

The grace of God is a wonderful thing. Think of all the wonderful things that we have by his grace. By grace we have been forgiven of our sins. By grace we have been made a child of God. By grace we are now an heir of heaven. By grace we have been promised everlasting life. Is it any wonder that we sing about God's grace, that we give thanks to him and praise him for that grace? Because there is nothing sweeter than the grace of God which he has shown to us through Jesus Christ his Son.

And yet, despite all of that, we still struggle to really understand what this grace of God is, because our idea of God's grace so often includes who we think deserves it, whether we mean to do it or not. Because even if we say that everybody deserves God's grace, that God shows his mercy to everyone, there's that little voice within us that is surprised or even upset when certain people are shown the grace of God. Of course I, naturally, deserve God's grace, even if I say that I don't, because God at least owes me the opportunity to come to faith. And there are other people who also deserve God's grace, people that I know and especially people that I like. But there's other people, whoever they may be, especially if it's someone I know in particular, that I think doesn't deserve the grace of God, either because of who they are or because of what they have done. And even if we don't mean to do it, these thoughts color our idea of what the grace of God truly is.

And that's why Jesus tells this parable in our Gospel reading for today from Matthew chapter 20. Because the disciples certainly thought this way. They certainly thought that some people deserve God's grace and that others didn't. Because in the previous chapter, in Matthew chapter 19, we meet some people who are bringing children to Jesus. They want him to pray for them, to pray with them, to lay his hands on them, to bless them. All very good, all very wholesome things to do. But the disciples rebuke them. They try to send them away. "Don't bother Jesus!" they said. "He doesn't have time for this!" they said. "He has more important things that he needs to be taking care of." It's not that they hated kids or something like that. It's just that they thought that Jesus had more important things to do. These children seemed so unimportant in the grand scheme of things. "Let someone else bless your children. Let someone else pray with them. Jesus simply doesn't have time." Their idea of the grace of God excluded these children. There were simply more important things to do.

But Jesus rebukes the disciples. He says in Matthew 19, verse 14: "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." And so the grace of God is given even to those who seem unimportant. To them belongs the kingdom of God.

And if the disciples were confused at this, they were even more confused about what came after. Because afterwards, a rich young man comes up to Jesus, and he says to him, verse 16: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Now, here was a man worth paying attention to! This was a man worth Jesus's time, because he has so much going for him, if you think about it. He's rich, which means that God has surely blessed him, and if nothing else, he could use all of that riches to help advance the Church. He could really help us out to carry out the mission of God! And he's a young man. He's interested in God at an age when his peers and his friends aren't. That certainly means something for him. And he's also serious about God. Why would he ask this question if he wasn't? This is a man worth paying attention to. This is a man, the disciples thought, who deserves the grace of God!

And yet Jesus sends him away. The young man was not willing to part with his possessions in order to follow after Jesus. The grace of God which had been shown to those children had not been shown to this rich young man. And so is it any wonder, then, that the disciples ask Jesus: "Who then can be saved?"

And to answer this question, Jesus tells this parable to show them and to show us what grace truly is. Because a master, Jesus says, goes out to hire workers for his vineyard. And this is already a very gracious action on this master's part, because he is hiring these day laborers to do the work of his vineyard, to go and to work for the day. And these men depended on finding work, because there was no such thing as unemployment benefits in those days. There was no such thing as insurance. There wasn't even such a thing as charity. If these men could not find work, they would not get paid. And if they didn't get paid, they wouldn't have any money to buy food, which means if they didn't find work, they would go hungry that night. And it's almost certain that these men had families that they needed to take care of. They needed to find work or that night was going to be very difficult for them. And so the master in his compassion hires all these workers for his vineyard. And it is gracious and compassionate because he didn't just need workers. If all he needed was some workers to work in his vineyard, all he would have to do is go out once, get the workers that he needed, and then he'd be good for the day. That's all he needed to do. But this master goes out no less than five times that day, five times, including once one hour before the end of the day, just as the day is almost coming to an end. He shows his goodness by hiring all these poor workers to work for him that day. And even when he asks the last workers why they've been standing idle all day, he's not rebuking them. He's simply asking them, why? "Because no one has hired us," they said. "No one has taken us to work for today." And I'm sure by that eleventh hour, these men were already convinced that they just wouldn't find work that day. That was it. They were just going to go hungry that night, like they had so many times before. But the master out of his grace sends even these workers into his vineyard, promising them a full day's wages, because no one would be going hungry tonight.

