

The Church's Economy

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[0:00] Well, who wants to earn a dollar? The Children's Focus pretty much did everything I'm going to say in the sermon in about five minutes. So, thank you, Jeremy, for doing that.

I will build on it a little bit here because I did a little work in this sermon. But I want to welcome you all back to this series on Matthew and remind you that last week we took a break and we heard about Naaman and his healing and the humility that worked in with that grace that he received from God.

And so it's a really great preparation as we look at Matthew 20 right now where Jesus tells this amazing parable to help us to understand the sheer grace of God.

So we're going to be immersed in God's grace as we look at this parable. It is a parable that is filled with bad math and very unorthodox accounting principles.

So if you're a mathematician, you might feel a little uncomfortable. Three years ago, I took ninth grade math again. And it wasn't to try to get my high school diploma.

[1:16] It was because I took the role of my oldest son, Alexander's math tutor because there was some difficulty with ninth grade math for him. And in fact, I'm doing it again with my other son, Nicholas, who is in grade nine too.

So if anyone has questions about fractions and how to multiply and divide and add them, you can ask me. Or order of operations, square roots, scientific notation, all of this stuff I can share with you as long as it's ninth grade math.

That's what I'm stuck on. There was one resource I had to deal with, and that was the ninth grade math textbook. And so what I would do is I'd learn each chapter quickly and then help Alexander out with it.

And the great thing about that book was all of the answers were in the back of the book for the homework. So I could tell if I was on the right track. However, there was one surprising thing I found as I became infinitely aware and knowing this book is that there actually was a problem in the back of the book.

I discovered that there were some wrong answers. And the way I discovered this is because I did what I thought for sure was the right way of doing an equation.

[2:37] And I looked at the back of the book, and it was wrong. And I did the problem over and over and over again and kept getting the wrong answer. Well, it turned out, and the teacher confirmed this, that there are some wrong answers in that textbook.

Now, I felt vindicated, but I also felt that this is an illustration of what Jesus says about God's grace in this passage.

Because the world, with all its wisdom and its authority, says that God uses bad math when he teaches about grace. But the parable teaches us that it is actually the world that needs revision, just like that math book needed revision.

It's God who has all the authority and the wisdom. God turns the world's accounting upside down in order to pour out his grace that brings life to you and to me.

So I want you to turn to Matthew 20, 1 through 16. And it's there on page 825. The context of this marvelous parable is that Jesus has been talking to Peter and his disciples.

[3:51] If you remember from two weeks ago, Peter said, after hearing this rich young ruler saying no to Jesus' request for him to give up everything, Peter says, what do I get for giving up so much to follow you?

And I think he's echoing our own thoughts when we hear Peter talk. He never is shy about being open. And that is the Christian life. There are losses that come from following Jesus.

Some of us lose relationships. We lose business opportunities because of our faith. We might lose a church building. In the Middle East and in Africa, to name just a few places, there are brothers and sisters today who lose homes and even their lives because of following Jesus.

And Jesus assures Peter and us that everyone who follows him will receive far more than they could ever give up. Everyone who's left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, Jesus says, for my sake, will receive a hundredfold and they will inherit eternal life.

But then Jesus says this amazing thing that we're dealing with today. Many who are first will be last and the last first. That's God's economy.

[5 : 15] That is his math. And it's only true because his grace undergirds everything in our life, everything in our universe.

So with that teaching, Jesus is saying, Peter, you need to know the fundamental thing about grace. It is not a wage.

You can't earn it. It's not a payment for good work. Or because of your great reputation. Or because of your faithfulness. Many of you think that many people that you think are first rate, Peter, and most deserving of grace, those are people who are last in God's kingdom.

Not only that, but the last person you might expect is first in that kingdom. And every person from first to last receives the gift that outshines all rewards, eternal life with God and everything that goes with that gift.

You know, in that sense, in the kingdom of God, the first and the last actually come to the finish line together. You know, horizontally instead of vertically. And there is this sense that there is a new math that is happening with this because of that fundamental grace of God's salvation to us.

[6 : 38] And now to awaken Peter and each of us to his grace, Jesus tells this memorable story in chapter 20, verses 1 through 16.

