

**STORYTIME:**  
**The One About the Socialist Farmer**

**Matthew 20:1-16**

*Grace is amazing; get over it!*

A sermon preached by  
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Methodist preachers are appointed by the bishop each year to serve a particular church. If you have been Methodist for a long time, you are used to that. If you haven't been Methodist that long, we change preachers and you go, "What? I was just getting used to that one!"

Nowadays, the appointments are made to try to match the mission field. The gifts and graces of a pastor and the needs and character of a congregation and community are all studied to try to put the right person in the right place at the right time. Most of the appointments make better sense than they used to.

When I first started in ministry, appointments were made by salary and tenure. Unless you were totally ineffective (and sometimes even then), every couple of years you would get a little larger church and a little more salary. This system was regulated by the "salary sheet." Every spring all the preachers would get their hands on the salary sheet and dream of their next appointment. It was like kids in the old days when the Sears Christmas catalog came out. Every preacher's desire was to get on page 1 (out of about 10) of the salary sheet. Then your career in ministry was certifiably successful.

I hated it. I went around for weeks every spring with a knot in my stomach, worried about my "career." I was resentful of those who were above me on the salary sheet; I was fearful of those below me, lest they get a big raise and get ahead of me. It's probably not too different from any corporate setting, but it was a real disconnect trying to be a servant of the Christ who said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth." It was wrong on several levels.

I air all that dirty laundry because I want you to know that I understand what is going on in this parable. And it's not fair! I feel for the guys who worked all day, because I have worked all day, too. Next year I will have been in pastoral ministry for 40 years. I have spent my life in the vineyard. I can see why the workers thought the owner had some crazy ideas about how to run a business.

The problem is that this story is not really about doing business at all. It's not about economics or farm policy or labor relations. The farmer is not really a socialist; I just wrote that title to get you interested. The parable is

about grace. It's about love. It's about a God who reaches out to his children to give them what they need, regardless of how much they have produced.

There are two things I want you to understand about grace today. First, it's not just amazing—it's outrageous! Grace turns the tables on everything we know about life—how we operate, how we value things, how we keep score. It's all blown to bits by grace!

We like to keep score, don't we? Three weeks ago we had our two oldest grandsons stay with us for a week. They are 8 and 6, close enough in age to be very competitive. And they keep score on everything. Board games and card games are very intense with those two. They count how many M & M's they get out of the package. We have a rope swing in the back yard, and if Papa pushes hard enough, they can touch the tree trunk. So they counted that! Little did they know that Papa could manipulate the swing so they always tied. That's grace!

We like to keep score, and not just with sports. We keep score with our jobs, our families, our friends. We want to know where we stand.

We like to keep spiritual score, too. We keep track of all the good things we have done for God and for humanity. That way we know who's ahead. We know who's more valuable. We know who's going to win. We keep up with our religion points so we can redeem them for blessings, or even eternal life. Only problem is, God plays by a different set of rules.

Jesus told this parable because there was some serious score-keeping going on in his day as well. A few days before he entered Jerusalem for the last time, a young man came to Jesus and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's the big prize, the ultimate goal.

This guy had followed all the rules, kept all the commandments, earned all his points. Still he wanted to know if there was anything else he needed to do. Jesus could see what a scorekeeper he was, and he totally upset the guy's apple cart. He said, "Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor." He told the young man to do the one thing he was not willing to do. He turned away in sorrow, realizing that he could not achieve perfection. What he did not realize was that he could have received grace.

Peter watched the young man walk away with his head bent low, and he turned to Jesus to check his score. He said, “What about us? We have left everything for you—homes, families, jobs. Surely we have enough frequent faithful points to qualify.”

Jesus said, “Nobody who has sacrificed for me will fail to receive their reward. You’ll get it eventually. But in the meantime remember: many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”<sup>1</sup>

Then Jesus told this parable. The landowner needed day laborers for his vineyard, so he hired some at dawn, some at 9:00, some at noon, some at 3:00 and some at 5:00 in the afternoon. It must have been harvest season. When the sun was going down, he called the workers in to get paid. The ones who had only worked an hour were thrilled when they were given a whole *denarius*, a full day’s wage. The other workers were expecting similar generosity from the boss man, and they were disappointed when he only fulfilled the terms of the agreement. Of course, they began to whine and complain: “We were out there in the scorching heat! We deserve more!”

The landowner quickly makes three responses: 1. I fulfilled the terms of the contract. 2. It’s my money; I’ll do with it what I want. 3. Are you envious because I am generous? That’s really not a very good attitude, is it?

Then Jesus bookends the parable by saying again, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”<sup>2</sup> In the divine economy, the old rules don’t apply. Everything is reversed. It’s all about grace.

Isn’t that amazing? Isn’t that an outrage? It’s not fair. It’s not just. It’s not equitable. You run a business like that, you’ll be bankrupt in a year.

But God is not running a business; God is saving a planet. Why does God operate by grace? Number one, none of us can make the perfect score, and God is a perfect God. So we’re bound to fail if all God counts is our points.

Number two, God loves each one of us so dearly and so completely that God will give us every chance to turn our hearts and be saved. God’s love is unconditional and God’s acceptance universal. Grace is the break we get

that we don't deserve. You can get it even if you walk in the door at closing time.

Jeffrey Dahmer was one of the most despicable humans ever to live. Between 1978 and 1991, he abused and murdered and cannibalized at least 17 young men. The horror and brutality of his crimes are disgusting and nauseating. He was indescribably sick.

At his trial, Jeffrey Dahmer sat impassively—no emotion, no remorse, no repentance. Sentenced to over 600 years of life without parole, there was no way he could ever pay his debt to society or to God.

