



# Grace

JESUS OFFERS GRACE TO ALL PEOPLE.

## **MATTHEW 20:1-16**

Everybody wants to be treated fairly. We become resentful when we perceive we have not received equal treatment. “Unfair,” we cry as we demand justice. “He got a bigger piece of cake!” “Her bonus was larger than mine, and I did most of the work.” We always want what we think we deserve. Yet life often is unfair. Life never levels the playing field for all those participating. Some are treated better, others are pushed down, but all suffer under the inequalities of life.

 **Why do you think we perceive life as being continually unfair?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **MATTHEW 20:1-34**

The parable in Matthew 20:1-16 is the capstone of the larger section of teaching found in 19:16–20:16. This sequence of events and teachings began with the inquiry of the rich young ruler. It continued with a discussion between Jesus and the disciples concerning the rewards of following Jesus. To illustrate the truths concerning eternal life and eternal rewards, Jesus shared the parable that begins chapter 20. What is profound about this section is the reversal of all that might be expected from a human perspective. The rich young ruler expected to hear steps he could take to gain eternal life. The people of Jesus's day expected the rich would be treated differently than the poor. The disciples were surprised at Jesus's teaching about the impossibility of the rich entering the kingdom of heaven. Jesus turned all these expectations on their ear. God's ways are not man's way. Eternal life is not earned by doing, riches are not a sign of God's favor, and they don't buy entrance into the kingdom of God. In this parable, Jesus taught His followers that God's graciousness toward humanity is based on His love and not on human effort.

Following the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, Jesus again spoke to the disciples about His coming death. This is the third time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus spoke explicitly about the crucifixion (see also 16:21; 17:22-23).

Jesus continually spoke of greatness in the kingdom of God (for example, see Matt. 18:1-4). Even so, the rivalry among the disciples continued. One glaring example of this is found in 20:20-28, where James and John enlisted the help of their mother to petition Jesus to elevate the rank of her two sons over the other disciples. Such open jockeying for position must have brought Jesus much grief.



**Read Matthew 20:1-16 in your Bible and put yourself in the story. How would you react had you been among those who were hired at the first hour?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## WORKERS HIRED (MATT. 20:1-7)

<sup>1</sup> “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the workers on one denarius, he sent them into his vineyard for the day. <sup>3</sup> When he went out about nine in the morning, he saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup> He said to them, ‘You also go into my vineyard, and I’ll give you whatever is right.’ So off they went. <sup>5</sup> About noon and about three, he went out again and did the same thing. <sup>6</sup> Then about five he went and found others standing around and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?’ <sup>7</sup> ‘Because no one hired us,’ they said to him. ‘You also go into my vineyard,’ he told them.”

### VERSES 1-7

This parable by Jesus is like other parables about the rule and reign of God. The *kingdom of heaven* is the sovereign rule of God over all things. The kingdom has a ruler—God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The kingdom also has subjects—those who have entered a relationship with God through faith in Jesus. Once again, Jesus was explaining what life in the kingdom is like, using a short story with a central theme.

The *landowner* in this parable is representative of God Himself. Because most landowners would not have enough household help to prepare the soil, prune the vines, or harvest the crops, hiring more laborers was a common practice. This landowner arose *early in the morning* to hire the *workers* needed to work the vineyard. Early morning would be around 6 a.m.

By beginning this parable with the word *for*, Jesus was linking this story back to Matthew 19:30 and the discussion of the rewards of the disciple. This parable is illustrating the statement that “many who are first will be last, and the last first.” The parable is book-ended by that statement (19:30; 20:16).

An agreement was reached with these laborers for *one denarius*. This was an equitable amount for a full day’s wage. Having agreed to the wages, these laborers were sent into the vineyard.

The landowner was back at the *marketplace* around *nine* o’clock. The *marketplace* was the center of the village and a

gathering place for day laborers. These would be men who did not have regular employment. They were dependent on finding work each day so they could feed their families. Unless they were hired, their family could go hungry the next day. The phrase **doing nothing** doesn't imply they were lazy but just unemployed at the moment. They were unskilled day laborers waiting to be hired for the day.

The landowner enlisted these men to work in his vineyard as well and told them, **I'll give you whatever is right**. The implication was that they would receive pay for about nine hours of work, from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Again, the landowner hired more day laborers around **noon** and around **three**. To this point, it became obvious the landowner was filled with compassion for these laborers who desperately needed to work each day. It wasn't so much that more workers were required. Instead, this was a benevolent landowner giving to these workers what they desperately needed. The text says he **did the same thing**—that is, he promised to give them *whatever is right*. Once again, these workers expected to be paid partially for the hours worked.

Finally, the landowner went back to the marketplace around **five** o'clock, where he discovered still more men **standing around** hoping to be hired. Perhaps by now they had almost given up for the day since no one had hired them. The benevolent landowner asked them, **Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?** Perhaps they had arrived late or were in an area of the marketplace where those hiring had not observed them. They could have been the least desirable of workers and had been passed over. Once again, the landowner sent them into the vineyard to work the final hour of the day. No doubt they realistically expected to earn an hour's wage.

Note again, the agreed-on wage at the beginning of the day was one denarius. Each group of workers hired assumed that they would receive a portion of a denarius for the time they worked.



**What is the significance of the detail about the landowner and workers agreeing on the amount of pay?**

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## EQUALLY PAID (MATT. 20:8-12)

<sup>8</sup> “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman, ‘Call the workers and give them their pay, starting with the last and ending with the first.’ <sup>9</sup> When those who were hired about five came, they each received one denarius. <sup>10</sup> So when the first ones came, they assumed they would get more, but they also received a denarius each. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they began to complain to the landowner: <sup>12</sup> ‘These last men put in one hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day’s work and the burning heat.’”

