

What is Grace?

1. Study Matthew 20:1-16 the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. What emotions or attitude do you see in the early hired laborers? Who are the most grateful?

The early hired laborers exhibited a sequence of attitudes: 1) they were initially happy to have a job, 2) as later laborers were hired, they expected to receive more, and 3) they became angry towards the owner because they were being paid last and not more. They received but did not appreciate the landowner's generosity. The last laborers, hired at the eleventh hour, were the most grateful, because they were chosen to work when they probably felt that another day would end without making any money, and they received a day's wage for one hour of work. The owner was very generous. Hired in the beginning of the day, the early laborers lost sight of the owner's generosity while being preoccupied with the comparison of themselves to their fellow workers.

2. Who is Jesus telling this parable to?

It is the disciples to whom Jesus is talking! In an earlier passage, Matthew 18, the disciples are discussing who among them was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In the verses just preceding Matthew 20, Matthew 19:23-30, the disciples were astonished to learn the impossibility of being saved which they had been assuming all along ("... it is much easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."). Peter further asks, "we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" Jesus promises that they will sit upon the twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel and closes with an enigmatic statement, "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first." The parable of the laborers in the vineyard follows this comment. For the first time, the disciples get an inkling of the concept of Grace; it is completely independent of one's efforts. Yet as one reads the rest of the gospel after Matthew 20, one discovers that the disciples still don't get it.

3. How does this apply?

Christians have the assurance that God is gracious. Grace is a unilateral act of generosity; Grace, in essence, is getting something you did not deserve. Which laborer are you? How do you view your fellow Christians?

There are three types of parables: 1) true, 2) similitude, and 3) epigram. This is an example of a true parable. It is a small story in which everyone hearing Jesus can identify with a character in the plot. By this method, Jesus uses parables to make a comment to the hearers of the parable and indirectly to us.

TIP: To understand the significance of the parable, always determine whom Jesus is telling the parable to. Find out all you can about the "hearer" of the parable! Remember to read within context: understand what is occurring before and after and ultimately with the whole Bible.

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