But the workers have a different idea of what grace is. Because when the first workers are paid the same as the last workers, they start to grumble. "Why do they get the same?" they said. "They've hardly done anything at all! We've been here for twelve hours today. We have worked in the hottest part of the day. We have done all of this labor, and these guys showed up at the last hour in the cool of the day when it was very nice out, and they've hardly done anything. Why should they get the same as us?" But the problem here really was envy. They were envious that these last workers were getting anything at all. Because envy is never satisfied unless someone has nothing. And so being envious, they said: "We should get the denarius, not them. We deserve this, not them. How could the master treat them in this way? How could he treat us in this way? Why should they receive grace at all? They haven't done anything to deserve it."

But before we start being too hard on these first workers, let us listen very carefully to that voice within us. We might want to say they, the first workers, don't deserve it because they wanted it by their works. But I, on the other hand, don't, and therefore I deserve it. We might want to say they wanted to turn away the last workers, but I would've shown them grace. We might want to say they were obviously envious, and therefore they don't deserve the grace of God. If we're honest, Christians, I think we may find ourselves sounding a lot more like those first workers that we may care to admit.

Because let's ask ourselves this question: are we really in a better spot than they are? To whom does the kingdom of God belong? What about the person with the troubled past, the one who has done a lot of bad things in their life? Maybe they've abused drugs. Maybe they've just had a hard time of it. Maybe they've run with the wrong people. Do they deserve to hear the Gospel? Is there grace for them? What about the person who fell away from faith for a long time, but has now come back? Do they deserve to hear the Gospel? Is there grace for them? What about the person that we just don't like, because they've hurt us in the past or done something against us that we just can't seem to forget? Do they deserve to hear the Gospel? Is there grace for them? To whom does the kingdom of God belong? Is it only to the respectable, to the upstanding, to the people that we like, those like the rich young man? We can be a lot more like the first workers than we think.

But grace is not about who deserves it, Christians, because none of us do. If grace is something that we deserve, it's no longer grace. Then it becomes something that I have earned, something that I have worked for. As Paul says in Romans 11: "If it is by grace, then it is no longer on the basis of works. Otherwise, grace would no longer be grace." God does not owe you anything. God doesn't owe any of us anything. We all deserve to have nothing because of who we are. And yet he shows us his grace through his Son. Just as that master didn't need to hire those workers. He would've been just fine going out once that day to get the workers that he needed. And yet he went out again and again to make sure that all could find work that day, to make sure that no one would be going hungry that night. And in the same way, Christians, God calls those who do not deserve it, giving us his Son in order to forgive us our sins. His grace comes from his goodness. He is good because he chooses to give to each one of us the same grace in Jesus Christ.

So may we not begrudge his generosity! May our eye not be evil because he is good. May we realize that this grace which he has shown to us is not something that we have deserved, but it is something that he has given to us anyway because of Jesus. And may we also receive those whom the Lord has received. May we rejoice in the salvation of one more sinner called to the same grace, no matter who they may be. Because we are all here, Christians, by the same wonderful, undeserved grace of God alone.

Let us pray. Gracious God, who in your great love for sinners sent your only-begotten Son to die for us, give to us a lively sense of your grace so that we may not be cold in our love toward others. As you have shown grace to us in making us your own, teach us how to show that same grace toward others, so that we may love you as you have first loved us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.