

The Economy of Grace

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[0 : 0 0] Sometime early in the 20th century in England, there was a big conference of comparative religions,¹ where religious scholars, doctors of divinity gathered together and discussed the differences between the various religions in the world.

! To see what kind of common ground and what differences different world faiths had. There was one session where they were answering the question, what belief, if any, is unique to the Christian faith?

They discussed and they discussed. They looked at all the different doctrines of the Christian faith and they struggled to find one that was truly unique to Christianity. So they discussed the incarnation, God becoming man.

And then they said, well actually in other religions there are stories of God or God's becoming men. So that's not unique to the Christian faith. They discussed the resurrection.

And they discussed, well in other religions there's also legends of people rising from the dead. So that's not unique to the Christian faith. And so they were discussing and discussing.

[1 : 1 3] And then in walks C.S. Lewis, who many of you know is one of the greatest Christian thinkers of the last century. And he said, apparently, what's all the hubbub about?

And they said, well we're discussing this question, what's unique about the Christian faith? And he said, oh that's easy. It's grace. Grace.

Grace. And it was so true. Because in every other religion, in every other faith system, in the whole world that's ever been, every other faith system is performance based.

What that means is, how you end up in eternity depends on how well you do in this life. And that is the default understanding of our relationship with God in all other religions.

And we're so used to that way of thinking, because that is how our world works. Our world works every day we go into the world, we go to school, we go to work, and it's performance based.

[2 : 2 3] How well you end up depends on how well you perform, how well you do. If you want a good salary, you get higher qualifications, you work harder, and you get a higher salary.

That's typically how the world works. If you want to win at sports, if you want that trophy, you need to do better than the next person. It's performance based. That is how our world works.

And that is actually proof that all the other religions are really just products of our world. The kingdom of God, however, is completely different.

Because it operates not by the economy of works, but by the economy of grace. And that is the main point Jesus wants us to get in this very important parable in Matthew about the workers in the vineyard.

It's so important that we understand the heart of what Jesus is trying to teach us in this parable. And you'll notice that we started our reading this morning back in chapter 19, which overlapped with last week's sermon.

[3 : 31] The reason I wanted to start there is because this parable Jesus gives in Matthew 20 is part of his answer to Peter's question that he asks back in 19 verse 27.

So have a look or just listen to what Peter asked him in Matthew 19. Peter answered in response to what he was saying and he asked him another question.

We have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us? So Peter was saying, listen, we've done well as your disciples. What do we get? Okay, we saw this last week if you were here, if you went, download, listen to the sermon.

But basically Jesus answers him and says that in following Jesus there is always much more to be gained than there is to lose. You will lose in following Jesus in this life, but there is far more to be gained.

And that's his answer to Peter. However, he doesn't stop there because there's a problem with Peter's question that he now has to address. The problem with Peter's question is that the question itself is still assuming that the kingdom works on a performance based economy.

[4 : 41] Right. He's saying this is what we've given. This is what we've done. What are we going to get out in return? That's the underlying assumption in Peter's question that the kingdom is performance based.

And so Jesus spends the first half of here, chapter 20, correcting that underlying assumption and teaches Peter and teaches us about the economy of grace.

And this is something that we all need to grasp this morning. And there are two main things that we're going to notice in this parable about the economy of grace.

The first is who it is that God calls into his kingdom. That's the first way we see the economy of grace at work in who it is that God calls.

So reading from verse one of Matthew 20, Jesus says for the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.

[5 : 42] Now, I want to stop there and just talk about this vineyard image that we see often in the Bible. And here in the Western Cape, we know well what a vineyard looks like.

And it's an image. It's a deep, rich image used in the Bible to describe God's people and how God takes people and he plants them in this barren wilderness of a world to grow and to bless the world around them.

That's how God's people are most often described. Well, actually, there's two main images that are used to describe God's people. Dumb sheep and a beautiful vine that grows out of the barrenness and brings blessing to the world around.