He says there is a vineyard owner, and he's the main character. He goes out in the very early, the first hour, which is 6 a.m., to hire workers, probably to harvest his grapes in the vineyard.

And he offers them a good wage, just like Jeremy was offering here, for the whole day's work. And this was an important thing because those laborers in first century Palestine depended completely on landowners giving them work in the harvest like this.

They weren't people who had a salary, who were working in a household, who were servants and so forth. They needed this work for their livelihood. And here this man is offering them all they need for their life.

But then things get interesting in the fields. At 9 a.m., the landowner goes out again into the marketplace where the workers are, and he asks more people if they will work for him too.

[7 : 49] And this time he doesn't tell them how much he's going to pay them. He says, I'll give you a fair wage. Just what is right, he says, I'm going to give you. And people say, sure, they trust him at his word, and they go to work for him.

He goes out and does the same thing at noon and at 3 p.m. as well. Now, this is the first hint that there is something very different about the landowner compared to the economy of first century Palestine.

Because he personally seeks out workers throughout the day, not just for his harvest, but it seems like his reason is to give a livelihood, to give them and their families a fair wage.

And I think Jesus is giving a glimpse into God's heart here. Because it is out of God's immense love for people that he seeks out people in his initiative to serve him, to come into his life, to know him.

And if you are not a Christian today, God is seeking you out, whether you know it or not. He is seeking you out to receive the grace of knowing him and to know the life that he gives you, the things that you truly need in life.

[9 : 09] And if you are a Christian, and many of you are here, it is only because he searched you out, that in his initiative, he chose to give you grace.

And that you responded because of his grace. You said yes to his invitation to come to him and to stop wandering around as these workers were doing, aimlessly, without the purpose, the great purpose of God himself and his hope and the grace that changes everything.

So there's this hint of this landlord seeking out as God himself does. And then look at verse 6, because here's where grace begins to be fully revealed in the parable.

It says there, And about the eleventh hour, the owner went out, and he found others standing. Now have you ever wondered where the phrase eleventh hour came from?

It means a point in time when it's nearly too late. And it comes from this story. So every time you hear that term, eleventh hour, thrown around, think of God's grace.

[10:19] Think of his undeserved grace. The eleventh hour is five o'clock. It's impossibly late for these workmen to find work because the end of the day is six p.m., an hour later.

That's when the sun goes down. And you can imagine what these people are thinking at five o'clock, these potential workers. I'm going to go home ashamed. I'm going to go home with nothing to my family.

No food that night or the next morning. Only a gnawing hunger and a real sense that I am a failure. That's what they have thought in this story.

And the landowner says to them, Why do you stand here idle all day? And they said to him, Because no one has hired us. It's a revealing question. It's likely they were not good workers, that they did not have the ability that the other workers had.

They weren't strong or experienced, and they didn't know the right people. It may very well have been that they didn't get along very well with other workers either. So whatever the reasons, they are outsiders.

[11:24] They are the ones very easy to ignore and to not hire. But this employer hires them. And you must put yourselves in the other workers' shoes as they're doing their work in the field.

And all of a sudden they see all these people coming at five o'clock into the field as the sun is going down. What are they doing? What possible help can they be at this point in time?

It's inconvenient too. Well, an hour later, dusk comes, and the landowner sends his foreman to gather everyone together to pay them. And again, you can imagine all these workers standing in a group together, and the five o'clock workers are off to one side, kind of shunned by others.

But there's a second hint that this landowner is very different from any they had met before, because he tells the foremans to pay the five o'clockers first. And then there's this huge surprise. He pays them a full day's wages. More than enough to feed their families and to have a roof over their heads. You can imagine the joy of these workers when they received it.

[12:32] I can't believe I received this. How can this be? They'd be given far more than they could have hoped for, and certainly more than they deserved. They knew it. Why would that landowner do that?

It is too good to be true, would be what they were thinking. But it is true. And it is true, because grace is fully revealed here, in that verse.

