

The One About the Crazy Payday

I grew up in a family of five kids, and although we grew up with all the basic things we needed, there was one thing that was always scarce. The biggest treat in our household was ding dongs. We loved ding dongs. But my parents would only spring for one box of our beloved chocolatey treat with every grocery store trip. And it just seemed like there was never enough to go around. In fact, it seemed like as soon as my mom brought them home they would be gone. Well, it turns out – that was true. As soon as my mom bought a box of ding dongs they **were** gone, because one of my brothers had taken to stealing the whole box and hiding them in his room. He was hoarding them for himself. And as you can probably tell, it has scarred me for life.

Sometimes, we operate from an attitude of scarcity. Sometimes we feel that there is just not enough to go around. We live in a world where scarcity prevails. We are used to viewing the world as a zero sum game. Someone wins and someone loses. Either it is mine or yours. Only one person can get the job. Only one person can win the election. And so knowing that we can't have all the things we want or even need, it causes us to grumble instead of rejoice at our neighbor's good fortune. We become jealous. We want justice. We have rights. And our motto becomes, "that is just not fair."

But if we can learn anything from these stories of Jesus, it is that the kingdom of God operates in ways that are very different from the world. You see Jesus is sensing some unhealthy ambition and attitudes in the disciples. If you read chapters 19 and 20 of Matthew you will read some things about the disciples that are pretty unflattering – you will see them seeking positions of authority and asking Jesus what they will gain from following him. The disciples are living very much in the human world, and they find it difficult to understand that God's kingdom is **so different**.

And so let me paint the picture of the vineyard for you again.

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early one morning to hire some workers for the vineyard. There is a lot of work to do in the vineyard, and he hires a few workers early in the morning and agrees to pay them a denarion. Now a denarion is a small silver Roman coin equal to a day's wages for an ordinary worker at subsistence level, so let's just say maybe \$100 today. And so these workers go out and work all day. It's hot. The humidity is high. The work is hard... and by the end of the day they are worn out, and they are ready to get paid and go home. But during the day the landowner had decided he needed a few more workers, and he goes back to the marketplace and hires some more workers telling them not to worry he will pay them what is fair. The landowner goes back throughout the day. More people are hired and some work longer and harder than others. But get this. The landowner tells the manager to pay the last to be hired first. You get the picture – the ones who have barely worked at all are called up to the front of the line to get their money first.

And you know what happens. The ones who have worked the least get paid the same \$100 that the landowner promised the ones who showed up on time. So imagine if you've worked all day – you're exhausted. You've worked your heart out, and now these guys who haven't even broken a sweat get to go to the front of the line **and** get the same \$100 that you were promised - event those who worked only one hour. Well, I'm thinking at this point maybe you wouldn't begrudge them the \$100, because I bet you would be thinking, man if they got

\$100, I'm going to get a bonus. I bet I'm going to get \$200! Because I've worked a lot longer and done a lot more than they did.

But when the last in the line are finally paid – they get the same \$100.

How is that fair?

And so they grumbled against the landowner.

Of course they did! They thought, “We deserve more.” **And what they were really saying is, “Those others deserve less.”**

Jesus, however, turns selfish ambitions upside down with this story. The landowner says: “Friend I did you no wrong. Didn't I agree to pay you a denarion? Take what belongs to you and go. Don't I have the right to do what I want. In my world things are different.”

What kind of crazy payday is that?

In God's world things are different.

Today, Jesus encourages us to think in a whole new way – a way that is contrary to the world view of scarcity that we experience every day. Instead, Jesus teaches that in the kingdom of God, there is always enough to go around. **There is more than enough grace for all of the workers in the vineyard.**

One writer explains this story in a few short sentences, saying: “Jesus strips away the notion that we must earn our way into heaven. And he strips away the notion that our heavenly rewards will be proportionate to our Christian service. And he strips away the notion that we are competing with other Christian saints for heavenly rewards. **He leaves us wholly dependent on the generosity of a merciful God who is eager to surprise us with undeserved blessings and to lavish on us joys that we would never have conceived.**”

When I first read this week's story, I put myself in the position of the workers who were hired first – the hard workers, those who deserved a big reward. But I finally realized, that in reality we all are the workers who are paid much more than we deserve. When I dug deeper into this scripture and considered the power and majesty of God compared with my flawed and selfish nature, I realized that I am wholly dependent on the generosity of a merciful God, who has and does indeed surprise me with undeserved blessings -- a God who lavishes on me joys that I would never have conceived. The grace poured out on me is abundant, and I am called to respond. I'm called to respond in the way that I live and love.

Not only is Jesus giving his disciples a tough lesson about their heavenly reward, he is giving them a lesson about the abundance of grace that God has available for each of us. So, I want to define grace for you. Grace is the undeserved and unconditional love that God has for each of God's children. It's the kind of love that provides for us in overflowing abundance when we show up at the last minute and don't deserve it at all. With God there is an unlimited supply of grace. And you see, scarcity is **not** a part of God's kingdom, and so we have no need to grumble or to hoard.

