

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Too Much Grace?”**

Rev. David K. Groth  
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*“Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (Mt. 20:13-15).*

When grapes are ready, they need to be picked. Time is of the essence because they will soon go bad. So, the owner of a vineyard needs lots of people right away. When I lived in Germany, I saw a notice on an information board asking for university students to come out and pick grapes for a weekend. The vineyard was on the bluffs of the Rhine River and your pay was in the form of room and board. It’s actually one of life’s regrets that I did not sign up.

The landowner in this parable goes to the town square where laborers gather everyday looking for work. He’s there at sunrise, 6:00 am and hires everyone in sight. But the harvest is large, progress is slow, so he returns to the labor market at 9:00 am, and hires another group. At noon and 3:00 pm, he’s back again. And at 5 pm he hires a fifth group to help finish the job.

At quitting time (6:00 pm) the workers line up to be paid. The owner begins with the last group hired. They can hardly believe it; he gives them each a denarius. It’s a full day’s pay, though they only worked for an hour. He pays them in full view of everybody else, and so we know who else is delighted: the others who were out there much longer, from sunrise, through the blazing heat of midday all the way to the end. Having done most of the work, they’re expecting a far greater payment. But when their turn comes, a single denarius is placed in their hands. *They* can hardly believe it. They receive the same amount as those one-hour workers, the full amount for a day’s work, but not a mite more. And they’re not happy about it! “It’s not fair!” one says. “This is outrageous!” says another. The owner says, “Take what you have and go. Can’t I do what I want with my own money?” Then he puts his finger on the real problem: “Or are you envious because I am generous?” They’re grumbling about the unearned generosity of the landowner. They’re grumbling about grace. That’s what this parable is about; it’s about grace, it’s about someone receiving what he did not earn. Remember, there’s always a hint of scandal attached to grace, and this highlights that resentment.

We all love it when God is generous to us. We also like to think we get what we deserve. We get what we work for, save for, and pay for. We make money the old-fashioned way . . . we *earn* it. So, we have trouble with people who have more than us – especially when they haven’t earned it and don’t deserve it. It’s not fair!

Whatever your profession is, you probably know someone with less talent who puts in less time and yet is wildly successful. He just happened to be in the right place and the right time, right? Similarly, there are celebrities and influencers in our culture. I’m still not sure what they do that makes them famous. They don’t act or produce anything; they just walk around

somehow attracting fame and fortune and reality T.V. producers. It baffles me, and yes, it seems unfair when so many are quietly working so hard to scratch out a living.

So yes, we are well familiar with the bitterness of those all-day workers, especially when we count other people's blessings. We are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains with us. We don't know how to handle a God who is generous to those who have not earned it, a God who "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt. 5:45). Wherever there is God's grace, there's also the whiff of scandal.

Here's the key to this parable. Don't think of yourself as the all-day worker. Think of yourself as that one who was hired at the very end, and yet has received a full day's wages. After all, God has blessed you richly in ways you did not earn, right? You worked, but that denarius in your hand is a gift, not a payment for services.

From Luther's explanation of the 1<sup>st</sup> article of the creed: "He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. . . All this He does only out of fatherly, divine good and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me." Remember also the second article of the creed which speaks of those things money cannot buy, namely a Savior Jesus "who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom."

Keep reminding yourself whatever you have, you have it by grace, unasked, unforced, unearned. We pray always that God would be gracious to us. We never pray, "Lord, be fair with me." We never pray, "Lord, give me what I have coming to me" because that'd be asking for trouble, right? No, we pray for what we do not deserve. We pray for grace.

Thankfully, God does not treat us according to our sin, or according to the standards of fairness. He treats us according to his love and grace. So, don't grumble about those one-hour workers receiving so much, because you're one of them. You and I are like that thief on the cross, who was promised paradise at the last hour, having done nothing to earn it.

God loves not only the all-day workers but also the one-hour workers. God laid down His life not only for the devout believer in church but also for the happy pagan at home. God has compassion for the hard-working manager but also for the unemployed addict. God is generous to you and me when we are good and honest and faithful and productive, but also when we are wicked, and dishonest, unfaithful and lazy. He loves us at our best, but also at our worst. Whatever standing we have with God then is not because of anything in us, but because of everything that is in Him.

To some in this life the Lord gives more and expects more. To some he gives less. Don't waste time counting other people's blessings and brooding on it. Remember, to all who believe in His name He gives eternal life. In the end, that's what we need the most and that's what He's already given us in Jesus Christ His Son. Amen.