And as I say, in the Western Cape, we can see we look at vineyards and we see these beautiful hills covered with vines that are growing grapes that are going to produce beautiful wine to bless the communities around them.

That's the image of what God's people planted in the world are meant to be. Now, originally, the vineyard language was used to describe the nation of Israel. Now, if you were listening carefully to Psalm 80 that was read earlier for us, you would have picked it up.

[7 : 03] And it's important to actually spend some time in that Psalm that gives us a summary of the story of God's vineyard throughout the Old Testament.

So I'm going to draw your attention and we'll put some verses of Psalm 80 up on the screen. It starts, well, talking about the vine imagery in Psalm 80 in verse 8.

And it says, this is the psalmist addressing God. It says, you transplanted a vine from Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it and it took root and filled the land.

Now, if you know your Old Testament history, you'll know what that's talking about. It's talking about the Exodus when God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. It was people who had nothing going for them, who were nothing special, and he chooses them and he miraculously rescues out.

And then they go through this journey through the wilderness and all these troubles that God protects them from. And then we read about that in Numbers and Deuteronomy. All the way to the promised land where he plants them in this land that he had planned from them.

[8 : 03] And we read about that in Joshua, the conquest, when they come into the land. And they stake the claim that God has given them on that land. And this was then followed by a time of when the great anointed kings rose up like David and Solomon and they ruled.

We read about that in Samuel and Kings and the blessing of Israel started to spread to the nations around them. And how Israel prospered as God's vine on the earth.

Verse 10 of Psalm 80 goes on, The mountains were covered with its shade. The mighty cedars with its branches. Its branches reached as far as the sea.

Its shoots as far as the river. So this was a great time of blessing where Israel, God's people, was making a difference in the world.

But then something happened. It didn't last. Because of Israel's eventual sin and rebellion that we go on in the Old Testament to read about. And it's reflected here from verse 12.

[9 : 07] Where the psalmist changes tack and he says, Why have you broken down its walls? So that those who pass by pick its grapes, boars from the forest ravage it, and insects from the fields feed on it.

And so this was the time of the decline of the nation of Israel. And yet, as we read on in Chronicles and 2 Kings, despite their sin and the downfall of the nation, there was still hope, which we read again in Psalm 80 verse 14, where the psalmist says, Return to us, God Almighty.

Look down from heaven and see. Watch over this vine. The root, your right hand is planted. The son you have raised up for yourself.

And so in that time, when the faithful in Israel were crying out to God, he rose up the great prophets, Ezekiel and Isaiah and Jeremiah, to tell of the anointed one through whom God would rebuild his vineyard.

As Psalm 80 goes on from verse 17, And let your hand rest on the man at your right hand. On the son of man you have raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you.

[10 : 22] Revive us and we will call on your name. Restore us, Lord God Almighty. Make your face shine on us that we may be saved. So this Psalm 80 is actually an amazing Psalm, because it tells the whole story from Exodus all the way to Jesus.

In these few verses, using this image of the vine that God planted, that grew, but then it was broken down, but then God has a plan to replant it through this man at his right hand, this anointed one.

Well, centuries later, Matthew is writing the Gospel, the account of the man Jesus Christ. And he's writing it specifically, as we've been seeing over the months, to show us that Jesus is this one the prophets were speaking about.

Jesus is the Son of Man, who has been raised up to rebuild God's broken vineyard, to bless the world again. And what we've been seeing, as we've been journeying through Matthew, is that the way he's doing that is by calling together a new people out of the old.

Building together a new Israel, a new vine out of the old broken one. A new blessing for the world. And this becomes, as we go on in the New Testament, we see this becomes the church.

[11 : 48] And the church, are this new vine that God is now planting in the world through his anointed one, which consists of people from every nation. And God has been doing that ever since.

As the Gospel has spread across borders and across lands throughout the world, as God's people have taken, as the church has taken the Gospel out. We read in the book of Acts how that started.

God has been calling people, calling people in every nation across the world. God has been calling people into his vineyard. To be part of what he's doing.

