

Amazing Grace: WHAT Kind of Sound?

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard: Matthew 20:1-16

I want to start by asking you a question; a *personal* question. How much did you get paid at your first job? Think about that and we will come back to that question in a minute.

Right now pay and benefits are lightning-rod issues. Around our community we see signs like these two.



The U.A.W. is on strike against the “Big Three” automakers, and maybe that affects your family. Amherst school teachers are picketing as they work without a contract. I don’t know what the workers’ demands are, or the employers’ offers. Both sides want “what’s fair,” and both sides have different ideas about “what’s fair” pay and benefits. In the end, these disputes will eventually find solutions, and “what’s fair” will be whatever amount both sides agree to. Neither side will end up getting everything they want.

Back to our question: How much did you get paid at your first job? My first hourly job paid \$1.15 / hour. Let’s hear from some of you, because I’d bet some got pay far below that.
Now, would that rate be fair pay today?

Today, we hear Jesus tell us a story about pay. The workers have an idea of what they believe is fair pay. And the workers expect the employer – the owner of a vineyard – to pay according to their sense of what is right and fair. The employer, however, has very different ways of running his business. And it ticks some people off!

Have you ever been unhappy with your boss at work? Have you ever been scheduled to work a shift when you really wanted to be off? Ever been assigned a task at work that you hate doing?

In those situations, what do you do? Just not show up for work? Just not do the task you don't like to do? Those are options, but if you go that route you might get fired.

Or do you quit? Turn in your resignation? Tell the boss, "Hey boss, you need to listen to ME. Boss, you need to do what I tell YOU to do." How would that go over?

And if you were the boss, how would you respond? Better yet, if you were the owner of the company – the owner of the vineyard in today's story – what might you say to an *employee* who tells *you* how to run *your* business?

As the owner of the company, the master of the vineyard might be polite. He might just smile back, say "Thank you so much for your advice," and then ignore what you said.

As the owner of the vineyard, you might say to a worker who feels entitled, "Keep your opinions to yourself and just get to work."

Or you might say, "Looky here. I'M the boss. You're NOT! Do what I tell you, or else, I'll show you the door."

Maybe that style of boss is too "old-school," too hard-nosed for these days.

These days company owners try not to upset demanding workers for fear of a lawsuit. And we've all heard of stories of workers these days who show up at a job interview with a mindset of interviewing *the employer*. Workers today want more than a paycheck. They want flexible schedules, free food and snacks, a company health club, and on-site free child care.

That attitude about work, fits today's world. People want things *their* way. People don't buy a plain cup of coffee anymore. They are willing to wait in long lines for a Pumpkin Cream Chai Tea Latte, or and Iced Apple Crisp Oatmilk Shaken Espresso. We live in a world where you can have it – no, you demand it – your own way.

Everyone expects, and demands, to have things as they choose.

Into this attitude of entitlement comes Jesus. His story will – and should – shake you.

Let me give you some background: Jesus has been on this theme of talking about what does it take to be right with God. The religious leaders and Pharisees of Jesus' day, assumed they were right with God because they kept all these rules meticulously. They believed God had a high standard they had to meet to be favored by God, and they were proud of perfectly meeting this high standard. That's what they thought. Then Jesus, blew them out of the water by saying: ***“Unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*** *Matthew 18:3-4*

Jesus isn't talking about actual children here. He is talking metaphorically, symbolically. Children, Jesus says, are humble. They are completely dependent on another person's care, and they know it. Kids aren't loved by their parents because they have lots of money to offer Mom and Dad, because they are so perfectly behaved, or because kids are so neat, tidy, and inexpensive to have around. No, kids don't bring anything to the bargaining table. They are humble. They simply trust that Mom and Dad love them and will care for them. In the same way, God seeks people who don't brag about their accomplishments or think they are so perfect that they have no sin to be forgiven. God welcomes anyone who humbly admits their sin, pleads for God's forgiveness, and trusts He will – lavish sweet undeserved, unearned love on them.

Jesus doubles-down on this idea when in the next chapter He says: ***“Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”*** *Matthew 19:14* Again, He is not talking about literal children, but about people – people who know they bring nothing to God. They simply rely on His grace. These are the people, Jesus says, who are welcomed into God's Kingdom.

