



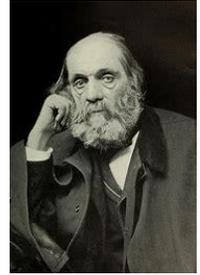
from the desk of ...
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IT'S ALL ABOUT GRACE

Matthew 20:1-16

When Edward Everett Hale (X) was Chaplain
of the Senate, someone asked him ...
"Do you pray for the Senators, Dr. Hale?"



His candid response ...
"No, I look at the Senators, & I pray for the country."

Now that story certainly has a contemporary
application ... but my purpose is to introduce the subject
of grace. We all need to receive the grace of God.

"It's All About Grace!"

I don't know if you've ever thought about it ...
but Jesus was a preacher. And like all preachers,
He had His favorite expressions & stories.

Those of you who have been listening to me for a #
of years now, know that when I'm talking about a large
quantity of something, I will use the figure ... (5,280).

If I'm quoting a passage of Scripture, no matter where
it's found in the Bible ... it's my (*favorite*).

I sign all my correspondences, or end all my
conversations, with the word ... (*blessings*).

Well, Jesus also had phrases that He repeated often. One of them deals with His formula for greatness. (X)

"Those who are last will be 1st,
& those who are 1st will be last."

(Matthew 18:4; 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14)



Actually, if we want to ponder that thought for a moment ... that seems to describe Jesus' own greatness.

"He was humble & walked the path of obedience all the way to death - his death on the cross.

For this reason God raised him to the highest place above & gave him the name that is greater than any other name." (Philippians 2:8-9)

This morning's Gospel passage comes as a result of a question that Peter posed. Now Peter had his own fishing business. (Luke 5:3) He had a wife, a home, (Mark 1:29-30), & a life at the time he met Jesus ... & he gave it up.

Peter felt like he'd sacrificed for the Lord.

So, he reminded Jesus ... "Look, we have left everything & followed you. What do we get out of it?" (Matthew 19:27)

Well, the truth of the matter is ... God owes us nothing, & whatever we do receive from Him we receive only because He's gracious. Now to make sure the disciples understood that, Jesus told them a parable.

Listen now to Good News as recorded by Matthew, to you who have gathered here for worship at C.C.R.M. Within your hearing comes the Word of the Lord ...

"The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the regular wage, a silver coin a day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. He went out again to the marketplace at nine o'clock and saw some men standing there doing nothing, so he told them, 'You also go and work in the vineyard, and I will pay you a fair wage.' So they went. Then at twelve o'clock and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. It was nearly five o'clock when he went to the marketplace and saw some other men still standing there. 'Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?' he asked them. 'No one hired us,' they answered. 'Well, then, you go and work in the vineyard,' he told them.

"When evening came, the owner told his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who were hired first.' The men who had begun to work at five o'clock were paid a silver coin each. So when the men who were the first to be hired came to be paid, they thought they would get more; but they too were given a silver coin each. They took their money and started grumbling against the employer. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'while we put up with a whole day's work in the hot sun - yet you paid them the same as you paid us!'

'Listen, friend,' the owner answered one of them, 'I have not cheated you. After all, you agreed to do a day's work for one silver coin. Now take your pay and go home. I want to give this man who was hired last as much as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?'"

And Jesus concluded, "So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last." (Matthew 20:1-16)

May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen

The story is told about Fiorello LaGuardia, (X) who, when he was mayor of New York City, (which was during the worst days of the Great Depression & all of WWII), had the affectionate nickname ... "the little flower" ... because he was only 5'2", & always wore a carnation in his lapel.



He was a colorful character who used to ride the city fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, & take entire orphanages to baseball games. And whenever the New York newspapers were on strike, he would even go on the radio & read the Sunday funnies to the kids.

Well, one bitterly cold night in January of 1935, Mayor LaGuardia turned up at the night court which served the poorest ward in the city. (X)



LaGuardia, a licensed attorney, dismissed the judge for the evening & took over the bench himself. Within a few moments a tattered old woman was brought before him ... charged with stealing a loaf of bread.

She told LaGuardia that her daughter, whose husband had just left her, was sick. And now her 2 grandchildren were starving.