My childhood home had a very limited supply of ding dongs. And while this is a really goofy example, I want you to think about the idea that there is really nothing in this world other than the grace of God that is limitless. Can you think of anything in this world that is of unlimited supply? Our wealth and our health is limited. The love people have for each other -- even deep love-- is limited. So it is hard for us to imagine an unlimited supply of anything. But God is full of grace. God has so much grace that everyone can receive just what she needs. --The people who show up first thing in the morning at the marketplace looking for a job – they can get God's grace.

--The people who roll out of bed at the end of the day hoping they might get a job--they can get some of God's grace.

--The people who already had jobs in a nice air-conditioned office at the vineyard can get some of God's grace.

--And even the people who don't have jobs and really don't care if they work at all can get some of God's grace.

It's free for the taking, and its supply is unlimited. It is not dependent on how much we work, how successful we are, or how good we are. It doesn't depend on our race or skin color, it doesn't depend on our wealth, it doesn't depend on the age we come to Christ, it doesn't depend on how many good acts we carry out at the church or how often we come in the door. And here is maybe the most important point -- God is God, and we are not in control of how, when, where, in what amounts, and with whom God shares this amazing love. It is not for us to judge whether others are worthy of God's grace because we ourselves are not worthy of God's grace.

Now, some of us have been in the vineyard working for God for a long time. Some of us came to know Jesus when we were little children. Others of us, are brand new to faith. And some of us are still struggling to find God at all. Nevertheless, all who say "yes" to God end up experiencing life eternal.

J. Ellsworth Kalas says, "What shall we say about a God who promises the same heaven to a self-centered scoundrel, saved on his deathbed, as to a Mother Teresa, who has spent a lifetime in the pursuit of holiness and in service to others." (Kalas, *Parables From the Back Side*). What kind of crazy payday is that?

And yet, let me ask you—if you have known Jesus for a long time, would you have it any other way? What a blessing – what a charmed life it is to live with the joy of the Lord in your daily life. Every single day lived with Jesus is better than not having the Father, Son and Holy Spirit's presence in your life. Am I right?

I remember my time waiting at the marketplace for someone to hire me. I remember what my life was like when I was waiting for my life to have meaning and purpose. I remember the difference in my life before and after I really met Jesus. I remember when I thought a new car or a better job or a bigger payday would satisfy the longing and emptiness in my life! And, wow, was I disappointed by all of those things. And, wow, was I surprised when I figured out that this crazy payday of God's grace was what I was searching for all along.

I am so thankful that the landowner **himself** kept coming back to the marketplace again and again to look for me. In the parable, he didn't send his manager to look for the workers; the Lord of the land came personally. God wants to look directly into our eyes so to speak -- to have a real, personal and meaningful relationship with us. Not only that, but the landowner was persistent in seeking out those who came later. He wanted to pour out the gift of grace on those who came late. So, I am thankful that God is personal, and I am thankful that God is persistent in seeking in giving out this grace -- because I, for one, was later to the marketplace than some.

But there's a big "so what" that I want to challenge you with today. First, if you haven't yet, I call you to come and enjoy this great grace of God today! Second, I call you to celebrate when latecomers experience this grace. And third, I ask you to think about this: how many people outside the doors of this place are **still waiting** to figure out that this amazing love of God is for them, too, and that it is life-changing? And how can you invite them to join in?

The challenge I offer you today is to imitate Christ. Jesus is full of grace and truth. We see in the life of Jesus the ways that he offered the grace of God to people. In fact, it almost

seems like he offered it most often to people like these late coming workers in the vineyard. Jesus offered grace to sinners – to prostitutes and to tax collectors, to adulterers and to people considered unclean because they had leprosy. Jesus offered grace to children and to women. Jesus offered grace, unending grace, overwhelming grace. Grace that would make your jaw hit the floor – because it was scandalous and shocking! Jesus loved everyone, and he called his disciples to live in the same shocking way. He called them to put aside ambition and to live as servants sharing God’s grace in ways that shocked the world. He called them to give away what they had for others, not to hoard it for themselves--and not just their money and possessions but he called them to share their God!

I promise you, when we open our eyes to this offer of unconditional love that we see lived out in Christ Jesus, it changes everything. When we realize the **love** God has poured out on us – even us – the undeserving ones who came at the end of the day, our whole view of our role in the vineyard changes. So, may we realize today that we are only God’s workers, and there is someone else in charge – someone who is good and trustworthy. And the funny thing is when we start to experience this inexhaustible supply of love that God has for even us sinners, we start to see the other workers in the vineyard differently, too – we start to see people differently.

We begin to look at children with the eyes of God. We begin to look at those who suffer from addiction with the eyes of God. We begin to look at the elderly through the eyes of God. We begin to look at the prisoner through the eyes of God. We begin to look at people who are different from us with the eyes of God. We begin to look at our own families with the eyes of God. We begin to do crazy things as a result of this crazy payday - we begin to notice injustices and unfairnesses that should not stand in God’s kingdom. We begin to stand up for people being bullied and mistreated.

You see, the kingdom of God is like a vineyard – it’s a place where things might not always seem fair to our human eyes. But it is a place where **God’s** will will be done. It is a place where all kinds of people are called to work side by side, even those who show up late. It is a place where our grumbling against others is replaced with grace toward others. The kingdom of God is not a place of scarcity. The kingdom of God is a place of glorious abundance -- where there is enough grace to go around, so much grace that we are even called to give it away ourselves.