

When God is Unfair
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June 13, 2021

Depending on your faith perspective, you are going to like this message or struggle with it. Either way, it is one of the most important messages a person can hear about God.

Sometimes what I do up here on Sundays is dangerous. My job is to preach the gospel. This is what you expect me to do, and this is what God called me to do. And much of the time preaching Jesus is agreeable to virtually everyone who comes to worship.

However, some of the things Jesus taught are challenging and even offensive. Quite often the gospel flies in the face of the values and principles we hold dear. That can create quite a predicament if you claim to follow Jesus Christ.

Truthfully, many people don't come to church to be challenged. Many people come to church because they want the faith to confirm what they already believe.

I recall a few years ago someone coming through the receiving line at the end of the worship service to tell me how much they liked my sermon. I asked, "What did you like about it?" They replied, "I agreed with it." There you have it.

As long as you're preaching about things people agree with, all is well. The problem is Jesus often preached about things people vehemently disagreed with. Jesus did not get executed because everyone found his message wonderful and agreeable. Think about it. Why would someone as loving and kind as Jesus get executed? What did he say that made people so mad? Well today you are going to find out. Today you are going to find out the message Jesus preached that got him killed.

We forget how controversial Jesus was. The first time he got up to preach in his hometown he was almost murdered. The people he grew up with were so offended they ran him out of church and tried to shove him off a cliff. How's that for sermon feedback? (Luke 4:16-30). What in the world did he say? What was his message and why were they so offended. You'll find out today.

You see, in addition to being a gifted healer and teacher, Jesus also had a knack for ticking people off. He was good at it. He was a real instigator. If you don't believe me, just take a look at our parable for today – The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. At first it seems like a rather ordinary story. A farmer has a job to do. His vineyards are ready for harvest. So, he goes downtown and hires some people, agreeing to pay them the usual daily wage. He takes them to the

farm. They go to work. End of story, right? Wrong. Jesus' parables are never that simple. Let's take a closer at this parable:

“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.” Matthew 20:1-2

A denarius was not just the daily wage for a worker, but it was also the cost of survival to the masses of poor families in Israel. A denarius would buy your family what they needed to stay alive, no more and no less.

The parable continues:

³“About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵So they went.” -Matthew 20:3-5

So, the farmer goes back to the marketplace to hire more workers. Back then the market place was like the unemployment office. If you needed work you would go there and stand around and hope someone would hire you so you could put food on the table for your family.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing.” -Matthew 20:5

These workers found work for only part of the day. And usually when you worked only part of the day you were only partially paid. That meant your family would eat some but not enough to keep hunger pains away.

If you were not able to find any work at all then you and your family would not eat. Which is why the next part of the story is so interesting. Take a look:

“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.’ -Matthew 20:6-7

This farmer is odd, isn't he? He hired some men right before the end of the working day. Not only that, the farmer was more concerned with hiring people than he was with farming. He is just going back and forth hiring workers all day.

But if you think that is odd. Wait until you see this!

“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.’

⁹“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.

¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

¹²‘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.’

¹³“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

¹⁶“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” -Matthew 20:8-16

And Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like that!

That doesn’t make any sense does it? That’s not fair! That is no way to run a farm or business. That is no way to manage life!

Can you imagine how long that farmer would have lasted in business when word got out that he paid the same to all his workers regardless of how long they worked?

Yet, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like that. Like what? Like the boss announcing to everyone in the office that the part-time workers will now be getting paid the same as the full-time workers.

It is like a mass email that goes out to the office announcing that the administrative assistants will now be getting paid the same as upper management.

It is like a teacher giving away A’s to the whole class, not to just the good students, but to the whole class, even those who don’t deserve it!

It’s like those sports leagues where all the kids get a trophy. What? Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like that.

This just isn't right is it? This parable messes with our sense of right and wrong doesn't it? Clearly, the farmer's idea of right and our sense of right are worlds apart.

Will Willimon says that our symbol of justice, our symbol of right, is Lady Justice. He says, "There she is. We are so proud of her – blindfolded, holding scales she can't see, atop our courthouses – scales in one hand, bloody sword in the other. That is justice for us - impartial, impassive, uninvolved, blind justice."

"You improved the bottom line, you get the raise. You got the best grade, you go to the head of the class. You come from the best family, got the best education and earned the most money, you get the best opportunity. Justice for us is objective, unemotional, distant, impartial, blind" (audio sermon from Willimon). That is the only way to be fair? That is right.

