

The Gracious Way of the King  
 Matthew 20:1-16  
 Tampa Covenant Church  
 22 March 2026

Proposition: As faithful disciples, we serve a gracious king who has summoned us into his kingdom by grace; thus, we labor diligently for him with hearts of gratitude.

FCF: Relying on merit as Christ's disciples rather than his grace.

RHF: Jesus Christ is the true master of the vineyard who merited our salvation by becoming last for us in order that we might be recipients of God's grace and labor for his gospel with hearts of gratitude.

### **(#1) Introduction:**

Today marks the conclusion of our Gospel series entitled, *"The Way of the King."* Throughout this series we've seen how Jesus' kingship becomes visible during his earthly ministry. From the beginning of his gospel, Matthew has shown us that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the faithful Son of the Father who fulfills Israel's calling as a light to the nations. And as Christ followers; we're called to walk in the way of the king as we labor for the kingdom. We'll see today, it's a way of grace. But if we're honest; we sometimes overlook the sufficiency of God's grace in our discipleship. Because there's that thing in us that pines to be recognized and rewarded for what we've done. It's the world we live in: you put in your time; work hard, sacrifice more than others and you expect to be rewarded accordingly. And oftentimes that mindset can carry over into our labor for the kingdom.

This isn't anything new. In chap 19, a rich young man asks Jesus, *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Jesus tells him to sell his stuff and follow him. And he walked away sorrowful because he couldn't part with his wealth. Then Jesus turns to the disciples and says, *"It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."* The disciples are shaken and Peter responds for the group, *"See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"* It's an honest question but when we dig a little deeper; it reveals how easily our hearts can think of discipleship in terms of a transaction: *"I do for you Jesus then you do for me."* Nonetheless, Jesus assures Peter rewards are sure to come but he also throws out a word of caution: *"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."* And with that, Jesus tells a story of the kingdom. One that calls us to examine the motives behind our discipleship. Why are we laboring for the kingdom? Because this story reveals the nature of the kingdom and the character of our King. So as we walk through the text, we'll highlight the gracious summons of our king, his scandalous generosity and his response to those who begrudge his generosity.

### **The Gracious Summons of our King:** *Grace to the poor and needy (vv.1-7)*

Jesus begins the **(#2) story by saying**, *"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."* And after agreeing with them for a denarius,<sup>1</sup> which is a day's pay; he sent them into the vineyard. **(#3) He goes out again** at the 3<sup>rd</sup> hour and sees others standing *"idle"* in the marketplace and tells them, *"you go to the vineyard and I'll give you whatever is right."* At the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> hour he goes out again and basically says the same thing. **(#4) And Finally**, he does the unthinkable, in vv.6-7, it's the 11<sup>th</sup> hour and he goes out yet again and finds more workers: *"Why do you stand idle here all day?"... "No one has hired us."* Well, *"You go to the vineyard too."*

**(#5 Blank) On the surface**....one might argue this vineyard owner is pretty unorganized; he doesn't have a plan! But Jesus isn't giving a lesson on how to execute a proper harvest plan. He's granting us a portrait of grace; unearned and undeserved favor that's lavished on us from God alone. First, grace is God's sole initiative, not ours. In every instance, the master went out to find workers; they never came looking for him. Second, grace meets us in our need. Every one of these workers was poor and needy,<sup>2</sup> and completely incapable of changing their situation unless the master intervened. When we step back from the text, I trust we see ourselves in the story. One can be flourishing materially in this world, enjoying all the markers of success but apart from God's gracious intervention in their lives; they're suffering from a kind of spiritual poverty that they can't hustle their way out of. This is a sobering depiction of the fallen human condition apart from God; totally incapable of producing the ultimate change one deeply desires. And living with no real hope for the future.

What fallen humanity needs is a new heart; one that has been quickened by the Spirit to hear the voice of the King and follow him. And with that new heart comes a new record; one no longer defined by past failures and futile attempts to be perfect; but now freed from guilt and shame and counted righteous before God. And from that flows a new hope; a settled confidence that we belong to the King; therefore, we labor diligently in his kingdom, anchored in his sure and secure promises for our future. Church, this is how one enters into the kingdom of God; not by individual effort, but by sheer grace; and it's that same grace that shapes how we live and labor in the kingdom.

And notice in the story, the gracious summons came at different times throughout the day; from the 1<sup>st</sup> hour right up to the 11<sup>th</sup>. But it's not about the timeline. The point is that regardless of when they were called; all the workers shared the same condition; poor, needy and dependent on the grace of the master. And this should shape how we understand life together in the kingdom. Because we all have differing testimonies of when we came to faith in Christ; for some of us it was early and for others not so early. But what binds us together is that no matter when we were called, all of us were given the profound privilege of drinking deeply from the same wellspring of God's grace. Therefore, we all give glory to God alone for rescuing us out of the estate of sin and misery in bringing us into his kingdom. When we labor together for the gospel with this in view; it preserves our unity as God's people. Because shared grace leaves no room for pride or comparison in God's kingdom. But what happens next in this story shows us just how quickly this shared grace can be cast aside when our King doesn't operate according to our expectations.

