

Deuteronomy 6:10-12, 7:7-9 (TNIV)

¹⁰ When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, ¹¹ houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, ¹² be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

⁷ The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸ But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹ Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.

Matthew 20:1-16 (NRSV)

1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 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?'

7 They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.'

He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

8 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.'

9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 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.'

13 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? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

10:00 sermon

It's hard to forget it when you get treated unfairly. Back when I graduated from college, I went to work for Dow Corning Corporation. I had been there working hard for two years and then was transferred to another position. They hired someone straight out of college to replace me. The rumor mill had it they were actually paying her the same amount that they were paying me after being there for two years. I was livid!!! Someone straight out of school was going to make the same as I was? I couldn't believe it. It just wasn't fair!!!

That sounds like something that the workers in today's parable might say. It's not fair! Jesus talks about a landowner who goes out to hire some workers. He goes out at 6:00 am and agrees to pay the early birds the normal wage for a full day—say \$12/hour for a 12 hour day, \$144 dollars. The early birds agree to get paid the normal wage for the day...then he goes back out and hires more workers at 9:00, noon, 3:00, and 5:00. When it comes time to get paid,

the last people hired are the first ones to get paid—they're expecting \$12, but instead, they get \$144. They can't believe it! They are the happiest people in the county! Well, except for the 6:00 am workers, who are sure they're going to get more. They don't know what 12 x \$144 is, and neither do I, but they can't wait to get it!

So when they get there and they get \$144, the same amount as the Johnny-Come-Lately's, naturally they scream, "It's not fair!!!"

And we scream it with them. There's something about us that likes to live in a world where we know that our hard work will pay off—tangibly. We work hard, we want a payoff. If we work 12 hours, we get paid for 12 hours, and if someone else works 1 hour, they don't get paid 12 hours.

That's the way we like things to work...but Jesus doesn't tell us this parable to tell us how we like things to work. He tells us this parable to tell us how God likes things to work. And apparently God likes things to work differently from the way we like things to work.

When the early birds start grumbling, the landowner asks them three things: remember back at 6:00 am when I told you I'd pay you a full day's wage? Didn't I pay you that? Then, can't I do whatever I want with my own money? And then, to really hit his point home, he asks, "or are you just jealous because I am generous? Jesus uses the parable to demonstrate how God shows grace to each one of us.

One classic interpretation of this parable is that we can become Christians at any point in our lives, and when we die, God will welcome us into eternal life. This is really comforting because it gives us hope for our relatives and friends who aren't Christians yet. There is a REALLY good sermon to be preached on this interpretation of this passage, but this is not that sermon!

Today you're stuck with a different sermon—a sermon that takes a deeper look at what this story tells us about God, and how we can mirror the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

When we look at the landowner, you have to admit that you get a picture of God that's a bit weird. One commentator said that this parable should be called "The Parable of the Eccentric Employer." I don't think that goes far enough. "Crazy Eddie's Vineyard" would be more like it, because the way the landowner pays his workers is completely insane. I mean, think about it...only Crazy Eddie would pay people a whole day's pay for an hour's work. How much is he going to have to sell the wine for to make any money giving away that much? And more importantly, who's going to show up early the next day if that's Crazy Eddie's policy?

Maybe it's blasphemous to refer to God as Crazy Eddie, but work with me here—God shows us grace by focusing on us as people—not on our deeds. It's crazy! God shows us grace by caring for us, even though we don't deserve it. God shows us grace by bringing Christ back from the dead for us, even though we didn't have our act together. It may be crazy, but God shows us grace.

I got some good insight into grace a few years ago when I dropped my laptop computer. The screen went completely black. The warranty did not cover accidental damages, so I kind of slunk to the store where I had bought it. For some reason the guy in customer service told me there'd be no charge. That was the first bit of grace—the "law" said I should have to pay for the repair since it was my fault, but I didn't have to.

Unfortunately it took quite some time for the computer to get back, so the manager said I could have a loaner computer. More grace--that wasn't in the warranty either. Then she said, "They wouldn't let me give you a loaner, so I said 'Fine, I'm going to give this guy a new computer.'" This clearly was not in the warranty. Turns out that my computer was outdated, so the nearest comparable machine was faster, with a bigger hard drive, and better software. This wasn't in the warranty either. Then when the manager is ringing me up, she says, "This is your lucky day. The price on this computer has come down, so you get \$300 back." Do you think this was in the warranty?