And Jesus comes along with this parable and blows our sense of fairness out of the water! Kinda ticks you off, doesn't it? If it does, you are in good company.

The last time I preached on this parable a couple sitting in the back walked out. I wanted to say, "Wait! This is not my story. Jesus told this story!"

It reminded me of an event I love to retell about Bishop Will Willimon preaching on this parable. After the service a young lady came up to him and said, "I was really troubled by the service today." She asked, "Where do you get these stories that you tell in your talk?" Willimon replied, "Stories? I guess I get them from growing up in South Carolina."

She said, "Well I was really bothered by the one today. I just don't think that's anyway to treat people. I mean, if you work longer than other people, you should get paid more."

Willimon said, "Wait a minute! That's not my story, that's from Matthew." She said, "Matthew?" He said, "Yeah, it is in the Bible."

Willimon noticed that she was wearing an usher tag and he asked, "Why are you ushering here?" She replied, "Well that tall guy over there, I'm dating him. And he needed somebody to usher today so he called me and here I am."

Willimon said, "I am curious. What is your religious background?" She said, "We went to church some when I was a kid, but I'm not anything really."

Willimon said, "Well let me tell you something. Just for your information, there is a sense in which you are the only person who got the story this morning. You found it offensive to your notion of justice. Right? Outrageous. Right? Well, just so you know, the man who told that story was later murdered for telling it. You got it. It really is an offensive, outrageous story. You got it."

It is offensive. This parable just isn't fair! And that's just the point. God's grace is not fair. This parable tells us loud and clear that God's grace cannot be earned. It is a gift – to everyone.

It's pretty simple. The farmer is God. The daily wage is God's grace. And the workers are us, all of us – from the pillar of the church who has worked in God's vineyard all their lives, to the felon who gets out of prison and joins the church. All of us get the same amount of grace.

When it comes to dispensing grace, God is not interested in being just; God wants to be generous. And that is fine with us until such an idea becomes more concrete. When we think that a man on death row gets the same amount of grace as a saint of the church, it bothers some of us. It doesn't seem fair.

We human beings like our pecking order. We act like we don't, but we do. We like putting people in categories and saying, "This one counts. This one doesn't. She's in. He's out."

But you see in the Kingdom there are no outsiders. Everyone counts. That's why God's grace is limitless and boundless. Therefore, one can't have more of it than another. King Duncan says, "That's like two people who live on the ocean fighting over who has more ocean! No one can buy the whole ocean, no matter how wealthy they are. And God's grace is far greater than any ocean, any land mass, or the entire horizon as well."

God pours out his grace on everyone, regardless if they deserve it or not.

If you are looking for a faith that is fair, don't look to Jesus. Honestly, I am glad God is not fair. For if God were fair, who among us would be worthy of his grace? I know I wouldn't be! Am I the only one? That's the whole point of grace. It's not fair. Otherwise it wouldn't be grace.

If that bothers you, you have just learned why Jesus was crucified. It started in the beginning when Jesus preached one of his first sermons to his hometown crowd. In a nut shell Jesus preached that God's love extended to all people, even our enemies. They responded by trying to shove him off a cliff.

But that didn't stop Jesus. He kept on preaching and demonstrating that message until the religious leaders were so mad they had to get rid of him. But the joke was on them. His very execution brought love and grace to the whole world.

All of us are invited to God's party of grace, for all of us are in need of forgiveness, redemption and healing. All of us are equal at the foot of the cross, and we don't have to say anything or do anything to get it. All we have to do is open our hearts to it and invite God in. Pretty amazing, right? I guess that is why they call it Amazing Grace.

King Duncan writes, "Writer Philip Yancey tells about an incident that occurred a few years ago. Journalist Bill Moyers created a documentary based on the hymn 'Amazing Grace.' One of the more unusual scenes in the film took place at a massive benefit concert in England.

“All day, fans had been blasted with hard-driving rock music. Strangely, the concert organizers had scheduled opera singer Jessye Norman to close the concert. Fans reacted negatively when Ms. Norman first took the stage. Here was a middle-aged black woman without any back-up band, depending completely on her voice. But she silenced the crowds with her opening line: ‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound/ That saved a wretch like me!’

“And soon, thousands of rock fans were singing along with this humble, life-changing hymn.

“It’s been said that there are more people who know the words to “Amazing Grace” by heart than know our national anthem.” Makes sense. Our national anthem is moving but Amazing Grace is transforming.

God’s grace will change your life. I am glad God isn’t fair. Aren’t you?