



“The Justice of Grace”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

March 29, 2006

In the gospel of Matthew there is a pattern to Jesus' teaching where life will present an opportunity for a teaching moment, Jesus responds to the moment, and then reinforces the lesson of his life with a parable. In our text for last week we studied Jesus' lesson about the kingdom of God through his response to a wealthy young man who comes asking Jesus what he must do to attain eternal life. Jesus told the man to sell all that he had and follow him, which of course did not go over so well, and then concluded by saying that attaining salvation is impossible for mortals to achieve, but that nothing was impossible for God. Our text for today is the parable immediately following this activity. It is a sort of object lesson given to the disciples by Jesus as they grapple with his teaching about the kingdom of God, and is a wonderful opportunity for us to grapple with it a little ourselves. Our reading comes from the gospel of Matthew 20:1-16.

(Now Jesus said) "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, '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.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Apparently there is a new phenomenon that is emerging in some corners of the Christian community - Christian wrestling. Here, "Groups such as Ultimate Christian Wrestling and Wrestling for Jesus employ teams of masked, spandex-clad evangelists to dramatize the ongoing battle between Good and Evil to paying customers at community centers throughout (the country)."¹ Illustrating Bible stories and lessons to groups that might not otherwise be reached by the gospel, or interested in hearing it, at least, by someone in a robe or tie. The gospel of Matthew is very interested in what happens when two kingdoms collide- the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world- so much so that the motif of a wrestling match isn't entirely inappropriate, if not conventional.

In Matthew, Jesus' life and lessons illustrate this tension and collision of kingdoms in a way that can be almost unbearable, and readers are often left feeling shocked and bruised as they

¹As cited in *The Week*, Volume 6, Issue 252. p. 8. Go to www.wrestlingforjesus.org for more information.

try to catch their breath ringside of the gospel message that Jesus delivers. Our text this week is a great example. Having barely recovered from the blow that Jesus delivers- that no amount of deeds can earn your way into heaven, but only God's grace- Jesus drives home another startling point about the kingdom of God to the disciples and then takes a step back to let us wrestle with it. It's not that he's trying to be difficult. He's just trying to be honest about this completely new paradigm that his very presence is ushering in for us all.

Perhaps in a perfect world we would be rejoicing with the laborers who got a day's pay for an hour's work while the others got the same for 12. In that same world I'd celebrate with the classmate in Seminary who made an A on his Hebrew exam without cracking a book while I studied for a week and barely pulled in above average. In that perfect world we'd give a high five to the new colleague who gets the corner office with two windows on their first day on the job while we've labored under the fluorescents quite comfortably for years, thank you very much. But I suppose that in a perfect world there also wouldn't be that feeling deep within us like an itch- that whiff of entitlement that brushes past our shoulder and whispers in our ear, '*It isn't fair. There's no justice.*' It is our sense of justice that is offended by this passage, isn't it? Those guys were there all day sweating in the sun and cutting their fingers on the branches of your profit and when all is said and done, they get the same pay as those whose backs had barely begun to ache from the work. Come on, that isn't right! They even took a water break! Jesus sure knows how to strike a nerve.

If you'll notice, the laborers who began at, well, the beginning, weren't upset that the others got paid. They were upset because they themselves didn't get paid more. It was only when they compared their lot with others that they became dissatisfied and determined that, though they were getting their due, they were due more. "When those hired (at) about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, '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.' It is offensive to them that they should be sent to the back of the line and paid the same wage- and don't we also feel the desire to rise to their defense rising within us? How quickly they had forgotten the feeling of waiting around hoping for work in the morning- wondering if they were going to have money to bring home to feed their family that night or if they would go hungry again. How quickly the joy of the morning over being picked, over being told that they would receive what they had needed most that day, faded to resentment in the afternoon. And gratitude gave way to envy.² Suddenly the landowner's kindness felt like a sham. 'These last worked only an hour,' they said. 'And you have made them equal.' Where's the justice in that? It's a good argument if you are wrestling for the kingdom of the world- but not when you are matched against the kingdom of God.

The funny thing about us is that we always seem to identify ourselves with the folks getting what looks like the raw end of the deal in this text. The posture of those who are out

²Rev. John Claypool treats this idea in his sermon, "*Life isn't Fair, Thank God!*" preached January 30, 2000 on the Chicago Sunday Evening Club on PBS, Chicago.

there toiling all day is a familiar one and so when we hear this parable we become confused and hurt on their behalf and our immediate response to this story so often is fear that turns into a shade of anger over the injustice. And Jesus is banking on this. It is kind of like in the story of the Good Samaritan where we always seem to be placing ourselves in the shoes of the one who identifies our neighbor and reaches out to help. But it never occurs to us to consider that we may also be the one who is beaten and bruised and bleeding in the ditch. That someone is reaching out to help us. We rarely turn the tables because we don't like what might be stuck to the underside of the story. Because on the other side of the story is the fact that perhaps we are the ones lingering at the pick up point for the day laborers in the 11th hour. Waiting for something that we can't make happen on our own. Realizing that we cannot possibly earn what we need for our sustenance- and that we are totally dependant on the goodness of another to survive. We don't place ourselves in the shoes of the one who is astonished over the invitation at such a late hour with the promise of a wage. Or allow ourselves to consider what it would be like to be overwhelmed by a reward that you didn't earn and that you don't deserve, but this good Lord knows what you need for your life-- and so he gives it to you anyway. Gives you as much as everyone else even though you were the last man on the job and you took a water break- he gives you everything you need to survive.

We may wrestle with the fact that in the kingdom of God a single serving of grace is all that anyone gets, but it is all we will ever need. By the good ness of God we are all given the same amount of grace when we accept the invitation to the field -be it is early in the day or at the 11th hour. Weather we walk the straight and narrow or just can't seem to find our way. Weather we have labored all day or if we have only just met the Lord. Because the idea is that he seeks us out and desires more than anything to give us all that we need for life. And like the folks who are waiting for work, or the man who is beaten and robbed at the side of the road needing a hand up, grace is the one thing that we cannot make happen on our own.³ And we don't have to. And so of course sometimes it doesn't seem fair- but thank God for that. Because the wages of sin is death, but in Christ we are all invited to receive the full measure of life. And so we reach out in love to one another not because we have so much to offer. But because he first loved us.

Jesus is banking on our reaction to this parable so he can tell us that the kingdom of God is not about demanding what you want, but about getting what you need. We want justice, but trust me when I say that we do not want to get what we deserve. And the justice of grace is that in Jesus Christ we never will. Amen.

³William Willimon treats this in his sermon, "*The Invitation.*"