

Good God, Good Church: Grace & Graciousness - 23rd January 2022 Matt Wallace

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[0 : 00] But as I said at the top, we're continuing a series that we began on YouTube a couple of Sundays ago called Good God, Good Church. And in this series, we're thinking about what it means to worship and follow a good God and therefore how we in turn might be a good church.

What is a good church? Good question. What is a good church? Well, in order to help us answer that question, we're looking at the person of Jesus to explore really how we see displayed in his life the good things which will shape our lives as a church being good in his footsteps, we hope.

So a good church, therefore, will always reflect the goodness of God. Goodness which as we're covering in this series, it's more than these things. But it's certainly not less than the principles which we've been looking at.

So, yeah, last week on YouTube, we began by thinking about compassion and empathy. We're going to be looking next week, or Ruth's going to be looking at the importance of prioritizing people. We're going to be looking at truth-telling, justice. Dave's going to be talking to us on service in a few weeks' time as well. And then we'll round things off by looking at Christ-likeness as a whole at the end.

[1 : 21] This week, though, it would be good to turn our attention to this, to grace and graciousness. The way we see grace championed by Jesus, and therefore how we as a church might live in ways which reflect those same gracious qualities.

And so to kick us off really in our thinking on this, we're going to look at a passage this morning from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 20, in which Jesus tells a parable to illustrate what the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, as it's called in Matthew's Gospel, is all about.

So here's the story that Jesus tells. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.

He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning, he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing.

He told them, You also go and work in my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right. So they went. He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing.

[2 : 54] About five in the afternoon, he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?

Because no one has hired us, they answered. He said to them, You also go and work in my vineyard. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.

The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more.

But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. These who were hired last worked only one hour, they said, And you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

But he answered one of them, I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go.

[4 : 08] I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?

So the last will be first, and the first will be last. What we got with that story? Well, Jesus, I think for me, tells this fascinating story of a landowner who takes on various fruit pickers for his vineyard at different stages of the working day.

A working day, which in Jesus' time would usually run from 6 in the morning right through 6 in the evening. We usually do a 12-hour shift in those times, since that was what was required to earn the minimum wage needed for everyday folks to pay their taxes, to keep a roof over their head, and to feed themselves and their families.

And they get paid one denarius. That was the living wage, if you like, at the time. And so you can see why this marketplace is full of people wanting to be hired, kind of labour exchange.

They'd need the money to live on. It's proper zero-hours contract stuff, though. So they'd turn up in the morning and see who would hire them, perhaps, for that day. They'd wait all day, even, to get some work.

[5 : 30] So even one hour, if that was all that was on offer at the end of the day. Indeed, we're told that about 5 in the afternoon, the landowner went out and found still others standing around.

He asked them, Why have you been standing here all day long, doing nothing? Because no one has hired us, they answered. And so he takes them on for the final hour of the day, a final hour's work, for which they'd expect an hour's pay, you know, a twelfth of a denarius.

Not much, but if you're struggling, you take what you can get, and it's better than nothing. And yet, as we saw in the story, when the time came at the end of the working day to pay his workers, the landowner gives every one of his workers a full day's wage, one denarius, to each of them, regardless of whether or not they'd worked a 12-hour shift or just a final hour of the day from 5 till 6pm.

Why does the landowner do this? Well, if we recall, when he took on these extra staff at different times in the day, he tells them that he's going to pay them whatever is right.

For the workers, whatever is right would seem to be their hourly rate. But for the landowner, his idea of whatever is right means giving his staff enough to live on, regardless of how long they've worked on that particular day.

[7 : 00] There's a generosity in that, which we'll come back to. But what's fascinating for me is the reaction from some of the other workers to this boss's generosity, to the Johnny-come-latelys at the end of the day.

So for those who'd been recruited last, they get paid first. And you can imagine how shocked, how made up they'd be, you know, been giving enough to live on for just an hour's work, a living wage for an hour's graft.

That would have been a story for the dinner table that night, I'm sure. And I'm equally sure that they'd have returned to the marketplace bright and early the next day, hoping to perhaps find this landowner again and work for him, because they knew he was a decent, considerate boss.

And yet when it comes to those who'd worked the whole day for them to receive their wage, well, knowing that the other guys have had a bonus, if you like, they'd be expecting, understandably perhaps, to get more than their agreed wage, more than a denarius.

But instead, each one of them just gets one denarius as well. And when they received it, they began to grumble. These were hired last, worked only one hour, they said, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

[8 : 19] But the landowner answered one of them, I'm not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave to you.

Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious? Because I'm generous. And it's a genius little twist in this story Jesus tells.

Because the landowner, he's right. He's not underpaid his original staff. He's paid them whatever is right, a living wage, enough for them to live on.

It's just that he's also been generous to the others. He's given them enough to live on as well. Now, I guess if we got our financial hat on, we might be feeling a little bit sceptical about this landowner's business sense.

Yes, the late in the day workers will return tomorrow, but will the original 12-hour shift workers feel inclined to do the same? And if they do, will they be prepared to work as hard in the midday sun as those who are recruited later and will in theory get a decent day's pay for less work?

[9 : 32] We don't know. Jesus doesn't expand on that bit on the story, the mindset of these other workers, but we can put ourselves in their place. I wonder how you would feel if you were one of these early bird workers.

I think if we're honest, there may well be a sense of envy which may well creep in. I can't imagine the staff nights out would be much fun with that kind of tension going on.

We might have enough, but I suspect we'd find it hard not to resent the fact that others also now seem to have enough primarily through the undeserved generosity of the landowner.

I think for me, envy, which is what we're talking about, is a pretty easy emotion to succumb to. And I guess if we really dug down and were honest, I suspect we'd all acknowledge being envious of others at various times in our lives.

So we might be envious of someone's money, their home, their job, their ability to seemingly breeze through life. We might be envious of their talents, their family, their football teams, last minute success, Old Trafford for example.

[10:46] We might be envious of their early retirement, their popularity, their ability to eat what they like without putting on weight and so on.

And I wonder that list and more, what are the kind of things that eat away a little bit at you? What kind of things might you get envious of others about? I think for me, self-disclosure time.

I've had moments over the past couple of years of being envious of people who were furloughed. Part of me wishes the Church of England had furloughed me 18 months ago and it would have been a much easier couple of years, I tell you.

I get moments of that thinking, that would have been good, that would have been good. Marie's the same in the office as well. She wasn't furloughed. But he was like, could you not do it, man? Could you not do it? No. I get envious of people who seem to love doing exercise.

It's not something I find easy and I'm envious of that passion. I'm looking at Jay over there, old Iron Man. I also get, if I'm honest, sometimes a little envious of people being able to settle down and make their house or their garden just as they want.

[11:54] Whereas, for us, I'm grateful the house comes with my job, but that makes it only a temporary home. And that one day we'll have to move and start again somewhere, not for a while yet, I hope.

But I have moments of envying people who can put down those more permanent roots, I suppose. So I've got a lot of sympathy for envy.

It's an easy, understandable emotion, I think, to succumb to. And yet, I also know there's something incredibly releasing about admitting our envies, our jealousies.

Because in voicing what we try to shove down, in airing what we might feel a little bit ashamed about feeling, that's the first step, I'd say, in being able to overcome those feelings.

Because if we do that, you can guarantee that everyone else can empathise with our envy. Owning up to our own envious feelings enables others to say, I'm glad it's not just me, you too.

[13:02] I know, I know that feeling and I know it's hard. I tell you what, should we work together in finding ways past that? How are we going to learn to be more genuinely pleased for people in their good fortune?

You see, if we imagine the landowner saying to his workers who were grumbling, if we imagine he put it like this, if he says, are you envious because I'm generous, it makes them sound pretty small, it makes them sound ridiculous, stingy, petty, and maybe they were.

And yet in the story, I don't see the landowner's tone as being too condemning of them. Rather, I think he probably places his emphasis not on their envy, but on his generosity.

So I wonder if his tone in saying this was not, are you envious because I'm generous, but instead would have said, are you envious because I'm generous?

Different tone, but I wonder if that's how he said it, are you envious because I'm generous? If so, come on, I know it's been a long day, but you're better than that. Indeed, I'm showing you a better way.

[14:22] Be generous, be pleased for the good fortune of others, because I've already given you all that you need. My way of doing things is not so that those who already have get more, rather than those who have not get enough.

And put like that, I think not only does it expose any sense of envy as being pretty shallow, really, but I think more importantly, it instinctively draws us to the depth of the goodness behind that generosity of the landowner.

And why does it draw us? Because in the story that Jesus tells, the landowner in the parable represents the gracious, generous way in which God treats us.

You see, God longs to give each of us enough. God promises to give us whatever is right in the words of the landowner. Whatever is right is enough for us to know life in all its fullness as Jesus promises.

