

The beauty of grace is that it makes life unfair. One of my favorite Christian bands uses this phrase in one of their songs. And I've always thought it was profoundly simple expression of the Gospel. The beauty of grace is that it makes life unfair.

That's really Jesus' message in our Gospel lesson today. Grace is unfair. And that's what makes it beautiful. If the master were fair, those five groups of workers would have received five different payments. The first group would have received wages for 12 hours of labor. The second for 9 hours. The third for 6. The fourth for 3. And the fifth for only one hour of work.

But they all receive the same payment. Those who work 12 hours receive a denarius. Those who work 1 hour receive a denarius. "What gives," the first group asks. "We worked longer. Why aren't we being paid more? We deserve it."

But the master's logic is inescapable. I told you that I'd pay you a denarius for a day's work. I've paid you a denarius for a day's work. How have I cheated you out of anything? What right do you have to tell me how much I pay my workers? If I want to pay everyone a denarius, I can pay everyone a denarius.

There's a certain capitalist, free-market logic to what he says that I think should resonate with Americans. There are conservatives all over this country who argue against minimum wage laws on the exact same grounds. A business owner should be free to pay his employees what ever he wants.

But this parable isn't about owning a business 21<sup>st</sup> century America. It's about the eternal kingdom of God. And the money that's being paid here isn't cold hard cash. It's God's grace poured out on us for our salvation. And the question of whether or not the master of the house is being fair is very much bound together with our parable from last week.

A king who forgives the debt of his servant. An enormous debt of 10,000 talents. Billions of dollars, we estimated. And he does it for no other reason than to teach the servant a measure of forgiveness for his other neighbors in need. The king is trying to bring his servant from a physical kingdom of law and into a spiritual kingdom of gospel.

Well, that parable and this parable are only about a chapter apart in Matthew's gospel. And frankly, I think the king in the first one could be the same person as the master in the second. Because they think and act in exactly the same way. They both operate in a spiritual kingdom of gospel. And it is not a kingdom of fairness.

I mean, really and truly, is forgiveness ever really fair? Is it fair to forgive someone's debts? No. It's not. Not in a kingdom of law. But in a kingdom of gospel, things are different. Not so much because the rules are different, but because the one making the rules is different.

As Isaiah points out this morning, God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. And God's grace isn't like money. Money is finite. There's a limited supply of it. God's grace is infinite. It's poured out more and more each day. And if God wants to pour out more grace on us, that's his choice.

So if the king wants to forgive the enormous debt of his servant and the master wants to pay all his workers the same, they're each free to do so. If God wants to forgive the man guilty of murder the same as the man guilty of a speeding ticket, he's free to do so. If God wants to forgive the member who only comes to church on Christmas and Easter the same as the member who comes to church week in and week out for their entire lives, he's free to do so. If God wants to forgive the person who was baptized on their deathbed the same as the person who was baptized as an infant, he's free to do so.

Because the truth is that you are not the worker who worked 12 hours. You are not the worker who worked 9 hours, or 6 hours, or 3 hours. You aren't even the worker who worked 1 hour. You have done nothing to earn God's grace. No, it was Jesus Christ who worked 12 hours. And he has handed to us that denarius from the master, even though we did nothing at all to earn it.

12 hours Christ worked for us. Literally, 12 hours from the moment he first stood before Pilate and had a crown of thorns put on his head. 12 hours while he was stripped and beaten and forced to carry his cross. 12 hours as he was crucified and the sun itself couldn't even bear to beat down on him as he did his work. 12 hours until he was laid in a grave we deserve.

The beauty of grace is that it makes life unfair. We look around at those we think sin so much worse than we do. At those we think sin so much more than we do. At those we think do so much less for God than we do. And we think its unfair that God saves them.

But the only thing that's unfair is that my Lord had to die for me. And the grace that he shows everyone else, is not only none of my business. But it's, in fact, the beauty of our Lord's grace poured out on this earth. Because in their forgiveness, I see my forgiveness. It gives me hope that if God forgives all of them. Well, then, maybe he forgives me too.

And that way of thinking about grace and our place in God's grace is kind of the message that Paul is getting at this morning. Because Paul makes some rather odd statements. Things that make it sound like he's... well... almost suicidal.

But not in a bad way, if you understand him. Paul is eager to be with his Lord. He looks at death without any fear or uncertainty. Death has lost its sting. The grave has lost its victory. The moment that Paul dies will be his moment of greatest joy.

It's a level of peace that I cannot even hope to comprehend. Something truly granted by the Spirit. And often, to very few of us. Even the strongest Christians I have known have looked at death with at least a little bit of fear and anxiety. But Paul reveals none of that.

So Paul is ready to die the moment his Lord chooses to take him. And yet, despite the fact that his *“desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”* He also acknowledges that *“to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.”*

What does he mean? He means, that the Philippian Christians need him. And the Roman Christians need him. And young pastors like Timothy need him. And we need him. God has given him a great task. *“Fruitful labor,”* he calls it. To bring others the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To bring God's amazingly unfair grace to all the world. Grace that saved even a Pharisee who persecuted Christians. And made him an Apostle for the Lord.

That same grace has been given to us. And that same grace flows out of us. So that we proclaim that those who have debts far greater than they can ever repay are forgiven by their king. And those who have not done even an hour of labor for their master can receive payment for their sin.

To die is gain. But to live is Christ. To live is to work in Christ's kingdom. Telling all the world of our gracious master. We are alive because Christ lives in us. And we continue to live, and not simply depart this world for the glories of heaven, because we have our own fruitful labors to accomplish in this world.

God has left you here for a reason. And that reason is not to get caught up in worldly ways of thinking. Where the law of fairness is all that matters.

No, God has left you here to live by his ways and think with his thoughts. And show the world a God who treats us not as we deserve. But far better. Who brings the glory of his gospel into our very souls. And makes our lives wonderfully unfair with the beauty of his grace. Amen.