To be part of this project of restoration and the future he has planned for this world. That is what's going on through the church today. That is the most important thing that's going on in the world.

Is God calling people to be part of this new vineyard. But the question is, who is it that God calls to be part of that? In all the people of the world, who is it that God approaches and supernaturally calls to this great future?

[12 : 59] To be part of this project? To be part of this vineyard? Well, that's what this parable is here to teach us. Who it is that God calls to work in his vineyard? And what we notice when we read it is that the people God calls consist of various types of people, some of them more useful to him than others.

It's not just one type of person. It's not just the useful people God calls. So let's read it from verse 2. This is the parable. This master comes and now he approaches, early in the morning he approaches some workers and it goes from verse 2.

He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. Now, apparently that's slightly more than a normal wage for the day. It's quite a generous, if you could earn a denarius a day, you're doing well.

From verse 3. About nine in the morning, he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, you also go and work in my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right.

So they went. He went again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. Then about five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around.

[14 : 22] He asked them, why have you been standing here all day doing nothing? Because no one has hired us, they answered. He said to them, you also go and work in my vineyard.

Now, that is a very strange job interview. I mean, imagine it. You're there, getting an interview for your job, and then the interviewer asks you, I see on your CV you've been unemployed for a long time.

Why is that? Well, it's because no one really wanted to employ me because I'm not that good at the work. And, oh, well, well done, you've got the job.

That's not normally how a job interview goes, right, except that's what happened here. These last groups of workers that are employed, the master has no real reason to hire them.

Why would the owner hire them? There's not much to be gained from hiring them. He hires them at five in the afternoon. Now, that's the original language says the eleventh hour.

[15 : 32] It's where we get the phrase, something happens in the eleventh hour, the very kind of last minute. And he hires them at the eleventh hour, and work ends at 6 p.m. So, by Jewish timekeeping, the day, the hours started at 6 a.m.

First hour was 6 to 7, second hour was 7 to 8, third hour was 9, sixth hour was noon. The eleventh hour was 5 p.m., just before the day ends, and now this owner comes and employs them, just before the end of the work day.

Why would he do that? Why would he hire them? Also, interesting, those who were still standing around waiting for work by 5 p.m. were probably not employed because they were the oldest and the weakest, and nobody really wanted them as laborers.

This, by the way, was a common way of getting work in the ancient world. It still is today for many people, but they would live hand to mouth. It would just be whatever work they could get that day, and they would wake up early in the morning, go stand at the side of the road, and hope that someone would pass and pick them up.

And so, these guys had been standing here all day, and people have just passed them, and no work, no work, no work. And so, most likely because all of the best workers were taken, and these were the dregs that were left behind.

[17 : 03] And so, why did the owner hire them? Well, he didn't hire them because he needed them. That's the important thing to realize about these 11th hour workers.

The vineyard owner didn't go and hire them because he needed them. He hired them because they needed him. They needed the work. As I said, this was a subsistence economy.

If they didn't get work that day, they would not have been able to feed themselves and their families. And so, they relied each day on the work they get that day to survive into the next day.

And so, here you've got this picture of these last workers, the dejected ones. And they're sitting there, and they're depressed, and they're sad because they've been sitting there all day trying to get work, and no one's employed them.

They know that they're going to have to go home and tell their family that there's nothing today to eat. No one wants them. They're about to pack up and go, and then along comes this rich vineyard owner, and he looks at them and says, Come.

[18 : 13] Come, I'll give you a job. Come, join me. And they're kind of, it's five in the afternoon. What possible work could we do now? No, come. Come, I want you to work. That's the picture.

It's a beautiful picture. And it reveals the type of vineyard owner this is. That's what this parable is actually here to do. It's to reveal the heart of the vineyard owner who represents God.

It's to reveal to us the type of God we have. We have a God who calls into his vineyard those who have nothing to give.

Those who are not useful. Those who he doesn't need. He still calls them. And he gives them a place in his vineyard.

God's got a place for you in his vineyard. No matter who you are. Even if you don't think you've got much to give. Even if you don't think you've got much to offer God and his kingdom.

