

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew chapter 20, as we continue making our way through this Gospel together. Do you remember the first time you drove a car? By yourself? Hopefully after you got your license. I do! It's one of my more vivid memories from my teenage years. I had just turned 16. My mom and I went to the DMV in Lombard to get my license. And when we got home, I asked if I could take the car on a quick drive. I didn't have anywhere in particular to go, so I drove to Walgreens, and stopped by my friend Charlie's house to say hey for a minute before heading home.

Now, why do I remember that so well? Because it was so exciting! The sense of freedom and opportunity that came with driving was amazing! And yet, like so many new and wonderful experiences, give it enough time and enough repetition, and it loses its luster. I don't get in my car anymore, amazed at the ability to drive. And that's fine. But there are other things in life—especially things in the Christian life—that begin as new and wonderful experiences, only to lose their luster over time, and it's not fine, because they are always worthy of our wonder. One of those things is grace.

Do you remember the first time you realized the truth about God's grace? I do. It's also one of my most vivid memories from my teenage years. I was still 16, and I was engaging in some serious rebellion against the Lord, when suddenly, the reality of what I was doing hit me. I saw the depths of my sin, and I knew I deserved condemnation, but in Christ, God met me with grace instead. Grace to pardon and cleanse. Grace to empower and change. Amazing grace. I will never forget that day. And I know many of you can look back and remember moments when God's grace flooded into your life and filled up your heart. And you were overwhelmed with awe and gratitude and praise. But over time, though we may not want to admit it, even something as astonishing as God's grace can become overly familiar. And this is a real danger.

Sinclair Ferguson writes, "A chief reason for the weakness of the Christian church in the West, for the poverty of our witness and any lack of vitality in our worship, probably lies here: we sing about 'amazing grace' and speak of 'amazing grace,' but far too often it has ceased to amaze us. Sadly, we might more truthfully sing of 'accustomed grace.' We have lost the joy and energy that are experienced when grace seems truly amazing."¹

This morning, my prayer is that we might retrieve some of that joy and energy, or find it for the very first time, as we see what Jesus has to say about God's amazing grace. That's what this parable is all about. Jesus wants to help his disciples see—and he wants to help us see—the grace of God displayed in: His initiative, his compassion, and his generosity. Let's walk through this story and take those themes one at a time. First, I want you to see what this story teaches us about...

1. God's Initiative

Let's pick it up in Matthew 20, verse 1. Jesus tells his disciples, *For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard* (Matthew 20:1).

When Jesus speaks about the kingdom of heaven, he's not speaking about a place, as much as he's speaking about a power. The kingdom of heaven is the rule and reign of God, making its way into the world. So, when Jesus says, "the kingdom of heaven is like..." he is effectively saying, "God is like..." And in this case, he says, God is like a master of a house who went out

¹ Ferguson, *By Grace Alone*, xiv.

early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. A vineyard was not only a common physical reality in 1st century Israel, it was also a common spiritual picture used in God's Word to describe God's people. For example, in Isaiah chapter 5, the prophet describes Israel as a vineyard, owned and operated by God himself. And now Jesus is picking up on that same imagery.

So, when he talks about a master hiring laborers for his vineyard, it is a picture of God bringing people into his kingdom, and here's what we learn right out of the gate: People enter God's kingdom because of God's initiative. Notice verse 1 does not say that these laborers came knocking on the vineyard gate, asking the master for a job. It says, the master went out to find them. And as the parable continues, we'll see the same thing happen four more times. The master goes out, looking for workers, and bringing them into his vineyard. It all happens because of his initiative. And that's how grace works. We do not receive God's grace because of our initiative, because we seek him and we find him. No in his grace, God seeks and finds us. Think about the words we sing in that famous hymn...

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

Who did the saving? Who did the finding? According to that song? God! By his amazing grace. And it's been this way from the very beginning. When Adam and Eve sinned, who took the initiative to bring about restoration? God! He came and found them as they hid in the garden. He made clothes to cover them in their shame, and he promised that he would crush the serpent who had led them astray. When the inhabitants of earth had scattered around the planet and plunged into all kinds of idolatry, who took the initiative to set apart a people for himself? God! He called Abram, a pagan from the land of the Chaldeans, and told him, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

And when Abram's people had become a great nation, but groaned in agony under the burden of slavery in Egypt, who took the initiative to set them free? God! He delivered them from Pharaoh's hand and brought them to the promised land. And when they rebelled and were sent away into exile, who took the initiative to bring them back? God! Listen to God's word through the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 34, God says...

Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered... And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak. (Ezekiel 34:11-16).

And when we were lost in our sin? Who took the initiative to rescue us? God! He sent his Son. In Luke 19:10 Jesus says, *the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*

Last year, I read the story of a British Ship called *The Wager*, which crashed on an island near Cape Horn in 1741. Those who survived made it by living off the land for years, before finally risking it all to paddle to the mainland of South America. It's a remarkable tale of human resiliency. And yet, sometimes people think this way about salvation. Yes, they'll say, humans have crashed into sin and landed far from God. So, we need to find our way back, and with

enough resolve and effort, we just might make it. But this is not how the Bible speaks about salvation. Salvation always comes at God's initiative. And that's what makes it grace.

So, do you want to be freshly amazed by the grace of God? Remember, when you were lost in your sin and far from God, he took the initiative to seek you out and bring you back. You never would have gotten to him on your own. And let this also remind you of...

2. God's Compassion

Remember, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Then, verse 2 says, *After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard* (Matthew 20:2).

A denarius was about a day's wage in the first century. Which means, the master and these laborers have come to a fair agreement for a day's work. Then, the master sends them into the field, and they begin to tend to the vines. A few hours pass, and then Jesus says in verses 3-5: *And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.'* So they went (Matthew 20:3-5).

This master hired the first group of laborers "early in the morning," probably around 6 a.m. Then, around 9 a.m. (known as "the third hour" of the day), he goes out and finds more workers. They're standing idle in the marketplace, he hires them promising to pay them fairly, and they go get to work. Then, verse 5 continues, *Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same* (Matthew 20:5).

So, at noon, and then at 3 p.m., the master goes back to the market and hires more workers. Why? Were the first two groups insufficient for the task? No, this master has a different purpose, which becomes clear in verses 6-7. Jesus says, *And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too'* (Matthew 20:6-7). The eleventh hour is 5 p.m. It's nearly quitting time, but this master has gone out once again to find workers. He sees these guys, who have been standing around idle all day. And notice why... "Because" they said, "no one has hired us."

They're not lazy! They're unemployed. And by 5 p.m., they surely would have thought they weren't getting any work that day. Which was a big deal, because in the 1st century, a man would need about 4 days of wages each week to support a modest family. With only 6 workdays in the week, missing any day put the family at risk! So, you can imagine these men, about to head home to their families empty handed, and the burden they would have felt. If you've ever been unemployed, you know the stress this can cause. For some, it's not just stress, it's even a sense of shame, because you long to provide for your family. I'm not sure anyone's captured this feeling better than John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*. At one point in that book, which tells the story of many people desperate to earn a day's wage, Steinbeck writes, "Muscles aching to work, minds aching to create—this is man."

We all know there are lazy people in this world. But we also know there are plenty of people aching to earn an honest wage. And they're not lazy at all, they're just struggling to find an opportunity. That's a real source of pain. And the master of this vineyard knows it, so he shows these men compassion. Sure, it's already 5 p.m., it is nearly quitting time, but he tells them, "You go into the vineyard too." And Jesus is saying, "This is what the kingdom of heaven is

like... this is what God is like!" God does not look on human pain—of any kind—with indifference. He looks with compassion. We've seen this throughout Matthew in the character of Jesus. For example, in Matthew 9:36 we read this...

When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). And this compassion is his grace. We don't deserve it. Remember, we are a fallen race, harassed and helpless as a direct or indirect result of our rebellion against him. But he is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and mercy. His heart wells up with compassion for sinners and sufferers. And friend, you need to know, in your pain and in your shame, his heart wells up with compassion for you. This is his amazing grace. Grace that initiates, grace that is full of compassion, and grace that overflows with generosity.

Notice third...

