

OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We come into Your presence this morning grateful that Your mercy has brought us here. You have been faithful in ways we have noticed and in ways we may never fully understand. You have carried us through another week, met us in our joys, and remained near in our burdens.

Quiet our minds and settle our hearts. Help us lay down the worries, comparisons, disappointments, and unfinished business we carried through the doors. Give us grace to be fully present—with You and with one another.

As we share our prayers and praises, teach us to rejoice with those who rejoice and to bear one another's burdens with compassion. Keep us from measuring Your goodness as though there might not be enough to go around. Remind us that another person's blessing does not diminish ours, and another person receiving mercy does not mean we have been forgotten.

Open our hearts to Your Word. Shape us through our worship. Make us a people who receive Your grace with gratitude and extend it with generosity.

May everything we say, sing, pray, and hear this morning make Jesus visible among us.

In the name of Christ, our Savior and Lord, we pray.

Amen.

ADVENT ANNOUNCEMENT: CARRY THE LIGHT

[SHOW SLIDE: CARRY THE LIGHT]

Our Advent Season Start Soon and Christmas may still feel far off, but this morning I want to give you a first glimpse of where we are going together during Advent.

Our Advent theme this year is **Carry the Light**. **[PAUSE — LOOK TOWARD SLIDE]**

Advent is more than a countdown to Christmas. It is a season in which longing becomes prayer, attention becomes obedience, and grace begins to take visible form among us.

We will begin by watching and longing for God to come. We will learn to recognize and receive the Light already among us. With Mary, we will be invited to offer God an embodied yes. Then, with the shepherds, we will carry Christ's good news into the night...

[EMPHASIZE]

**We will watch for the Light.
We will receive the grace already coming toward us.
We will say yes with Mary.
And we will carry Christ's good news into the night.**

Our Advent journey begins Sunday, November 29. Each day, we will also offer a short devotional by text containing Scripture, prayer, and one Positive Act of Holy Hospitality.

[POINT TOWARD QR CODE] You can scan the QR code on the screen to sign up for those daily texts. We will share the sign-up information again as Advent gets closer, so you do not have to remember everything today.

For now, simply remember the invitation:

Make room for the Light. Carry the Light into the night. [PAUSE]

More will be coming as we prepare for Advent together.

[LEAVE SLIDE UP FOR 10–15 SECONDS]

FALL FOR MARRIAGE ANNOUNCEMENT

[SHOW FALL FOR MARRIAGE SLIDE]

I want to ask our married couples to save an important date: **Saturday, October 31, from 10:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m.**

First Friends will host **Fall for Marriage**, a one-day marriage-coaching workshop built around a simple conviction: **marriage is worth tending.**

This day is for couples in every season. Maybe your marriage is strong and you want to keep investing in it. Maybe life has left you feeling a little disconnected, and you are not quite sure how to find your way back toward one another. Either way, this will be a practical and encouraging opportunity to take an intentional next step toward greater closeness and connection.

[PAUSE]

Please save the date, registration is online and consider inviting another couple to join you.

[LEAVE SLIDE UP FOR FIVE SECONDS]

Saturday, October 31, from 10:00 to 3:00—Fall for Marriage, here at First Friends.

SERMON MANUSCRIPT

Matthew 20:1–16, Jonah 3:10–4:11, Psalm 145:1–8, Philippians 1:21–30 [Slide 1]

Main Point: God's goodness is not a limited resource, and grace is not wages. [Slide 2]

Our Sunday Query: Can I receive God's grace deeply enough that I can rejoice when God gives it to someone I would have made wait? [Slide 3]

Heart-Exposing Question: Who am I still hoping God will give less to?

OPENING

It is remarkable how quickly we become accountants when grace is handed to someone else. We speak warmly about God's mercy when we need it. But when grace reaches someone whose story troubles us, something inside begins doing the math. We compare what they received with what we endured and wonder whether they waited long enough, suffered enough, or proved enough. Without saying it aloud, we begin to ask whether God's generosity toward them somehow makes his love for us worth less.