[19 : 15] If there's not much on your CV that makes you useful for God, you don't think you'll be a very good Christian. Well, it doesn't matter to God because he delights to call those who have nothing to offer.

And he delights to employ in his vineyard. And give a job to do to those who can't do anything for him.

He delights to employ them and to give them a place in his future that he has planned for this world. And in the work that he's doing in this world. Not because he needs them, but because they need it.

Because you need it. You need to be caught up in what God is doing in the world. I need to be caught up in what God is doing in this world. And God delights to call us to that.

No matter who we are. That's how the economy of grace works. That's how the economy of grace works. God calling those who have nothing to give.

[20 : 21] But that's not all. We go on to see grace, not just in who God calls to his kingdom, but secondly in this parable, how God rewards those he's called.

So something fascinating happens next. Let's read from verse 8. Verse 8. Verse 8. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired, those eleventh hour workers, and going on to the first.

Workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more, but each one of them also received a denarius.

When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. These who were hired last worked only one hour, they said.

And you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day. Okay, you can kind of understand why they're grumpy, right?

[21 : 39] This is not a good remuneration policy. It will never actually work in the real workplace. Imagine it just for a second.

Imagine you come to work and you come every morning at 8 in the morning, you're at work and you work consistently through, and you just take like a half an hour lunch break all the way until 5 in the afternoon.

Every day. And then, one of your colleagues, who's actually less qualified than you, comes in at about 12, 1, takes a whole hour lunch break and then leaves work at 3, and gets paid the same as you.

Or imagine, imagine if you're at school doing exams. I know many of you are getting ready to do exams, right? Imagine you study and you work to do this exam, and then you do the exam, and it's 3 hour long and you've got 4 essay papers to write.

And you just scrape through, because it's a really hard exam. But imagine, one of the other students comes in, sits next to you, they spend 10 minutes, they answer like 3 multiple choice questions, and they get the same mark as you for the exam.

[22 : 58] In fact, they get better. Now that would be unfair. You know, different standards. The economy would not work if people were awarded in that way.

In fact, we've seen in history, when Soviet Russia and communist countries tried to do something similar, where everybody got the same no matter what work they did, it didn't work.

They all collapsed. That's not how the economy works in our world. And yet, Jesus is saying here, that is how God's economy works.

That is how the economy of grace works, whether we like it or not. It's completely different to how our world works. Now, that might seem unfair.

And that is why we need to hear the owner's reply when he was accused of being unfair from verse 13. Look what he says.

[23 : 57] But he answered one of them, I'm not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go.

I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?

He's got a point, right? It's his money. He can do what he wants with it. He's got every right to pay the last workers the same as what he agreed to pay the first.

God has every right to be like this. God has every right to reward people seemingly unfairly like this.

Why? Why does God have every right to reward people like that? I'll tell you why. Because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of the gospel of grace.

[24 : 58] Because of what Jesus did when he came here. What he did for his people. That is what gives God the right to do this. When Jesus came to do on our behalf what we could not do for ourselves.

In both dying for the sins we could never pay for. And then securing an eternal reward that we could never earn. That is what Jesus did when he came, when he died, when he rose again.

And that is what Paul means when he writes in Romans 8, 17. He writes this. Listen to these words.

Now if we are children, then we are heirs. Heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

Co-heirs with Christ. Do you know what that means? That we are co-heirs with Christ? Do you know what it means? It means we get to share in what Jesus inherits.

[26 : 07] We get, if we are united to Christ by faith, if we trust in him as our Lord and Savior, because of what he did for us, we get what he has earned.

What God has, the Father has planned to give to him, his inheritance, we get it. Even though he earned it. That is the unfair generosity of God to all who he's called to believe in Christ.

He gets to do this. He gets to unfairly reward those who haven't earned it because of the gospel of Jesus. And he delights to do it. He wants to do it. To those who have nothing to give.

To those who couldn't earn it. That's at the heart of this vineyard owner. That's at the heart of God. He delights to give people what they don't deserve.