3. God's Generosity

Five times, this master went out intentionally and compassionately seeking laborers for his vineyard. Now, the day is done and it's time to give the workers their wages. Watch what happens. Verses 8-9: *And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius (Matthew 20:8-9).*

Remember, a denarius is what someone would earn after a full day's work. These guys have only worked for an hour, but they are paid for a whole day! This is a strange business practice, but it is also wonderful generosity! Can you imagine their surprise and their delight? At 5 p.m. they thought they were going home empty-handed. Then, they were called to work and now they're paid far more than they deserve. Well, you can also imagine what the guys who started at 6 a.m. must be thinking. "This is great! If those guys who only worked an hour got a whole day's wage, we're getting overtime!" But that's not what happens.

Verses 10-12: *Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat' (Matthew 20:10-12).* We can understand their frustration. They've been out all day in that vineyard, digging, pruning, harvesting. And it's been a hot day with scorching heat! They're exhausted. Maybe dehydrated. Probably sunburnt. And they get the same thing that the eleventh-hour crew gets? How is that fair?!

Verse 13: *But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?' (Matthew 20:13).* It was their agreement. The master hasn't gone back on his word. He has kept his promise. But at the same time, he's been generous. So, he says in verses 14-15: *Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' (Matthew 20:14-15).*

Notice the master's emphasis on his own freedom. "The money is mine," he says. "I can do what I want with it. And I've chosen to give it away generously." "Does that make you upset?" And if we're honest, we might say, "It would make me upset!" But remember, Jesus is not offering best practices for vineyard owners here. And he's not saying, "If you have employees, this is the way to pay them." He is telling a parable about the kingdom of heaven. And people do

not enter the kingdom or enjoy the kingdom because they earn it. People enter the kingdom and enjoy the kingdom because of God's generosity! We were outside the kingdom, but he took the initiative and called us in. We were unworthy of the kingdom, harassed by suffering and helpless in our sin. But his heart welled up with compassion. And there is no amount of work or effort that could ever earn us God's blessing, but he pours it out richly and generously upon us.

And nowhere is that generosity more clearly displayed than in the self-giving of God's Son. Who laid down his life, and took it up again, that we might live with him. Mercifully, life in God's kingdom is not a wage we earn, it is a gift we receive. And there's one sure way to know if you've really received it: Can you rejoice when others receive it too? No matter how underserving they may be? Or will you, like these laborers, begrudge God's generosity?

Sinclair Ferguson says there is a clear sign "that our religion, even if we call it Christian, is not the real thing. We are not made happy by seeing the grace of God touch the lives of needy men and women."² But when you know that you have entered God's kingdom because of God's initiating, compassionate, generous grace to you, you will find your heart welling up with joy when you see his grace extend to others.

Conclusion

As we wrap up our time, look at verse 16. Jesus says, "*So the last will be first, and the first last.*"

What does that mean in the context of this passage? Well, there's a warning and there's an invitation. The warning is, if you think you're first, you might end up last. If you think you've earned your way into the kingdom, or that you're more deserving than others of the blessings of the kingdom, you're missing grace! You might be missing it entirely, and it's only a matter of time before your self-righteousness comes crashing down. Or, you might have slipped into an overfamiliarity with grace, forgetting just how amazing it is. Either way, remember how God initiated his work in your life, how you were lost and how he found you!

And remember his compassion toward you. He did not condemn you for your sin or crush you in your suffering. He forgave you. He upheld you. And he still forgives you! He still upholds you! He is full of generosity toward you, lavishing the riches of his kindness upon you in Christ every single day. Remember this and rejoice in this! Praise God for his amazing grace. That's the warning... don't miss grace.

And here's the promise: If you think you're last, you can be first. If you think you have no place in God's kingdom, that God would never want you as one of his own, think of these eleventh-hour laborers. They thought no one wanted them, that no one would hire them, but then this master came, and invited them in. And they were blessed! Not because they deserved it, but because this master was generous.

Friend, you don't have to stand outside Christ's kingdom anymore. He's calling you in! He's inviting you in! And he will bless you, not because you deserve it, but because he is generous. Trust in him. Serve him. And you will find amazing grace in him.

² Ferguson, *By Grace Alone*, 26.