None of that mattered to the shopkeeper, who refused to drop the charges. "It's a bad neighborhood, your Honor," he told the Mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach the others around here a lesson."

LaGuardia sighed, & turned to the woman ...

"I've got to punish you.

The law makes no exceptions. \$10 or 10 days in jail."

But even as he pronounced the sentence, the Mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill & tossed it into his hat saying ...

"Here's the \$10 which I now remit; & furthermore I'm going to fine everyone in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a town where a woman has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines & give them to the defendant."

The following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered elderly lady, who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren ... 50 cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery storeowner.

And when all was said & done, everyone in the courtroom: petty criminals, people with traffic violations, & New York City policemen ... each of whom had just paid 50 cents, gave the Mayor a standing ovation.

So, the obvious question is ... "Did the elderly lady in the story get what she deserved?" ...

Of course not! She had stolen a loaf of bread. Certainly, she had a "good" reason ... but nevertheless, stealing is stealing; & regardless of the motive, punishment would seem to be the order of the day.

This is kind of what we're talking about this morning.

What we see in that story is called grace.

Grace is when someone in superior power shows **kindness** or **mercy** to someone in a lesser position.

Mayor LaGuardia, rather than demanding punishment of the woman herself, paid the fine, & then further helped her cause with the collection of the 50 cent fines ... ultimately giving all the money to her. It was more than she deserved. It was grace. That's what our Gospel lesson this morning is all about. "It's All About Grace!"

Let's look at this parable of "The Workers In The Vineyard." Remember ...

a parable is an earthly story with a Heavenly meaning. It's something we can relate to that has a spiritual truth.

In this parable, Jesus tells us that the (X) Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who went out & hired workers for his vineyard.



Some he hired early in the morning, telling them he'd pay them the regular wage. (Hired workers were always paid at the end of each day.) Most people back then lived on the edge of poverty, a hand-to-mouth existence ... so, God's laws saw that they were taken care of.

"Do not rob or take advantage of anyone. Do not hold back the wages of someone you have hired, not even for one night." (Leviticus 19:13)

"Each day before sunset pay them for that day's work; they need the money & have counted on getting it. If you do not pay them, they will cry out against you to the LORD, & you will be guilty of sin." (Deuteronomy 24:15)

In any event, the man returned throughout the day & each time found more workers standing there.

And as he hired them, they were told that they'd be paid "a fair wage."

Okay, Jesus has set the scene for us, & we can all picture what's taking place.

It's now early evening. (X) The vineyard is filled with laborers, & the end of the workday whistle blows. The owner arrives & instructs the foreman to pay each of the workers.



He begins with the ones most recently hired ...
& he pays them a full day's wage.

That must have excited those who had been there since early morning. They thought that surely if the owner paid the later ones that much he obviously would compensate them even more for all their hard work.

But their excitement was short-lived.

In fact, they were pretty upset when they got the same amount for working all day as those who only been on the job for an hour. (X)



When the landowner heard them grumbling, he attempted to explain that he was not unfair at all. He gave them what they had agreed upon. It was his money & he could be generous ... if that's what he chose to do.

Okay, the parable itself is clear enough ... but that doesn't mean it's without difficulty. The most obvious concern is that we have a businessman who pays people who work only one hour the same wage he pays those who work all day. We may argue, as he does, that the pay for the full day's work is fair. And while that may be true ... what businessperson operates that way? It's irrational.

It's sure to produce labor problems & hard feelings. And my guess is, the next time the man went out to hire some laborers, many wouldn't be interested in going to work until the last hour of the day.

But there's an additional difficulty ... the payment to the workers seems unjust. We may be a little reluctant to acknowledge that, knowing that the owner (X) of the vineyard is God ... & God's always just, (The Psalms 18:30), no matter how it may appear.



But still the procedure seems like a raw deal to those initial workers. Why should those who were hired later be paid the same as those who were hired at the start of the day?

Why shouldn't those who worked longer be paid more?

Some have attempted to interpret this parable so as to eliminate those difficulties. They've suggested that those who began early didn't work real hard.

They took long coffee/chai breaks.

They took an extended lunch hour.

And those who were there for a shorter time worked harder. They accomplished as much in their 1-3-6-9 hours as the early workers did in 12 hours.