This phrase Jesus uses, “The kingdom of heaven,” or “the kingdom of God” don't simply mean heaven to come. It's more. Much more. The kingdom of heaven is God's total blessing. It is

living in Jesus' forgiveness, with His peace, living now close to God, certain of His love, filled with His love, living according to God's commandments, **and** looking forward to eternal life in heaven.

Who does God welcome into this Kingdom of Heaven? Anyone who turns away from sin. Anyone who turns from breaking God's heart by their disobedience, and then turns to Jesus like a beggar bringing nothing, but just asking for forgiveness, and trusting God is gracious and loving.

Next event in Jesus' life is He meets this **Rich Young Ruler**
Matthew 19:16-24 People back then thought that being rich was a sign of God's favor. Here's this rich guy, who keeps all those religious rules, but he's proud. He thinks he has no sin. He thinks he has earned and deserves a place in this Kingdom of Heaven. But in his heart he really loves his money, not God. Jesus rejects this rich guy, and the disciples are shocked. Matthew tells us: ***"When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?'"***
Matthew 19:25 "You mean, Jesus, that riches don't get us in to favor with God?"

Well if riches aren't the trick, how about serving? Does working hard for the church, even suffering for God get a person into the Kingdom of Heaven? After all, the disciples have given up 3 years of their lives. What's in it for them? ***"Then Peter said in reply [to Jesus], 'See, we have left everything and followed You. What then will we have?'"*** *Matthew 19:27*

So Jesus tells this parable, this story today, to tell us who is welcome into God's favor. Who is it that God blesses now and gives heaven to come? Jesus says:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard."
Matthew 20:1-2

This story about a vineyard is really about the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said. It's about believers. It's a story about the

church now on earth and heaven to come. The owner represents God. The question is who gets into God's vineyard?

In the story, the owner goes early in the morning to hire workers. That was a normal thing to do. Day laborers gathered in the city square. Owners went there if they needed to hire a crew. This owner has a harvest of grapes that needs picking before they spoil in the fields. So he goes at 6AM, hires workers, agrees on pay, and sends them to work. A denarius was the usual daily wage.

That should be the end of the story. Workers are needed. The owner seeks a crew, hires them, they work, and then they get paid. End of story. But not in this story as Jesus tells it.

“And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went.” *Matthew 20:3-5a*

The owner goes back at 9 AM and hires more workers. Then at noon he goes back and hires more workers. Then at 3pm he goes back again. And Jesus tells us, ***“And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’”*** *Matthew 20:6-7* These weren't lazy people, they just hadn't been hired at all. It's now 5 in the afternoon – almost quit'n time.

What is so infuriating in this story is this vineyard owner! He hires workers, but just won't leave well enough alone! He keeps going and going, and going to town. This guy just won't sit still. He wants as many workers as possible.

Then, at 6:00pm, it's time to call it a day. He gives the foreman a pile of cash and gives the foreman some special instructions. ***“And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.”***

Matthew 20:8-10

They all got paid. They should just head home. But, you can guess how the workers react. Jesus said: ***“Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 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.’”*** *Matthew 20:10-12*

They grumbled. The pay scale wasn't fair! They want the owner to run his business according to *their* sense of fairness.

And here comes the zinger! The owner – Jesus -- says, ***“But he replied to one of them, ‘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?’”*** *Matthew 20:13-15*

This master says, “This is MY vineyard. I'll run it how I want. I really didn't ask for your advice, nor do I want it.” The owner wants to be ... NOT fair, but strangely, infuriatingly *GRACIOUS* to as many people as he can.

Where do you and I fit into this story? Aren't we often like the protesting workers? **We want God's kingdom to work as WE see fit!**

Every time we sin we are telling God, “No, not Your way, God. I'm doing what I want.” We defy and rebel, yet we still expect to waltz right into God's kingdom as if we are doing Him a favor.

Just look at the world right around us. Do people live as God commands? No. They usually know what is right and wrong, its just that they don't care. They don't care what God says, or respect His authority to run this world He made and run His kingdom as He sees is best. And folks, you're no different.

In the church, somebody wealthy comes along and we give them special treatment: elect them to boards, give their words extra weight in voters' meetings, treat them as V.I.P.'s.

