



“Grace of the King”

Matthew 20:1-16, 20-28

Rev. Bruce Stanley

Sermon audio and text available at www.waitara.anglican.asn.au

Is life fair? Short answer: No. Long answer: Noooooooooooooo!

- Pastor Youcef Nardakhani is currently on death row awaiting execution in Iran. Why? For converting from Islam to Christianity. He’s been on death row for over 800 days. He has a wife and two children, aged 7 and 9. Is that fair?
- This is a boy I met in Tanzania. His parents died from AIDS. His grandmother also has AIDS, and looks after him and his brother and sister. They share 1 room and have 1 meal a day.
- John Hammergren is the CEO of McKesson Corporation, the world’s largest health care firm. He earned \$1.7m in salary in 2010 plus stock options. If the company changes hands, he will make \$469m. Is that fair for someone to earn that much money?

How often do we use that phrase: “It’s not fair!” The word “fair” means “free from bias, dishonesty or injustice”. And I wonder if there is anything in this world that’s actually fair? Is there anything that is free from bias, dishonesty or injustice?! And the difficult thing is – we all have our own opinion on what’s fair and what’s not.

• Generous Grace

In this chapter, Jesus tells us what’s fair. He tells the story of a vineyard owner who needs some workers in his vineyard for a day. So he goes out at 6am and finds some workers. He offers them 1 denarius for a day’s work. That’s a fair wage. And they agree. Then at 9am, he goes out to find some **more** workers and says he’ll pay them a fair wage. They agree. He goes out again at 12noon and 3pm and then at 5pm and finds more workers, again offering them a fair wage. And they all finish work at 6pm.

Then the vineyard owner pays everyone. First, the ones that started at 5pm. They only worked for 1 hour, but he pays them... 1 denarius – a full day’s wage. So when he gets to the men who worked all day, through the heat of the day, for 12 hours, they’re expecting to get more than a denarius. But what do they get paid?... 1 denarius. And they say “Unfair!”

Those guys got 1 denarius for 1 hour's work. We worked all day, through the heat of the day, and you pay us the same? That's not fair! We should get more!"

And the vineyard owner says:

- *"Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?" (20:13)*
- *"Or are you envious because I am generous?" (20:15)*

This parable is about people becoming followers of Jesus. When we make the decision to follow Jesus, we are **given** eternal life. We are **given** the gift of heaven. When Jesus becomes our Lord and Saviour, we receive eternal life. And some people follow Jesus their **whole** life. They serve him with their time and money, and they've committed their whole life to him. And we can tend to say: Look at what **I** have done. How much I've given for the gospel. How much I've sacrificed. For my **whole life**, I haven't pursued worldly wealth or desires. I've given up the temptations of the flesh and it's been really hard!

But others only follow Jesus at the end of their life. At the 11th hour. Perhaps just before they die, they make a commitment to Jesus after they've lived their whole life opposed to Jesus. They've given no time or money or commitment to Jesus until their last moments on earth. And Jesus offers them... eternal life. The **same** reward. The **same** as the person who followed him and sacrificed for him their whole life.

Is that fair?

But what God doesn't want us to think that way. He wants us to look at **him**. Look at what **God** has done. Look at what **God** has given us. Look at how **generous** God is. You've worked all your life to follow Jesus and he has given you eternal life. Or you've followed Jesus for just the last hour of your life and he's given you eternal life.

In both cases we can say that God is incredibly generous! Because the truth is, **NONE** of us deserve eternal life! No matter what you've done, how much you've done, how long you've followed him, the gift of eternal life is not a gift we **deserve**. The forgiveness of our sins is not something we deserve, whether we've followed Jesus for 60 years or for 60 minutes. The point is that it's not fair that **ANY** of us should receive the gift of eternal life. The fact is that God is generous in offering **ANY** of us eternal life!

• Messy Grace

So with that in mind, let's go back to the parable and have a closer look at those 11th hour workers. Verse 6:

- *“About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us’ they answered.”*

No one has hired us. They’re standing there, waiting. But no one would hire them. Then Jesus comes along. These are the people who no one would hire. These are the leftovers.

- III – Soccer team picks.

When I was at school, I used to hate that time in the school playground at lunch where you picked teams to play soccer or something. And everyone lined up, and the two captains, who were usually the sportiest people, would take turns to pick their team. And you’d just stand there hoping that you wouldn’t be the last one picked. And I remember one day, it was down to the last two kids. And for once I wasn’t one of them! Then only Adrian was left. But then one captain turns to the other and says: “You have him. I don’t want him!” And the other captain said: “I don’t want him either. You have him!” No-one wanted him. He stood there while the two teams fought over who got stuck with him. He was the leftover. It was the 11th hour and no one wanted him on their team. If you’d asked him “Why aren’t you playing with the other kids?” His answer would have been “Because no-one wants me.”

In the 11th hour, Jesus walks up to someone and says: “What are you doing with your life? Why are you just standing there? Why don’t you come and join my team. Why don’t you come and follow me?”

And the person says: “You don’t want me. I’m useless. Look at my life. Look at what I’ve done. My life’s a mess. I haven’t lived a good life. I’ve done terrible things. I’m not a nice person.”

And Jesus says: “Follow me”. Why? Because God’s grace isn’t about being nice and neat and good. God’s grace is messy. It’s generous. And it’s messy. For messy people like you and me. And... it’s undeserved...

• Undeserved Grace

This is God’s grace: We are all equal in His sight. None of us **deserve** what God offers. None of us **deserve** eternal life. None of us **deserve** forgiveness. None of us **deserve** to be asked to follow him. But God’s grace is that he offers us what we don’t deserve because he loves us. I think it’s best summed up in Ephesians 2:8-9

- *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works so that no-one can boast.”*

Grace is a gift. Grace is undeserved. Grace is nothing to boast about.

Turn with me to verse 20. James and John’s mother comes to Jesus, and asks him if her sons can sit at his right and left hand in heaven. Jesus –make my boys the captains of your teams! Give them the highest positions of honour in heaven! And what does Jesus say to her and the disciples? Verse 26:

- *“Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave”*

Greatness in the kingdom of heaven isn’t about how long you’ve been a follower, or what you’ve done. Everything God has given us is an act of grace. A free gift. Undeserved. This is what we are called to be – Verse 28:

- *“just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

Greatness is about selflessness. Sacrifice. Humility. Being last. Being a servant. Greatness in God’s kingdom is giving up our worldly greatness for God’s sake. Being first in God’s kingdom is about putting ourselves last in this world’s kingdom.

It’s easy in our society to be *obsessed* with fairness – getting what we deserve and what belongs to us. But we actually don’t **want** what we deserve from God! Because what we deserve from God is punishment for our sin. But what we **get**, because of his love for us, is eternal life.

And this is the point of the gospel – this is Grace:

- We **do not** get what we deserve. Instead,
- We get what we do **not** deserve.

Let’s give him thanks for that.