### VERSE 8

The law specified that day laborers were to be paid at the end of each day they worked (Deut. 24:15). Their family would depend on that pay for daily expenses. What is interesting is the order of payment. The landowner directed the *foreman* to start with the last of those hired and end with the first group of laborers.

As far as the foreman and laborers were concerned, the order didn’t matter, as long as each laborer received what was coming to them. For the landowner (and for the intent of Jesus’s parable) the order did matter. This rhetorical device of reversing the order set up the amazing contrast of treatment of each group. The reversal of order served as a clue that the hearers were in for a surprise ending. This reversal is the point where the parable connected to Jesus’s statement in Matthew 19:30 (and 20:16) that the first shall be last and the last first.

***He doesn’t give us what we deserve!***

### VERSES 9-12

All the laborers, regardless of when they were hired, ***received one denarius***. Those who were hired last received a full denarius—twelve times what they were expecting! Can you imagine the shock experienced by Jesus’s followers as He told this parable? They reacted probably as we do—that’s unfair! There is a tremendous truth here about God the Father. He doesn’t give us what we deserve!

Obviously, the payment made to those hired at the five o’clock hour was made in the presence of all those hired. Expectations arose for the others thinking that maybe they would

receive proportionately more than was contracted. They all eagerly awaited their bonus. But such was not the case.

No mention was made by Jesus of those hired at three, noon, or nine o'clock. Instead, He skipped to the climactic portion of the story and spoke of the initial hired laborers. ***They assumed*** they would receive more. They were expecting “fair” treatment, since they had worked more and should receive twelve times what the last group received. But they, too, received a denarius. Incensed, they demanded equality. They had worked more and believed they should be paid for their work. But the landowner paid each group as he had promised (see vv. 4,5,7). He did not renege on any agreement.

The laborers hired first began to ***complain*** as they recounted the details of their day-long labor in the sun. The others labored far less and in the cool of the evening. As these first-hires compared themselves to the others, their anger only deepened. Their whole perception was that they had been treated unjustly.

### ***The ways of God as pictured here are completely different from our ways.***

In compassion, the landowner had not given each man what he deserved but what they needed. For some, this would be over and above what they deserved. From a human standpoint, those first hired had the right to complain. From a divine standpoint, the ways of God as pictured here are completely different from our ways.



**How do people today question God's fairness?  
How do some view His just nature?**

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#### **KEY DOCTRINE:** *God*

God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections.  
(See Isaiah 40:25; Matthew 6:9.)

## GRACE EXEMPLIFIED (MATT. 20:13-16)

<sup>13</sup> “He replied to one of them, ‘**Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me on a denarius?**’ <sup>14</sup> **Take what’s yours and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you.** <sup>15</sup> **Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what is mine? Are you jealous because I’m generous?’** <sup>16</sup> **So the last will be first, and the first last.”**

### VERSES 13-15

One person emerged as the spokesman of this group of complainers. To him, the landowner spoke directly: ***Friend, I’m doing you no wrong.*** The term *friend* was not the word used for an intimate friendship but more of a business associate or a casual acquaintance. The landowner wanted them to know that they were out of line with their grumbling. He had fulfilled his word to them. They worked the number of hours to which they agreed, and he had paid them accordingly. There was nothing unfair about this. The landowner was not in their debt because they worked longer and harder than others.

**Take** your wage and be content, the landowner told them. There was no explanation needed. If the landowner chose to act out of compassion toward those last hired, that was his prerogative. The landowner had every ***right to do*** with his money and his vineyard as he chose. He was not acting unjustly; instead, the complainers were ***jealous*** of the payment others received. Their complaints didn’t arise from some vaulted sense of justice but from sheer greed and jealousy based on their faulty expectations.

As Jesus wrapped up this parable—and this section of teaching (19:16–20:16)—His desire was that the disciples realize that participation in the kingdom of heaven is not based on human effort, with those who work the hardest expecting the biggest reward in glory. Entrance into the kingdom is based on the benevolence of God, pictured here as the landowner. He deals with us according to grace.

***He deals with us according to grace.***

### VERSE 16

Jesus closed the parable with the same thought He began with in Matthew 19:30. While the word order is reversed, the intent is the same. All are equal before God and need His mercy and grace.

We should be grateful that God doesn't give us what we deserve. Instead, He deals with us in mercy and grace. What we all deserve is God's judgment. Instead, God gives us grace. Grace is simply God giving to us that which we don't deserve. We receive His unmerited favor and the gift of eternal life.

God's grace applies equally to all. There must never be a time when we cry out to God that He is being unfair. All of us stand condemned before God, and all of us desperately need His generous grace. Through this parable, Jesus taught that God's justice (fairness) and His generosity are not mutually exclusive. He is both.



**What does this parable teach us about comparing ourselves to others?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Use Bible study resources to gain more insight into a passage.*

Read articles on “vineyards” and “denarius” from a Bible dictionary. Record significant insights you gain as you consider what you read in light of this session's focal passages. In addition, consider what made the setting of Jesus's parable (hiring day-laborers to work in a vineyard) so effective for the audience He was addressing.

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- + We can trust God to always do what is right.
- + We should be thankful God gives us more than we deserve.
- + We should never cease to be amazed by God's grace.



**Discuss in your group what you believe to be the main lesson of Jesus's parable of the vineyard workers. How should it impact the way we evaluate ourselves in relation to others? How does it impact the way we relate to others?**

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**On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very often, how often do you feel you must earn God's love by doing right things and thinking right thoughts? Contemplate in prayer that God's love for us is based on what He has done for us and not what we do for Him.**

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**Memorize Matthew 20:16.**

*Prayer Needs*

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