It was a simple case of = pay for = work.

Unfortunately, there's nothing in Scripture to suggest that this is the way to interpret this parable.

If nothing else, Jesus' concluding words stress the generosity of the owner & not his evaluation of the quality or quantity of the work that had been done.

Others have suggested that the size of the coins were different.

Still others have attempted to make the parable teach that there are no rewards in Heaven; that it doesn't matter how much or how little we do for Jesus in our life here on earth. But again, that runs contrary to the numerous passages which do teach that there will be rewards in Heaven based on our works. (1 Corinthians 3:10)

So, how are we to understand this parable? ... At the very least it's a story intended to teach us about the grace of God in salvation. Peter wanted to know what he & the others would get for their discipleship, which they considered to be a major contribution on their part.

But when Jesus answered as He did, He was teaching that although the disciples would receive "rewards" for their service, anything they were given would be a "gift" flowing from the grace of God only.

God owes us **nothing** ... not even a chance to hear & respond to the Gospel. Now most people assume that He does, which is why even "church-folk" think so little of grace in our day. "Amazing Grace" by John Newton used to be one of the most popular sacred songs.

But today "amazing grace" has become "boring grace" for many people. It's boring because we don't think of ourselves as sinners ... at least not "wretched" sinners ... plus the fact that we assume that God owes us something anyway. We're kind, generous, forgiving.

Why shouldn't God be? ...

What Jesus is telling us is that God is not like human beings (Numbers 23:19) & doesn't operate in line with our assumptions. Everything in God's Kingdom is based on grace, which is why "many who now are 1st will be last, & many who now are last will be 1st."

Nothing in the immediate context requires us to see anything more in this parable than that. The workers that came at the end of the day didn't get what they deserved ... they got mercy.

And mercy is at the heart of grace.

So, the landowner is God, the workers are us, & the pay is the Kingdom of Heaven, which means, the 1st thing we learn here is that grace is **received** ... not **deserved**.

Now, all of us, as people of faith, should recognize that we don't deserve God's grace. Nothing that we can do can ever put us in a position of deserving God's grace. All we can do is receive God's gift freely. (Romans 5:15)

David Seamands ends his book (X)
"Healing Grace" with this story:



For more than 600 years the Hapsburgs exercised political power in Europe. When Emperor Franz-Josef I (X) of Austria died in 1916, his was the last of the extravagant imperial funerals.



A processional of dignitaries & elegantly dressed court personages escorted the casket, draped in the black & gold imperial colors.

To the accompaniment of a military band's processional & by the light of torches, the somber group descended the stairs of the Capuchin Monastery in Vienna.

At the bottom was a great iron door leading to the Hapsburg family crypt. (X)



Behind the door was the Cardinal-Archbishop of Vienna.

The officer in charge followed the prescribed ceremony, established centuries before. "Open!" he cried. "Who goes there?" responded the Cardinal. "We bear the remains of his Imperial & Apostolic Majesty, Franz-Josef I, by the grace of God Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Defender of the faith." The officer continued to list the Emperor's 37 titles.

"We know him not," replied the Cardinal.

"Who goes there?" The officer spoke again, this time using a much abbreviated & less ostentatious title reserved for times of expediency.

"We know him not," the Cardinal said again.

"Who goes there?" The officer tried a 3rd time, stripping the Emperor of all but the humblest of titles.

"We bear the body of Franz-Josef, our brother, a sinner like us all!" At that the doors swung open, & Franz-Josef was admitted.

No matter who we are, or what titles we have, or even how much we have ... none of that can open the way to God's grace. (X)

Grace is given freely. What's left for us is to humbly receive that grace.



Grace is received ... not deserved.

2^{ndly}, God's grace is about **mercy** ... not about **fairness**.

What would have been fair would be to pay the later workers less than the daily wage. Or pay those who had worked all day more than the daily wage.

Now that would have been fair.

When we speak about grace, it's about something different than fairness. It's about mercy. God loves us, & mercifully gives us more than we deserve.

You know, when we hear this parable & think spiritually, most of us immediately identify with those who went to work early in the morning. "Hey, I've been serving the Lord faithfully most of my life. I haven't missed working at CORNFEST for 18 years. Look at all the money I've put in the offering plate. These other guys haven't done any of that ... & now they're getting the same reward as me? It's just not fair."



