

AMAZING, UNFAIR GRACE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Tuesday I emailed Sam Rose, owner of Legacy Blueberry Company, David Johnson, owner of Johnson Nursery, and Wayne Casteen, Vice President of Human Resources at Smithfield Hog Production and asked them one simple question: What would happen in your business/company if you hired and paid people as the landowner in the parable did? Not surprisingly, their answers included reprisals from the Department of Labor, chaos in their bookkeeping and a decline in their profitability, and lots of grumbling from workers who worked all day and got paid the same amount as those who only worked one hour. David commented, “I doubt there would be long term incentive for people coming to work early and getting the same pay as someone who only works the last hour.”

Just about every time I have read this parable with a group of people, someone will indignantly say, “That’s just not fair!” In his email reply, Wayne said, “The Department of Labor would likely call it inequitable, unfair, or even discriminatory. In a union environment, an unfair labor practice charge would surely be filed.”

But, is the landowner really unfair? At the beginning of the parable, verse 2 makes it perfectly clear, “After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.” At the end of the parable, the landowner says to the disgruntled worker, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?” (v. 14) It’s true, the laborers who only worked one hour got paid a full day’s wage – but so did those who worked three hours, six hours, and nine hours. The laborers who were hired at 6:00 a.m. did not get cheated. The landowner didn’t dock their agreed upon wage in order to pay the other laborers.

But that’s not fair! Well, what’s being fair got to do with it? In a parable about what the kingdom of heaven is like and, ultimately, what God’s amazing grace is like, that might sound like a strange question. But think about God’s grace in light of what Paul says in our epistle lesson from Romans 3: “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:22b-24). We are all like those laborers who were hired at the eleventh hour. Like them, none of us deserves God’s goodness and generosity, and yet he offers it.

This parable in Matthew 20 is a lot like the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Think about it. A man had two sons. The younger son asked for his inheritance early, left home, squandered his money in a far away place, then returned home, determined to grovel for forgiveness. But when he returned home, his father greeted him with a hug and a kiss and threw a big party for him. In the meantime, his big

brother had stayed home and worked hard. When he found out what their father had done for his little brother, he was indignant: “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” (Luke 15:31) The older brother got angry and refused to go into the party. The 6:00 a.m. laborers grumbled against the landowner. You can almost hear the 6:00 a.m. laborers complaint in the elder brother’s complaint: “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” (Matthew 20:12)

That’s just not fair! Again, though, what’s being fair got to do with it? In the last twenty years or so, more and more people refer to the Parable of the Prodigal Son as the Parable of the Loving Father. After all, the story begins, “There was a man who had two sons.” The father’s love, always forgiving and always gracious is always available for both of his sons, if they will receive it. In the same way, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is often renamed The Parable of the Generous Landowner. He is, after all, the main character. He goes to the marketplace throughout the day looking to hire workers. He’s the one who makes the wage deals with the laborers. He’s the one who looks out for all of his workers. Notice there is no suggestion in the story that the guys who stood around all day were lazy or trying to get out of work. Nobody had hired them! The generous landowner had compassion on everybody who worked in his vineyard. Unfortunately, not everybody showed their gratitude to the landowner.

Perhaps you’ve heard this saying: Justice is getting what you deserve. Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you don’t deserve. The first statement describes the 6:00 a.m. workers, in a good way. The last statement describes everybody else, in an amazing way. Isn’t it interesting that the only workers described as angry and grumbling are the ones who got paid exactly what the landowner had promised and they had agreed to? That’s what makes God’s grace so amazing and so unfair. The great reformer, Martin Luther, said that God does not want to deal with us according to works, according to our deserving, but according to grace. Instead of grumbling that “those other people” have benefited from God’s grace, we can and should be grateful that God deals with us according to God’s amazing grace, even if, from our point of view, it seems unfair.

The classic example of this is the question, “What about deathbed confessions?” It might not be said out loud, but the underlying thought seems to be something like this: “Somebody lives however they want their whole life, only to profess faith in Jesus at the last minute, and God extends the same kind of grace and mercy to that person as to me? Why, I’ve been a Christian all my life. I’ve worked hard in the church. I’ve always done what was expected of me. That’s just not fair!”

That sounds like Peter’s question when he compares himself to the rich young man who couldn’t let go of his many possessions. Peter said, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” It’s a variation on the theme of

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” and “Jesus, grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” And over and over again, Jesus says, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Matthew 20:16)

It’s always interesting to ask, “Which character in the parable do you identify with?” We might want to be more like the laborers hired at 5:00 p.m. or the younger brother who was welcomed home with a big party. But how often are we more like the 6:00 a.m. workers and the elder brother? In his commentary on Matthew, Frederick Dale Bruner notes that this parable might be Jesus’ warning to his disciples “not to get the big head.” But then he goes on to offer a list of other people this parable might serve as a warning to: to those in the old people of God who looked down on latecoming gentiles; to some Pharisees in their relation to unimpressive Jews; to first-century Jewish Christians who disdained incoming gentiles; to Catholics or Orthodox who look down on “latecoming” Protestants; to long-time church members who resent newcomers; to progressive or growing (Bible, independent, charismatic) churches that look down on seemingly weaker or slower or smaller (denominational) churches; to mainline churches who look down on newer kinds of churches; to strong Christians who question the dedication of weaker or less striking Christians; to Christians who are too conscious of their being in God’s work and who speak or think demeaningly of those who are not (yet) in God’s work at all.¹

Someone has said, “In a sense, grace is always unfair since it gives the undeserving more than they deserve.” That’s what makes God’s grace so amazing – how sweet the sound!

Let us pray: Dear God, as we consider the meaning of your Word for our lives and wrestle with this parable, surprise us, shake us, offend us, but ultimately save us through your generosity, grace, and love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

NOTES

¹Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), p. 723.