The master chooses to be generous simply because of his compassion. He wants life for those workers, for those wandering people in the marketplace. He's not motivated by what he can get. He is motivated by being able to give out of the overflow of his abundant life and resources, that he can give to those families all they need for life.

And when we look at these workers, these different types of workers, thinking about those five o'clock workers and the others, we might wonder, which workers do I identify with?

[13:38] Am I like the 6 AMers, who have been a Christian for a long time? We've gone through sacrifice. We've gone through all of the ups and downs of life with God as we've served him.

Or we may have come to this life with Christ later, at 9 AM or noon, or maybe even 3 PM in our lives so far.

Who are we? Well, God's math says the answer is none of the above. It's none of the above. You and I are all five o'clockers.

We are the 11th hour people when it comes to God's grace. And that's something that should change our hearts and our lives.

All we have to offer to God is our sin and our shame and our spiritual failure. This is what we offer to him. And God has not brought you into the kingdom because you are good and upright and decent and respectable.

[14:40] And it's certainly not because God owed you something. The whole point of this parable is that God does not owe us anything. It is simply because God is generous beyond our hopes, beyond anything that we could ask or imagine.

And not only that, he searches particularly hard for the most unlikely and unqualified people to bring into his kingdom. That's why Paul says in Romans, while you were still enemies of God, while you were sinners, God gave his only son to die for your sins, that you will not die, but have eternal life.

That life that we actually need. That life of serving God, the true living God with joy. And therefore, it is impossible to be ever put in the situation where you can say, God, you owe me.

It is impossible. And that's why it is his mercy. When I think of my life and your life, it is his mercy on which you and I rest.

He owes me nothing. He has given me everything. The only basis of our life is undeserved mercy and undeserved grace. This is the good news.

[16:01] And so as we hear this, what do we do with this? What do we do with this grace that Jesus is teaching in this parable? Well, in this same story, there is a warning for us and there is a call to action.

And the warning shows up in a further twist in this parable. The 6 a.m. people who were working the longest that day, they watched the 11th hour people, the 5 o'clockers getting paid.

And then they can only think of this. How much more am I going to get than what was promised?

When they are paid the exact same wage, their thinking completely changes.

They are deeply offended. They grumble. They go past the foreman and they go up to the owner's house and they demand answers. They say, these last worked only one hour.

You have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat right through noon, morning, noon, and night. The landowner replies, am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

[17:11] Or do you begrudge my generosity? Now there's the warning. Do you begrudge God's generous action?

The last will be first, Jesus says, and the first will be last. God makes that twist. Jesus makes that twist in the parable to speak to our hearts here because he knows that along with Peter, you and I have a tendency to forget what grace is.

Over time, we experience loss because we are a Christian. There is hard work in the vineyard where things can be really, really difficult and painful sometimes.

We easily grumble and we say, God owes me more than what I am getting. Or you might look at others and say, they're doing better than I am, which is what people saw when they were looking at the five o'clockers.

There's a danger for us all here. Do we begrudge his generosity? I visited a friend overseas this summer who I hadn't seen for many, many years.

[18:22] And I'd never met his adult son. He was a wonderful person in his 20s, living with his mom and dad still. And he no longer, unfortunately, goes to church or follows Jesus.

And we talked about it. And the reason was, was because when this son was 15, he was diagnosed with a chronic illness. And many prayed for him in the church that God would take that illness away. But he was not healed. It was deeply disappointing for him. Now, wonderfully, medicines allow him to live a normal life. But it was painful for him because it seemed like God was not fair.

Don't I deserve more? God can heal. God can do what is really the best possible thing for me because he has everything at his disposal.

But what happened to him was, there was anger and bitterness that came out when that did not happen. What he felt entitled to, he did not receive.

[19:26] And he rejected God. It's a great sadness for his dad. He prays for him that he will embrace God's grace in his life and no longer begrudge God's generosity.

And I'm joining him in his prayer. But that is an example of what we are all tempted to. That in different ways, we can begrudge God's generosity and question his fairness, even though we have received everything at Jesus' hands.

In a way, we are conditioned to be like frequent flyer Christians. And what I mean by that is that when you've earned, and that's what it's called, you earn so many miles, 100,000 miles, million miles.