(X) God says, "I know ... it's grace ... & it's been given also to you."

So, we need to learn:

- Don't be jealous with what God has given to another person
- Be happy with what God has given you - stop comparing yourself to others
- The kingdom of heaven is not about fairness but about God's grace
- God's grace is for the **last** ... as well as the **1st**

Today & everyday God wants a relationship with everyone, (2 Peter 3:9), from those hired 1st thing in the morning to those that only managed to put in an hour at the end of the day. (Luke 23:43) That's what grace is about.

Philip Yancy tells the story about a young girl who grew up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, MI. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, & the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, & she seethes inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, & that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the Tigers play.

Because newspapers in Traverse City report in lurid detail the gangs, the drugs, & the violence in downtown Detroit, she concludes that it is probably the last place here parents will look for her.

CA, maybe; or FL, but not Detroit.

Her 2nd day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides:

her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, 2 months, a year. The man with the big car - she calls him "Boss" - teaches her a few things that men like. Since she's underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse, & orders room service whenever she wants.

Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring & provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline "Have you seen this child?" But by now she has blond hair, & with all the makeup & body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child.

Besides, most of her friends are runaways,
& nobody squeals in Detroit.

After a year the 1st shallow signs of illness appear, & it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean, & before she knows it she's out on the street without a penny to her name. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. "Sleeping" is the wrong word - a teenage girl at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard.

Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold & frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty & she's hungry. Something jolts a memory & a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows & rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

God, why did I leave, she says to herself, & pain stabs at her heart. My dog back home eats better than I do now. She's sobbing, & knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

3 straight phone calls, 3 straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the 1st 2 times. But the 3rd time she says, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, & it'll get there about midnight tomorrow.

If you're not there,
well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about 7 hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit & Traverse City, & during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town & miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back & forth between those worries & the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" She says the words over & over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them.

She hasn't apologized to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with lights on since Bay City. Tiny snowflakes hit the pavement rubbed worn by 1,000's of tires, & the asphalt steams. She's forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road & the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard.

A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. Oh, God.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "15 minutes, folks. That's all we have here."

15 minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smooths her hair, & licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips, & wonders if her parents will notice.

If they're there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the 1,000 scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-&-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, MI, stands a group of 40 brothers & sisters & great-aunts & uncles & cousins & a grandmother & a great-grandmother to boot. They're all wearing goofy party hats & blowing noise-makers, & taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome Home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury & begins the memorized speech,

"Dad, I'm sorry. I know ..."

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

My dear friends, that girl is you & me, & our Heavenly Father has a "welcome home" banquet is waiting for us in Heaven ... "It's All About Grace".

MARANA THA

"The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the regular wage, a silver coin a day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. He went out again to the marketplace at nine o'clock and saw some men standing there doing nothing, so he told them, 'You also go and work in the vineyard, and I will pay you a fair wage.' So they went. Then at twelve o'clock and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. It was nearly five o'clock when he went to the marketplace and saw some other men still standing there. 'Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?' he asked them. 'No one hired us,' they answered. 'Well, then, you go and work in the vineyard,' he told them. When evening came, the owner told his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who were hired first.' The men who had begun to work at five o'clock were paid a silver coin each. So when the men who were the first to be hired came to be paid, they thought they would get more; but they too were given a silver coin each. They took their money and started grumbling against the employer. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'while we put up with a whole day's work in the hot sun - yet you paid them the same as you paid us!' 'Listen, friend,' the owner answered one of them, 'I have not cheated you. After all, you agreed to do a day's work for one silver coin. Now take your pay and go home. I want to give this man who was hired last as much as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?'" And Jesus concluded, "So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last." (Matthew 20:1-16)

_____ is when someone in superior power shows _____ or _____ to someone in a lesser position

God owes us _____

Grace is _____ ... not _____

God's grace is about _____ ... not about _____

God's grace is for the _____ ... as well as the _____



*For by grace you have been saved through
faith, and that not of yourselves,
it is the gift of God, not
as a result of works,
so that no one
may boast*

Ephesians 2:8-9