respect the full rainbow of their fellow Christians.

[19:05] rainbows can symbolise both diversity and unity at the same time, many colours coming from the same sunlight.

As Christians, we are a people united by grace. One of the privileges that I have training for the ministry is that I get to see lots of different churches, to really see the full spectrum of workers in the vineyard.

And this parable is a reminder that all of them, that all of us, get the same grace. On Thursday night, I sat in on a meeting of the implementation team working on the union of the four congregations.

One of my other privileges is that I've been able to be a fly on the wall at lots of meetings of that sort across Edinburgh. And it is genuinely a privilege to see people, Christians, working hard to work together.

And as I was waiting on Thursday night for the bus back home from St Michael's, I happened to get chatting with a young woman at the bus stop. She was asking why I was out on so cold a night, and so I said that I'd been at a church meeting.

[20:27] Now, she wasn't a Christian, but she was interested in what the meeting was about. So I explained that it was about four parish churches looking to unite with each other, and that all Church of Scotland congregations around the country were doing much the same thing.

And you know her response. Her response was, oh, how lovely. how good that religious communities and religious leaders want to work together and to be part of each other.

And I realised that my instinct was to say to her that, well, this process is one that people all over Scotland are finding stressful and difficult.

But the building that was my home church, where I first entered the part of the vineyards called Church of Scotland, is going to be closed. That people more often talk about changes being painful than being lovely.

But I didn't say that because I realised that as someone looking from the outside in, she had a better view of the vineyard than I did as a worker within it.

[21:50] There's a sting in the tail to the sting in the tail in this parable. A last, subtle shade of grace. The workers who complain, who resent their fellow labourers, don't have their pay taken away.

They aren't cast out of the vineyard. God's grace encompasses and overcomes their imperfections, just as it encompasses and overcomes the imperfections of the workers who responded late in the day.

They all still receive the same pay. We all still receive the same grace. Jesus knows his workers.

He knows that even among those who follow him faithfully, there will be frictions, difficulties, pains.

He describes one in his parable. He knows what goes on in the vineyard. Discord among the saints doesn't stop the faithful grace giver from fulfilling the promises made to them.

The many-coloured light of grace dispels even those shadows. We, all of us, receive God's grace in whatever colour we are blessed to see it.

[23 : 16] Jesus spreads the rainbow out for us and shows that it is richer and more varied than we can imagine. Richer and more varied than we can grasp or understand.

But even when we cannot grasp it, even when there are parts that our ears have not been blessed to hear or our eyes been blessed to see, we can still trust that God's grace is given to all who respond to the call to the vineyard.

The full rainbow of whatever shade or hue. Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for the boundless rainbow of grace that you have given to us in Jesus.

Jesus. We thank you for binding us together in him, people of many backgrounds, many ages, many lives.

We ask you would help us to understand the fathomless mercies of your grace and the boundless love that you show us in your Son, Jesus Christ in whose name we offer all our prayers.

[24 : 40] Amen.