I was traveling with Jim Packer and he's got a million mile card and you get very nice perks, nice lounges in the airports. And that's a great status to be part of.

But we're tempted to feel like that, that God must work in my life the way those air miles work. That we earn the goodness and the perks as long time Christians.

[20:36] And God should work, therefore, in my life the way I think that he should work. And to give me what I think he should give. We begin to compare ourselves to others and say, I deserve more than they do.

I am entitled to a certain level of spiritual comfort. And when that thinking creeps in, what happens is you begin to take your eyes off Jesus and off his authority.

Just as those workers started taking their eyes off that landowner and started looking at other people and comparing themselves. When that thinking creeps in, you can't see what Jesus has done for you.

You cannot rejoice in what he is doing in other people's lives. In fact, the opposite response of those all-day workers, the response of grace would have been if they had said, wonderful, look at what happened with those five o'clockers.

Which, by the way, is what Simon did in the children's talk. He was very satisfied by what happened. That's the response of grace. And Jesus warns us. He tells us a story of complete, crazy, upside-down employment practices to show that he has given everything to you from the start.

[21 : 51] By grace, you have been received. By grace, you have been saved. By grace, you are being saved. By grace, you will be saved as well. It always has and always will be from God's overflowing generosity.

In his love, in his authority as the owner, he takes initiative in your life to give you life. By the work on the cross that it's not by accident Jesus talks about right after this passage in verse 17.

That's the basis of our grace. That's the basis of our salvation. It's the basis of our life. And it really is the good news. In the midst of your sin, in the midst of your shame, in the midst of feeling very inadequate, and also in the midst of the world's pains and illnesses, God's love for you is constant. Jesus gives you his abundant life. His grace, as Paul found out, is sufficient for you even in the times of greatest affliction because his power is made perfect in our weakness.

That's God's math. And then finally, there is a call to action. And I close with this. You don't see it at first, but there is a call to action in Jesus' parables.

[23 : 13] And that is, fundamentally, that we are to live like five o'clockers. And what I mean by that is that Jesus is calling us to know that we are, each of us, last-minute hires who count blessing upon blessing from God's hand more than we can ask or imagine.

In fact, the evidence of a right relationship with God, the evidence of your maturity in Christ, is that I am overwhelmed with the goodness of God.

I am overjoyed with his goodness to other people as well. That is a sign of a right relationship with God. Do you find that in your soul this morning as you hear this parable?

Have you learned to be so interested in Jesus' interests and in his causes that you are all taken up with him? You know, I think one practical thing which we can do in our action is to fill our minds with the grace of God in our lives.

And I did this as I was writing the sermon. I started writing a list and the list gets longer and longer. He said, what he has done for me in his grace. What is the thing that is undeserved in my life?

[24 : 33] Well, he forgives my sin and his mercy is new every morning. He speaks to me every day through his word so that I can actually know him, the living God, every day in my life.

He is glorious. I can worship him every day because he is worthy of all my worship. He pours his love into me continually.

Even when I don't feel loving or particularly open to God, he does this. He gives me complete assurance of the future. His hope is certain.

I will see him one day. I will know the resurrection of the body and rejoice in being with him forever. I can be his minister, a channel of his grace to other people in the most profound ways.

You and I can be that every single day. I receive my ability, my experiences, my intellect, my motivation to work so that the fruit of my labor is his gift to me.

[25 : 37] Our daily bread is his gift to us. Now, I could go on and on and on and make this a really long sermon as that list goes and that's what you will find when you start writing out this undeserved grace that God has given to you.

But I want to close by saying that Jesus calls us in this parable to fill our minds with his amazing grace because by that grace, God first gives to us what the world is thinking is last and that which the world considers and admires to be of preeminence, God often considers last.

So today, God calls us to live according to his otherworldly math. He has given us undeserved mercy so that we will mirror that mercy to others in our life in the way we live it.

May our hearts be so filled with the thankfulness of the five o'clock workers that we live a life of joyful service, giving undeserved mercy, and giving free grace, serving Jesus in costly ways because he has first loved you.
Amen.