That is the generosity of God to all that he's called to believe in Christ. If you are one of those people, if he has called you to believe in Jesus Christ, as your Lord and as your King and as your Savior, what that means, if you believe in him today, God has called you to that faith.

[27 : 26] What that means is that God has resolved to reward you lavishly with what you haven't earned. God has, he wants to, and he's planned to, to reward you with what you haven't earned.

Now, does that mean that we then just sit back and do nothing in this life? Because God has already resolved to reward his people with so much more than they earned, and it doesn't matter what they do then?

No. No. Because notice, even the workers that were employed last were still employed to work. Even though it was just an hour, they still did work in the vineyard.

And let me tell you, they probably worked their heart out because of the grace of the vineyard owner. That they still got a job, even after waiting all day. They probably went in that and they worked as much as they could, and they delighted in it because of the grace of the one who employed them.

That is the picture of Christians and the life we are called to live. We don't do it out of reluctance. We don't do it because we have to. We do it because we get to, because we've experienced the grace of God.

[28 : 40] Ephesians 2, 8-9, a classic passage that tells us about this. It says, We are saved by God through grace alone, not through work, so that no one can boast.

But then it goes on to say, We have been saved to be God's workmanship, to do the good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do. We are not saved by our works, but we are saved to work, to be new people, to live new lives.

So, the fact that God has resolved to reward you with what you haven't earned does not mean we don't do anything. It means that we now have even more incentive to live for God because of the grace we've experienced.

And also, it doesn't mean that God wants to reward everyone equally. We must understand this to mean that we're not rewarded by God for particular things we do in this life for him and for the kingdom.

In fact, later on, Matthew 25, Jesus tells another parable, the parable of the talents, where he implies that there are different responsibilities given to different people in the new creation based on how they used what God gave them in this world.

[29 : 55] And so, what we do with what God gives us in this world is important. But, that is not the point of this parable in front of us today. The point of this parable, and what we need to get this morning, is that whatever we receive from God as his people, it will be undeserved.

Ultimately, everything we get from him is a result of his grace and not your performance. Get that. Get that this morning. Everything you receive from God will be a result of his grace, not a result of your work or what you've done.

If you are one of his people this morning, God is planning to give you way more than you have earned. So, take a moment to rest in that.

I don't think we do that often enough. I don't think we rest in this truth often enough of the grace of God. Take a moment to rest in that fact. Take a few moments every day to rest in this truth.

Especially when you feel inadequate. Especially when you feel like you've fallen short. Especially when you feel like you've failed God. That you're not good enough. That you're not being the Christian that you should be.

[31 : 14] When you feel like, oh, I've disappointed God again. When you've missed your quiet time. When you've not lived, when you reacted badly in that situation. And you just, you know what I mean?

We all get to that point where we feel, I'm not good enough today. It's in those moments that you've got to rest in this truth that this parable teaches. It's in those moments you've got to realize that nothing you do or fail to do today is going to change God's generosity towards you in Jesus.

And his unwavering desire to give you way more than you deserve or could ever earn. He wants to and he will. If you're his child.

Rest. Rest in that. Rest in that. That is the economy of grace. That is what Jesus wants us to realize about his father in this parable.

But there's also a warning in it. Did you realize? Did you notice? There's a warning in this parable. It's a hugely, hugely encouraging parable where we learn about the heart of our God and the economy of grace.

[32 : 22] But there is a warning in it as well. And it's a warning to those who have done a lot for God. Those who have lived a good Christian life.

Maybe for many years. And we see this warning in the reaction of the workers who were hired first.

And the warning is don't do what they did in verse 12. When they grumbled. Because the less deserving got the same reward as them.

Let me read verse 12 again. They said, These who were hired last worked only one hour. And you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

And so you actually see in their response. You see the issue. You see the real issue. When they said, You have made them equal to us. They didn't want to be equal. They wanted to be better. They felt they deserved more.

[33 : 29] Right? Because they worked more. And you know what? That attitude. That attitude is all over the church.