And yet the point of this parable is that God's generosity is not dependent on our own effort or work. No, God's generosity with us is a gift, undeserved gift of God's goodness, an undeserved good gift, which we can best sum up with the word grace.

[15 : 51] grace. It's a big concept, grace. But I think we can say it's by grace that we've been given the gift of life in the first place.

I didn't ask to be born, you didn't ask to be born. Certainly no way I could have earned the right to have been born. Now, my life, your life, is a gift from the word go.

It's by God's grace that we're able also to relate to each other, to know the wonder of not being alone, the joy of being together perhaps like this, of finding joy in those around us.

It's a gift. This world, when we look around, the wonder of beauty and diversity and of creation, the mystery of it all is all there for us to explore and enjoy.

And it's a gift given to us through God's grace. And ultimately, God's presence with us in the person of Jesus and now through the Holy Spirit to know through Jesus' life that God is with us, to know that through Jesus' death that God has saved us, to know through Jesus' resurrection that God has raised us, to know through the Spirit that God has enabled us.

[17 : 03] It's all a gift. It's all a freebie. It's all an expression of God's grace, God's undeserved generosity to us. grace. It's a grace.

We could define it as God's generous, undeserved favour, a gift of goodness which is ours to receive, and a gift of undeserved favour which God calls us in turn to generously pass on.

Good God, good church. Now, what might it mean for us to be a good church with this idea of grace in mind? I guess that's a question which would take us a long time to explore.

But for today, and in light of just this parable, I just want to zone in on the importance of two particular things, two particular ways of living which I think are encapsulated with this word generosity.

Generosity as being one way to reflect the goodness of God's grace. You see, I'm convinced that generosity is absolutely key to being a good church because it's one of, if not the most, compelling, eye-opening, life-shaping ways in which God's goodness can be shared and experienced.

[18 : 23] What does it mean to treat people with generosity? Well, there's a range of things, but let's just focus on a couple of things. Firstly, I'd say treating people with generosity means having a generous opinion of them.

It's a deliberate decision, if you like, to look for the best in people, not to pick holes, but to love them for who they are and forgive them for who they're not.

Treating people generously means being patient and kind, or to put it another way, it means showing grace to them, which I guess we could say is a godly response to irritation.

Yes, we get irritated, but showing grace is a godly response to that irritation. You see, I'm in no doubt that people will do our heads in from time to time.

That's in no doubt. But the way we respond to that irritation is ideally defined, I think, by having a generous attitude towards them. For me, it goes back to what we were saying last week with empathy and compassion.

[19 : 29] If someone's in a strop or someone seems moody, yeah, we might think they're out of order and either get stroppy back or avoid them, but the gracious, generous, empathetic response takes a step back from their mood and perhaps realizes that their mood may well be a result of tiredness or chronic pain or worrying about the rising cost of living.

It might be they're in a mood because it's a defense mechanism about feeling insecure in that kind of situation. It might be indicative of a home life which is pretty chaotic.

Equally, being gracious, I'd say, can sometimes mean acknowledging that if we had their circumstances, if we lived with their pain, if we had their upbringing, their home life, we'd be struggling just as much if not more.

And it's hard to stay angry with someone who you feel sorry for. And yet, treating people with generosity isn't about feeling smug or superior, you know, rising above them and being all calm and zen-like.

That'll just annoy them even more, I'm sure. No, rather, it's not about rising above it. It's about getting down with them and cutting them some slack, knowing how much we'd appreciate being treated gently if we were in their shoes.

[20 : 51] or as the letter to Ephesians puts it a bit more poetically than that, the writer says, be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Or along similar lines in Colossians, bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. That word's there, bear with.

It's not some annoying telesales way of fobbing someone off. Bear with me, bear with me, that kind of thing. That's not good, that's not good. Rather, we're saying bearing with each other means looking beyond the surface to see what else might be going on.

Treating people with grace. Undeserved favour may be, but it's still favour nevertheless. And bearing with literally means just that, bearing someone else's load for them, holding them up.

So perhaps rather than saying, blimey, you're in a mood today, aren't you? We could just say, how are you doing? How can I help today? I wonder for you, how, well, who, who might God be asking you to treat with more generosity, more grace over the coming months?

[22 : 09] You'll know who's coming into your head, who you find hard. perhaps as this January month unfolds and 2022 does the same, we could ask God to give us the generous opinion, the grace, to deal with those people more kindly who irritate us, perhaps.

That's one way how we treat people generously. But then secondly, I'd say, being a good church means that, as well as having a generous opinion of someone, it means, I think, we treat them with literal generosity as well.