And like the disciples, we expect people who have served in the church to call the shots. Not those new-comers! We've been here for years. Our families go back generations in this church and great grandpa put the plumbing in the old church building. So we've earned a place.

AMAZING GRACE IS AN OFFENSIVE Sound !

God doesn't look on things with our eyes, with the values of this world. God doesn't respect riches, or what we do as earning VIP passes into His graces.

At the University of Atlanta, researchers gave Capuchin monkeys the task of picking up a small granite stone and bringing it to the researcher within one minute. If they did it successfully, each monkey was given a slice of cucumber. The scheme worked well. It was a happy lab situation as long as each monkey got the same pay. Then the researchers gave one monkey a grape for its rewarded while all the rest still got a slice of cucumber. Rebellion broke out. First all the cucumber receiving monkeys refused to work anymore. Then they started throwing the cucumber slices and the granite stones out of the cage. Paying one different for the same work offended the monkeys' sense of justice.

Paying the workers the same for different amounts of work offended the laborers in the vineyard. God's ways of doing things are not our ways, and it offends us.

**THE MASTER'S (GOD'S) SELECTION OFFENDS us.
As Many as possible.**

The vineyard owner went back again and again and again to bring in more workers. God, too, wants as many people as possible in His kingdom and He is willing to be, not fair, but gracious to do it. He will allow in even people we think are unworthy and not respectable.

**Anyone who is Child-like
(Turns away from sin & Trusts Jesus Only)**

There is only one way into God's kingdom and it's the grace way. The only way is through Jesus, His Son. Anyone who is childlike humble, freely admitting they can't get in on their own but they need help – they need forgiveness. Anyone who knows they

don't have a hope or a prayer to get into the Kingdom of Heaven on their own, but who also breath a prayer of confession and hope in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – anyone who will receive God's grace is welcome in.

Even today, however, this offends us. All around, people today say choosing an LGBTQ lifestyle is good, to be accepted and celebrated by all. God, however, is really clear in the Bible that this is sinful. Its no more or less sinful than lust, or greed, or lying, or any other sin. But sin is not something that we take pride in. sin is not something that we say, "God's Word must be wrong because He says this..." Sin is simply to be confessed, admitted, turned away from. Like a humble child we turn to our Heavenly Father and ask for His help, his forgiveness. We turn to His grace in Jesus.



This week I was talking to my wife about her days as a lifeguard. She said they train lifeguards how to break free from a drowning swimmer who is still trying to save himself. When a person is in danger in the water, they have to be passive and let the lifeguard save them. If the person grabs onto their rescuer, most likely both will drown.



One week ago in St. Louis, Missouri, a stray puppy showed up on a family's porch step. The dog wasn't injured but would not leave. The family called the stray rescue of St.



Louis, who came out to the house. Every time they tried to approach the puppy it lunged at them. Finally, the rescuers waited until the dog tired itself out. Then they could help it.



Once it stopped fighting and submitted, they



were able to take it to the animal shelter. The puppy, whom they named Babbit, is doing fine.

Jesus waits until we stop struggling and we give up hope of ever saving ourselves. No pride that we're so good we don't need to confess our sinful need. No confidence that we've worked in the church so long and hard. No VIP passes in because we think God's just gotta pick us. No fair pay. Only the extravagant, lavish, foolish, unfair grace of God. Jesus offers forgiveness and life eternal as a gift, free-and-clear, to anyone, anyone, and everyone, who turns to Him trusting only in His grace.

Who is Welcome in God's Kingdom?

- **All are Invited.**
- **Some Grumble and Reject the Terms.**

Who is Welcome in God's Kingdom?

- **YOU when you become like little children – that is,**

humble, dependent, grateful. Let the Owner, God, set the rules of operating His own kingdom. Listen to God's Word. Read God's Word. Trust it. Follow it. Obey it.

Who is Welcome in God's Kingdom?

- **There is only ONE way in – through Jesus' forgiving grace.**

There is more than enough grace for anyone and everyone.
God's grace is foolishly extravagant!

AMAZING GRACE IS A SWEET, sweet, sweet Sound ! And it's for ALL who turn to Jesus for forgiveness!

It's for all, ALL, ALL who turn to Jesus for forgiveness. AMEN.