That attitude can so easily present in Christians. Especially those who have been Christians for many years. It's the same attitude.

The whole book of Jonah is in the Bible to warn us against. It's the attitude Jonah had towards the Ninevites. Remember that? Where the Ninevites were these wicked pagans that God chose to save. And Jonah got angry because they didn't deserve it.

He got angry at God's grace. Because the Ninevites didn't deserve his salvation. But that's the point. You see, none of us do. None of us deserve God's salvation.

The workers who were hired first. The workers who were hired last. None of them deserve to be employed by this God. But out of his grace, he calls them and he rewards them. And so if you are irritated that God calls wicked sinners with messed up lifestyles.

[34 : 36] And you think that you perhaps have more claim to a place in his church than they do. If you get uncomfortable with less decent people starting to come to church and sit next to you.

Well then let me tell you something. You've misunderstood grace. And you don't believe the gospel. Because you don't understand the gospel. Because those who understand the gospel.

Those who believe the gospel of grace. Those who have truly tasted God's grace in Jesus Christ. Themselves become people of grace.

Like the master who called and saved them. They do what he did. They reward others with favor that they did not earn. They show grace to those around them.

They show grace in their home. To their husband. To their wife. To their brother. To their sister. When they don't deserve that grace. That is the heart of a true Christian home.

[35 : 41] You want to know if a home is truly Christian? It's when you go in there and you see grace in the relationships. Because that is the heart of a Christian home. It's undeserved grace and favor to those who have not earned it.

Because that is at the heart of a true Christian who has been saved by grace. Because that is the heart of the gospel. You want to know what the heart of the gospel is?

As C.S. Lewis said, it's grace. It's undeserved favor to those who haven't earned it. And those people who have been saved by that gospel will start to show grace in their homes.

And then they will start to show grace in the world around them. To those that they come across daily. They will favor those who can't give them anything. In a world where people are only interested in those who can do something for them.

Christians, those who are saved by grace, will be interested in and love and show favor to those who can do nothing for them. And who haven't earned it.

[36 : 49] That's how you know someone's really a Christian. That's how you know someone really believes this gospel. This is the light of the grace that this dark world is in such desperate need of.

But only Christians can give it because only Christians have received it truly. Have you this morning? While you're still operating under the economy of works.

You know, so many people have come to church for decades.

And they're still operating under the economy of work. They're still going to earn favor. To work so that God will give them rewards. So many Christians can come to church for decades and they still are not operating under the economy of grace.

Themselves and they're not showing grace to others. Because so many churches still operate under the economy of works. The way they're set up.

[38 : 02] And you know how you can tell that a church is a church that operates under the economy of works and not under the economy of grace? It's an easy way to tell.

Sinners don't feel welcome there. When you invite sinners to that church, they go, I can't possibly go there. I'm not good enough. Well, that's a church that's still operating not under the economy of grace, but under the economy of works.

Let's not be one of them. Let's not be one of those churches here at St. Mark's in Plumstead. Rather, let's be a church where anybody can come and anybody feels welcome and anybody can come and experience the grace of God because they're experiencing it through the grace of His people who have been transformed by grace.

And that is a grace that they won't find anywhere else in this world. Let's be a church that operates the economy of grace for a world that is bound to this economy of work and performance.

Let's be different. Let's be people who show God's grace to the world. Let's pray. Let's pray. Oh, Lord, we thank you that you are the vineyard owner who calls those who have done nothing and can do nothing for you.

[39 : 32] Lord, that you are a God who delights to call and reward those who have not earned it. And that that is the heart of the gospel. We thank you, Lord, for that assurance today that you delight to reward your children with what they haven't earned.

And I pray, Lord, that you would help us here at St. Mark's to be a people who show that grace to those around us, who display that grace in our homes and who display that grace to the world around us because it is your heart that you want the world to know.

And, Lord, we pray that you would use us as a people who really genuinely show grace to the world. And through that, that glorify you in Jesus' name. Amen.