Jesus tells the parable of the workers in the vineyard because that question was already forming among his disciples (Matthew 20:1–16).

Just before our passage, a rich young man had walked away sorrowful because he could not release what he possessed (Matthew 19:16–28).

Peter then asked, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” (Matthew 19:27 NIV). His question was understandable. He and the others really had left boats, nets, homes, and familiar lives.

Yet beneath Peter's question was the beginning of a ledger: We left more. We arrived earlier. We carried a heavier cost. What will we receive?

Jesus tells them their faithfulness matters, but warns that many who are first will be last and the last first. Then comes **the vineyard parable**... Matthew 20:1–16. [Slide 4]

THE VINEYARD AND THE LEDGER, MATTHEW 20:1–16.

A landowner hired workers early in the morning for a denarius, then returned at nine, noon, three, and again near the end of the day. Some worked through the heat. Others barely had time to gather the tools before the day was done.

At evening the owner paid those hired last first, and they received a full day's wage. Imagine the calculations beginning among those who had worked since sunrise. A moment earlier the agreed wage had seemed fair. But after seeing what someone else received, the same wage suddenly felt insulting.

[Slide 5] **That is the quiet power of comparison.** Their blessing did not become smaller; comparison made it feel smaller. The owner had taken nothing from them. Their complaint began only when somebody else received generosity. They needed the late workers to receive less so their own work would feel more valuable.

The owner answered, “*Friend, I am not being unfair to you*” (Matthew 20:13 NIV). Then he asked the question that exposes the heart of the story: “*Are you envious because I am generous?*” (Matthew 20:15 NIV). Is my goodness offensive because it reached somebody else?

Justice and grace are not enemies here. The first workers received what was promised. Grace simply went beyond what was earned. The scandal is that the owner refused to let human worth be measured by the number of hours beside a person's name. [Slide 6]

WHEN ANOTHER PERSON’S MERCY FEELS UNFAIR

Jesus' story reaches the part of us that keeps score in families, churches, workplaces, and relationships:

- I served while they stayed away.
- I remained faithful while they wandered.
- I carried the responsibility while they made excuses.
- I forgave, waited, prayed, and showed up. Now they arrive late, and everyone celebrates.

Does any of that sound familiar?

There may be real pain beneath those thoughts. Grace does not pretend wounds never happened, and mercy does not erase wise boundaries. Jesus is not praising irresponsibility. He is exposing the moment when another person's mercy begins to feel like our injury.

- Accountability asks whether truth and repair are needed.
- Resentment needs the other person kept beneath us so we can feel secure above them.

JONAH 3:10–4:11 [SLIDE 7]

Jonah shows us the same struggle. God sent him to Nineveh, an enemy city. Jonah preached judgment, the people repented, and God showed compassion. That should have been the triumph of a prophet's ministry. Instead, Jonah became angry. He had not wanted Nineveh merely corrected; he wanted Nineveh punished.

God asked, “*Is it right for you to be angry?*” (Jonah 4:4 NIV). This is part of the story I never really paid attention to until this week... Jonah sat outside that city, the place where a huge miracle happened... He sat outside that city and pouted... And God gave him a plant for shade, and Jonah was happy. And then the plant died. Jonah could grieve a plant that served his comfort while feeling little compassion for a city full of people. His heart had room for mercy when mercy sheltered him, but not when mercy sheltered his enemies.

Jonah ends with God's question hanging in the air: “And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh...?” (Jonah 4:11 NIV). Matthew leaves us with a similar question:

- May God be good to people **we would have made wait?**
- May God restore someone **whose repentance comes later than we think it should?**
- May God welcome them **without first asking our permission...**?

GRACE REVEALS WHERE WE SEEK OUR WORTH [SLIDE 8]

When the late workers became equal recipients of the owner's generosity, the early workers felt diminished. Their identity depended on comparison.

The same temptation enters faith. We begin with empty hands, but over time faithfulness can become leverage: how long we served, how much we gave, how often we stayed, how much burden we carried. Those acts matter. But they cannot place God in our debt or make another person less worthy of mercy.