But as troubling as the crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer are, what really bothers me is his conversion. Weeks before he was murdered in prison, Jeffrey became a Christian. He received some evangelistic literature from his father, and he repented of his sins, profoundly sorry for his crimes. He professed his faith in Jesus Christ. He was baptized. He started reading the Bible and attending chapel services. He started his life over. He was forgiven. So when another inmate bludgeoned him to death in 1994, if everything we know about God is true, Jeffrey Dahmer received the full day's wage. He went to heaven.<sup>3</sup>

That's outrageous, especially if you pride yourself on your points. But if you have ever fallen short of perfection, if your life has ever been on the skids, if your hopes and dreams have ever been shattered like a clay pot dropped on a concrete floor, then you know. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!"<sup>4</sup>

Grace is not fair—thank God! Grace is not what we deserve—thank God! But grace is what we get whenever and however we turn to God—thank God!

I'll never forget my first "eleventh-hour" baptism. Gerald was dying of cancer. He was on so much pain medication he was seeing snakes crawl out of the wall. The last time he had been in church was the day he got married decades earlier. He believed in the gospel according to Louis L'Amour—he owned just about every western novel ever printed. He had always been a rugged individual, able to take care of himself. But he was about to die with his boots on.

He was barely conscious when I went to see him in the hospital. He asked weakly if he could be baptized. We talked about what that meant, as best we could, and we decided to go ahead with it. Being a recent seminary graduate, I drove back to the church—20 miles!—to get the proper ritual and baptismal bowl to do the ceremony. I'm glad he didn't die while I was going to get the book! The whole way I was having an argument with myself about this old sinner having a deathbed conversion—outrageous! But I remembered this parable, and I couldn't see any way around it.

When I got back to the hospital and prepared for the baptism, Gerald whispered something I could barely hear. I leaned over, and he said it again: "I'm sorry it took so long." I placed my hand with his wife's hand on his head, and with the baptismal water trickling down his hairless head, I spoke the words, "Gerald, I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Then an amazing thing happened. His body, which had been in constant agitation due to the pain, suddenly trembled all over and then relaxed. Totally and peacefully relaxed. I thought he had died with my hand on him! But he was still breathing, barely. In a few hours, he slipped into a coma, and in 48 hours we were making funeral arrangements. But it was a real different kind of service than I had expected just a few days earlier.

Grace is amazing and sweet and outrageous and a little irritating sometimes, especially to those of us who count our points and consider ourselves righteous. But the other thing I want you to understand about grace today is that the late workers did not get the best deal. Sometimes we tend to think that the workers hired in the afternoon were the lucky ones. They didn't have to work all day; they didn't have to stand the heat of the sun. Yet they got the generous reward.

The truth is, productive labor in the vineyard is its own reward. The work is also a gift of grace. In the ancient world, being picked to work was an honor. Their service was valuable; they would have something to do; they would get paid. Those who stood around waiting just languished, aimless and lost.

Most of the unemployed people I talk to still feel that way. Sure, it might be nice for a few days, but not for long. Unemployed people generally feel

worried about their future; their self-esteem takes a nose dive; depression and anxiety follow them like an unwanted puppy. Nearly every one of them would rather have a job. It would be like a gift to be productively employed, to have a purpose in life, to have a mission that gets them out of bed every morning, and of course to be able to expect a paycheck at the end of the week.

Apply that to your spiritual life. Yes, you can get into heaven on a deathbed confession. Yes, God will be good to you whenever you turn to him. But if you wait until the end of the day, you'll be like my friend Gerald: you'll be sorry you took so long. Think of what you will have missed. A worker in the vineyard knows a life of purpose and fulfillment, the inner satisfaction of knowing you are employed by the master for a fruitful harvest. Life engaged in Kingdom work is its own reward. What you get at the end is just icing on the cake.

Dr. Ellsworth Kalas makes a remarkable statement in his book on parables. He writes: "I believe in heaven, but if I did not, I would still opt with all my being for the Christian life. I want to have a grand reason for arising in the morning, to know the candle is worth the burning, to see a purpose in life beyond stoking the furnace of the body so that it can continue running for another day. My Christian faith gives such a sure, clear purpose. It immerses the quantity of life in quality."<sup>5</sup>

I believe in heaven, too. But if somehow the hope of heaven were taken away, I would still live as a Christian. No other life is so full; no other life is so meaningful; no other life could give me the deep sense of joy I receive in serving Christ. For me there is no other way to live. The good news is, we can have it both ways. We can know the fulfillment of fruitful labor in the Kingdom now, and we still get the reward at the end of the day, not because we have earned it, but because God is generous.

In 1910, after serving as a missionary for forty years in Africa, Henry Morrison became sick and had to return to America. As the great ocean liner docked in New York Harbor there was a great crowd gathered to welcome home another passenger on that boat. Morrison watched as President Teddy Roosevelt received a grand welcome-home party after his African Safari.

Resentment seized Henry Morrison, and he turned to God in anger, "I have come back home after all this time and service to the church and there is no one, not even one person here to welcome me home." He was an all-day worker.

Then a still small voice came to Morrison and said, "You're not home yet."<sup>6</sup>

We are not home yet, but one day we will be. We have a glorious home, a great reward, a grand welcoming party waiting on us. We all get there by grace; that's our only ticket. But in the meantime, we have vines to tend, work to do for the Master. The vineyard is vast, and the Kingdom is ready for a harvest. At the end of the day, sooner or later, you will come to the table and receive your pay and hear the words that welcome you home: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master!"

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 19:30.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 20:16.

<sup>3</sup> "Jeffrey Dahmer," *Wikipedia.com*

<sup>4</sup> John Newton, "Amazing Grace," *United Methodist Hymnal*, #368.

<sup>5</sup> Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables From the Back Side*.

<sup>6</sup> Brett Blair, "It Isn't Fair," *sermons.com*