That's grace: it was my fault. I made the mistake. I should have paid the penalty. But I got a better computer and \$300 back. I didn't deserve any of it. God's grace works like that—instead of holding us accountable for the things we've done wrong, God gives us favor. Like Crazy Eddie the vineyard owner who takes it upon himself to pay people a full day's wage for an hour's work. It is only out of the goodness of his heart. They deserve a few bucks—but they get a whole day's pay.

God's been showing grace like this all the way back since the beginning of time. The Old Testament passage for today is typical: Just before the Israelites enter the Promised Land, God tells them not to forget who brought them there. God says, "When you start living in fine cities you didn't build...when you start using wells you didn't dig...when you start enjoying vineyards you didn't plant, don't forget about grace." When Crazy Eddie pays you for a whole day when you work an hour, don't forget about grace. When you drop your computer and get \$300 back, don't forget about grace. When you realize that your sin should separate you from God, don't forget about grace.

But all too often, we do forget about grace. We know God's given us grace, but we still identify with the early birds in Crazy Eddie's vineyard. We still want the payoff for the work we've done. I do it too. Sure, I got a new computer and \$300 back, but when I read this parable, I think about that time that I should have gotten paid more at Dow Corning.

What if we could change who we identify with? I told a friend of mine that I was preaching on this parable, and she said, "LOVE IT!!!" I couldn't believe it, since the first thing everyone in the Preacher's Bible Study said was, "It's not fair!" But she said, "LOVE IT!!! I'm always running late."

What if, instead of identifying with the early-birds, we could picture ourselves as the ones who are late? As the ones who get a day's pay for an hour's work? As the ones who receive God's grace even though we don't deserve it?

If we could put ourselves in these happy folks' shoes, I think we'd act a bit more like Crazy Eddie. We'd realize that the Gospel means that we don't have to earn God's love and we don't have to earn grace and we don't have to earn our faith. We just receive a full day's wage that we don't deserve, and we'd be grateful. We'd know that we didn't deserve a new computer and we'd just give thanks.

And then as we gave thanks, out of gratitude we'd show grace to other people—not because we had to earn God's approval, but because God had given us his approval in the first place. Out of gratitude we'd show grace to people around us—even if they don't deserve it...since after all, we didn't deserve it either. Because God gives us grace, we'd extend this grace to others.

It's hard to know exactly what this might look like in your world, but through this parable Jesus is challenging us to figure out what it means to show grace to those around us, because God's shown grace to us.

Jerry is the sister of a friend of mine who's working hard to show this grace. After she and her husband Bob had two kids, he had an affair. It was devastating for Jerry. After a very difficult divorce, she found a new church, where she and her sons began to make a new life for themselves. Bob married the other woman, and soon afterward they had a child of their own.

Bob and his new wife weren't part of any church. When the baby came, they decided they wanted to have it baptized. Although there were lots of churches in the community, for some reason they decided to come to Jerry's new church for the baptism. They had no ties to this congregation. It would have been so easy for Jerry to have kicked up a fuss. She was so wounded by the divorce that I don't know how she could bear having her ex-husband and the other woman at her church, too. It would have been so easy to do everything she could to keep them out.

Yet there she was, in church, every Sunday. That Sunday. Somehow praying for that baby and its family. Somehow she understood that the child

being brought before God was much more important than the wounds she felt. Somehow she struggled to show them grace. Somehow she reflected the kingdom of God to everyone in the sanctuary.

After the service, Bob's younger brother came up to Jerry. He gave her a hug and told her, "When I grow up, I want to be just like you."

I do too. I want to be like Jerry, because Jerry is crazy...crazy like Crazy Eddie. Crazy enough to give a guy a new computer when it's his fault. Crazy enough to pay almost \$150 to someone who's earned \$12. Crazy enough to follow a savior who died for us, while we were still sinners.

It may be crazy...but don't forget about grace.