Sometimes this sounds almost virtuous: “I learned it the hard way.” And many of us did. But that sentence can quietly become, “So should you.” I had to wait, so you should wait. I had to struggle, so you should struggle.

Sanctifying grace teaches a freer response: I learned it the hard way, and if God can spare you some of that pain, reach you sooner, or bring you home before you wander as far as I did—praise God. Your easier road does not erase what God formed in me on mine.

PSALM 145:1–8 [SLIDE 9]

Psalm 145 declares that the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. God's compassion is not a small supply to be divided carefully among the deserving.

Grace becomes more than a doctrine when Christ forms us into people who can rejoice when grace reaches somebody else.

THE SANCTIFYING WORK OF GRACE [SLIDE 10]

This is where the sanctifying work of grace comes together: Sanctifying grace teaches me to stop needing someone else to receive less in order for me to know that I am loved. That sounds simple until grace reaches someone I would have made wait.

But grace is not diminished when it is given away. Another person's blessing does not reduce mine. Another person's forgiveness does not threaten my place. Another person being welcomed does not mean I have been forgotten. The first workers lost nothing except the privilege of feeling superior.

The deeper work of holiness is allowing grace to reshape what still measures, compares, ranks, and keeps score. Grace frees me from needing another person to stand lower so I can feel secure. It frees me from needing their story to validate mine.

[Slide 11] Paul tells the Philippians, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27 NIV). Grace forms faithful people—but it changes why we are faithful. We do not labor in the vineyard to force the owner to love us. We labor because he came looking for us, called us, and gave us a place in what he is doing.

We are here because he came into the marketplace and called our name.

THE GOSPEL GIVES US EMPTY HANDS [SLIDE 12]

The gospel brings us all to the same place: empty hands before Jesus Christ.

The person who has followed Christ for seventy years and the person who turns toward him today both live by mercy.

Mature faith may bear deep fruit, tested character, and a lifetime of obedience. That fruit is precious. But it remains the fruit of grace, not proof that grace has become wages.

And Jesus himself stands at the center of the story.

He is speaking on the road toward Jerusalem, where human beings will measure him, rank him, reject him, and place him on a cross. The One who deserved every honor will take the place of the last and give himself for people who cannot earn their way home. The same mercy that welcomes the late worker is the mercy that welcomes us.

When I remember whose I am, I no longer need to ask whether I received more than someone else. I belong to Jesus. I have been called into his vineyard. From that secure place, I can celebrate when the lost are found, the wandering return, and mercy reaches someone I never expected to see standing beside me.

INVITATION TO REFLECTION [SLIDE 13]

So, I want to leave us with a question:

Whose experience of God's goodness is hardest for me to celebrate? Perhaps a name came to mind. Do not push it away. Hold that person before Christ. Is there hurt that needs truth? A boundary that needs wisdom? Grief that needs tenderness? Or a ledger that grace is asking you to release?

The invitation is not to pretend. Let Jesus meet us beneath the comparison. He knows the hours we have worked and the heat we have carried. He does not dismiss our faithfulness, but he will not let our faithfulness become a wall against another person's mercy.

The Owner of the vineyard is generous, and the invitation is still going out. Some come early and some late, but everyone who comes discovers that the kingdom rests on God's goodness rather than our calculations of human worth.

[Slide 14] As we enter open worship, let us place our ledgers before Christ. Who am I still hoping God will give less to? What is it in me that needs them to receive less? Then wait long enough for grace to speak a deeper truth: You are loved. You belong to me. You do not need anyone else to receive less. And from that secure place: Can I receive God's grace deeply enough that I can rejoice when God gives it to someone I would have made wait?

BENEDICTION

Friends, go now in the grace of God.

Receive mercy without keeping score.

Rejoice when grace reaches someone you would have made wait.

Remember that another person's blessing does not diminish yours, and another person's welcome does not mean you have been forgotten.

May the generosity of the Father free your heart,
may the mercy of Jesus shape your life,
and may the Holy Spirit make Christ visible through you.

Go in peace—and give freely what you have freely received.

Amen.