

Sermon on Matthew 20 v 1 to 16

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Soon after they married my parents had their first child, a girl, and within a few years two boys came along of whom I am the younger one. Around nine months later, my mother became pregnant again hoping to make the score two-all by having another daughter.

In the days before scans, the pregnancy went well until, with just a few weeks to go, worried about how big she had become, my mother went to see her GP. Later that day, she rang my father at work, “Roy, something terrible has happened,” she told him. She had discovered she was having twins and a few months later my younger brothers were born.

There are distinct advantages to being in a family that contains four boys – you have an instant two-a-side football game, or you can play tennis doubles at a moment’s notice - but there are also disadvantages. We were highly competitive and became agitated if one of us perceived that another was being given some small advantage.

Most of the arguments concerned food. We were always hungry and at mealtimes we examined each other’s plates

to see who had been given the biggest helping. My mother came to dread the words, "it's not fair." During my years as a secondary Headteacher I was regularly called on to decide if something was fair. Aggrieved pupils would come to see me if a whole class had been given a detention for misbehaviour, "It's not fair," they would say. "Most of us were not mucking about." I took charge of the lunch queue most days and stopped older pupils pushing in. "It's not fair," I would tell them. "The others have waited patiently in line."

Fairness seems to be bred into us at birth and so when we hear the parable Jesus tells in Mathew 20, our instinctive reaction is to say, "That's not fair!"

A landowner hires workers early in the morning and agrees to pay them a denarius, the daily rate for work back then. He returns to the marketplace at nine, noon, three, and finally five o'clock, bringing more workers into the vineyard throughout the day. When he asks the last group why they have been standing there all day, they answer, "Because no one has hired us."

That is all we are told. They do not say they overslept. They do not say they were unwilling to work. Whatever else we might imagine about them, Jesus gives us people who are still waiting because no one has hired them.

At the end of the day, the landowner pays the last workers first. They receive a denarius. The first workers see this, do a quick calculation, and expect more. Of course they do. If one hour gets you that much, surely a whole day gets you something better.

But they receive the same amount. They grumble that the others worked only an hour, while they endured the whole day and its scorching heat. Then comes the line in verse 20 that, for me, opens up the parable: “You have made them equal to us” (20:12). They might as well have said, ‘That’s not fair.’

Jesus’ parables were designed to challenge our preconceptions, to make us think, and this one is no different. It ends with the words, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” What we think of as fair will be turned on its head.

So let me draw three lessons from the words recorded in Matthew 20 – three Gs. Firstly, the parable tells us something about the **grace** of God. Grace is often defined as the underserved love of God, in other words, it’s not fair.

In our world, fairness normally means equal pay for equal work. But in God’s kingdom, the measure is not hours worked — it is grace given.

The story goes that a man dies and meets Peter at the pearly gates of heaven. Peter says to this man, you need three hundred points to enter this place. What good have you done in your life? Well, he answers, I was a faithful husband and father. Good, that is worth three points. I attended church as often as I could and usually gave a tithe of my income. Good, that is worth another three points.

What else? Well, I worked hard and tried to treat the people I met with respect. Oh, good, you get another two points. You only need two hundred and ninety-two more. What?! The man says. But that's impossible! It'll only be by the grace of God that anyone earns that many points! Peter says, "Yes!" and immediately opens the pearly gates to let him enter the kingdom of heaven.

Pastor and theologian Tim Keller once summed up the gospel in a sentence so powerful, it's been quoted many times: *"The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope."*

None of us have earned it. None of us ever will. You might get a point or two more than a neighbour, or more than me, but you still won't have enough. And a thief on a cross

who may not have done a bit of good all his life can say a quick prayer and go to the same place as you. That's the nature of grace. It's not fair. That's the point of the parable. God's grace upends everything. It's not fair. And we should be grateful for that!

If the parable demonstrates the amazing grace of God, it also illustrates the remarkable **generosity** of God. Whatever our past life, whatever our misdeeds, God, through his son Jesus, is ready to forgive.

Brought up in a Christian home, John Newton was only seven when his mother died. Taken to sea by his father at the age of 11, he ended up captaining slave ships, but his drunkenness and abuse of female slaves, led to him being enslaved himself on the coast of Africa. Eventually he was rescued and as he was travelling home his ship was hit by a violent storm. Newton cried out to God for help and the ship was saved.

On landing in Liverpool, he asked himself, 'Why did I cry out to God? I don't even believe in him.' That was the start of his journey to faith. In 1773, he wrote Amazing Grace, a hymn that is still sung around the world. You know the words

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.

Newton became a passionate abolitionist – someone who campaigned for the end of the slave trade – and was ordained as a church of England minister. For the last 28 years of his life, he was rector of St Mary Woolnoth, a church in the City of London.

If you visit today, you will find a memorial stone which reads: 'John Newton, once an infidel and a libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy.'

So the parable illustrates God's amazing grace, the parable illustrates God's remarkable generosity and finally, the parable illustrates God's great **goodness**.

Jesus uses the phrase, The Last Will Be First, and the First Will Be Last. This is not about reversing the order for the sake of it — it's about dismantling the idea that we can *rank* ourselves in God's kingdom. In God's vineyard, there is no hierarchy of worthiness. The reward is not based on *how much* we've done, but on *who* we belong to.

There's a powerful moment from the life of Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian who, along with her family, helped Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust during World War II. Eventually, they were caught and sent to concentration camps. Corrie survived, but her sister Betsie did not. The cruelty she endured at the hands of the Nazis left deep scars.

Years later, Corrie was speaking at a church in Germany—sharing her testimony of God's forgiveness and the freedom that comes from forgiving others. At the end of the service, something unimaginable happened.

A man began walking toward her. She recognized him immediately. He had been one of the cruellest guards at Ravensbrück, the concentration camp where her sister died. He didn't recognize her—but she knew his face.

He reached out his hand and said, "Fraulein, how good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea! I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, will you forgive me?"

Corrie froze. Later she wrote, "I who had preached so often the need to forgive... kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw

the sin of them... Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more?"

She prayed silently for God's help. And then—miraculously—she extended her hand. She wrote: "I took his hand. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. I forgive you, brother, I cried. With all my heart!"

Jesus told the parable in response to Peter's question "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" And Jesus replied: "everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife^[e] or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."

Those who have laboured long in the vineyard will receive their reward, but we should live in the light of God's generosity. God's grace is not a wage we earn; it's a gift we receive.

As we take Communion this morning, we come to the foot of the cross. As we take Communion this morning, we approach with humble gratitude. As we take Communion this morning, we remember that forgiveness comes not

from our actions but through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our place in the Kingdom of God depends on the grace of God. It's not fair. And we should be grateful for that!