Again, part of why I'm convinced I think that generosity is so key to be in a good church is that I've seen the difference that generosity, that graciously giving people something for nothing, can have on their ability to appreciate not just what a good church is about, but ultimately what a good God is about.

For example, I don't often talk about my previous job to this one here because I'm not really into looking back too much and nostalgia and all that kind of stuff. I don't want to fall into the trap of, oh, in my day, I'm getting there, I tell you, but it's not quite on my agenda yet.

But I think what I'm going to share, which is looking back a little bit, is probably a relevant example for today. So before I came here as curate and in vicar, I've been here about 10 years now, I spent five years as a youth worker at church over in Aldridge.

[23 : 39] Now one of the expectations of my role was to set up some kind of Christian union in the local secondary school, some kind of faith group at lunchtime.

And yet, I wasn't too keen on that, if I'm honest. It didn't really sit all that well with me going into school and doing a kind of God's squad kind of thing. I knew that wouldn't really appeal to most young people.

So instead, we didn't do a Christian union, we didn't call it that. Instead, we started a lunchtime group which we called Random. And the idea was that it was just a place of welcome, effectively, a place to hang out for the young people.

We had some games, consoles and so on, did a few random acts of kindness each week. But crucially, and really just following Jesus' example of feeding the 5,000, each week, we provided a load of free food for the young people to come and eat.

We didn't charge the kids, so it cost the church about 50 pound a week at a time to do, a couple of grand a year. So not insignificant. And we ended up running it over two lunchtimes each week because of the numbers that wanted to come for the free food.

[24 : 51] But I can remember at each session, pretty much every week, having countless conversations with young people who'd come, but couldn't believe all the food was free.

We didn't even put out a little donation plate or anything. No, they'd ask me, what's the catch? Why are you doing this? Why are you giving this food away for nothing?

And it's a gift of a question to ask a youth worker. Because rather than having a formal Bible study or talking about a God who's generous, I could just talk with them about why generosity, why grace, why goodness matters, and who the God is behind that goodness.

The food was a practical illustration, if you like, a gift of the gifts that God gives us. And the beauty was though, because it wasn't kind of cheesy leaflet giving out evangelism or anything like that, the young people who I knew from church felt confident enough to invite their mates and they enjoyed

the fact that the food was free, they were proud to be able to offer something for nothing to their mates.

And largely the result of that lunchtime club, the church youth group in Aldridge, it grew to around 200 teenagers with about 70 or so coming to church services each Sunday night.

[26 : 11] And it's encouraging that some of those teenagers, some of their families and so are now part of this church here some 15 years later. Now this random group, it was simply the right thing in the right season at the right time in the right place.

But I share this story because the growth of the youth group, the growth of the church, and most importantly the growth of God's kingdom in that community, it all stemmed and it was rooted in practical generosity, where the principle of gift, of grace, of undeserved favour seemed to strike a spiritual chord with these young people, that God's spirit was able to do something special there in that time.

And this principle, that principle of the importance of grace-filled generosity, well it's stayed with me ever since. And I know how important it is for us as a church too.

That's why over the last 18 months, two years, we've been right behind and involved with Burwood Be a Friend. That's why we tithe our income as a church to support other charities. That's why we've got something as basic, but for me as important as that glass fridge at the back of the hall. Free drinks, which we have on a Sunday F&F; drop-in, but especially our little friends, people can just take. Our little friends especially, the parents who come, they can just take a drink, it's a small thing, but I know they're thinking because they tell us, ah, this is free, okay, this is a place then of kindness and generosity.

[27 : 56] And that practical goodness, when tied with treating people with grace and generosity, as the little friends team do, as the drop-in team do on a Monday and so on, when it all ties together and it all points ultimately to the goodness of the God behind it all.

So practical generosity is a key sign of grace, it's a sign of goodness. Now of course it costs us to be generous, the cans have to be paid somehow, that's where your giving and my giving comes in, it's so crucial for us to be able to do what we do as a church because it enables us to give it away, enables us to be generous.

So if you're not giving regularly, or you could maybe give more than you do, do please consider that, because a good church is a generous church, a good church is a gracious church, who understand the importance of gift, of undeserved favour, because we know how good God is to us. As the landowner in the parable who represents God says, I will give you whatever is right. So just as our good God promises to give whatever is right to us, us, I think my prayer is that we may be a good church who give whatever is right to each other, to those in our community and beyond, living with a spirit of generosity which reflects the gift of God's grace to us. means if we we do it