### **The Scandalous Generosity of our King:** *Grace vs. merit (vv.8-12)*

**(#6) In v. 8, evening** comes and the owner of the vineyard orders the foreman to call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last up to the first. So, the foreman started with those hired at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour and paid them a denarius; a full day's wage for one hour of work!! Whoa... You can sense the mental math taking place at the back of the line; *"work one hour and get a denarius; I've worked for twelve hours; I'm about to get paid!!"* But when they step forward, they too receive a denarius. And those who were hired first grumbled...and it wasn't a slight gruff; we're talking about ongoing, full-blown protest **(#7) against the** master.<sup>3</sup> *"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."*

The first hired are outraged at the generosity of the master toward the last hired. According to their logic, they put in more work during the roughest portion of the day; therefore, they should've been paid more. (#8 Blank) In our culture, it looks like someone who's enjoying long tenure on the job and known as an employee who's always first in and last out and is atop the leader board in all categories. And when year-end bonuses are paid; they expect the lion's share because of their tenure and top performance. But after cashing the check; they discover employees hired just a few weeks ago; received the exact same bonus; and naturally they cry foul! Now, that may hold water in the real world but not in the kingdom. Again, we all enter into the kingdom by God's grace; therefore, life in this kingdom continues with grace not merit. Grace is antithetical to merit: Grace looks at that denarius and says, *"I don't deserve this"* while merit looks at it and says, *"I deserve more; I worked harder."* That's the problem here, those hired first jettisoned the grace that brought them into the vineyard and are now laser focused on merit. They're thinking transactionally, *"boss, you owe us more because we worked longer and harder for you than they did."* In their minds, the vineyard owner wasn't acting fairly because he made the last hired *"equal to them"* in giving them equal pay.<sup>4</sup>

This takes us right back to Peter's question: *"We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"* Again, those kinds of questions expose the fact that we're keeping score in our relationship with God and with fellow laborers. As we operate on the faulty assumption that greater effort and sacrifice for the kingdom should result in a greater reward. (#9) And beloved we know how it goes: *God, it's not fair that \_\_\_\_\_ because I \_\_\_\_\_.* We've all played the fairness card in our lives and it usually surfaces when things don't go according to expectation. But when we play that card in our relationship with God; we're playing with a losing hand. Because grace doesn't play according to the rules of merit and fairness and that's why it brings out the ugly in us. But the sobering reality is this: if we approach a holy God on the basis of fairness and merit, then what we should expect is not reward, but judgment for our sin and rebellion against him. Here in v.13 and following, the master responds to these merit-based workers and his answer reveals the nature of the kingdom and the character of our King.

**The Response of the King:** *Do you begrudge my generosity? (vv.13-15)*

(#10) Picking up in v.13, the master now responds to the chief plaintiff, and he doesn't respond in kind, rather he calls him *"friend."* And then hits him with the facts, *"I am doing you no wrong."* Why? They agreed to work the whole day for a denarius and that's exactly what they received. Therefore, the master was just and the agreement was fair. But as one commentator put it, they're not crying out against injustice; they're crying out against the master's generosity.<sup>5</sup> And that's exactly (#11) where he presses them in v.15, *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"* In other words, the master was under no obligation to be generous to those hired first just because he was generous to those hired last.<sup>6</sup> And he aims right at the hearts of the first workers, *"do you begrudge my generosity?"* (#12) Which literally translates to, *"Is your eye bad because I'm good?"*

In the ancient world, the "bad eye" was an idiom for envy and greed that resented what others had and longed to possess it.<sup>7</sup> But in this case the *"bad eye"* is resentful of what the last hired was given. As gospel laborers in this already-not-yet kingdom, this question is also for us. Because we too can succumb to this kind of reasoning in our relationship with our King. We get surprised when we witness his grace being

lavished on those, we deem unworthy or undeserving for whatever reason and we store it up in our hearts. And when it all comes out, it reveals the impure motives that are shaping (#13 Blank) our hearts. But there's an antidote for this faulty disposition of the heart; it's called gratitude. Which is *"a joyful commitment of one's personality to God."*<sup>8</sup> It's a whole-life orientation: our mind, will, and emotions all coming together in a humble and joyful response to the work of God's grace in our lives. And it serves as the primary motivator of our hearts as we labor for our King and his Gospel. Because a heart filled with gratitude doesn't busy itself looking around the vineyard, comparing itself with others. Rather, it looks to the master and celebrates his grace at work in the lives of everyone in the vineyard. Why? Because it recognizes that at one point; everyone was poor and needy but the master came to the marketplace and by his grace, called us by name. Therefore, we joyfully labor for him; not for recognition or reward but in humble and loving service out of gratitude for grace.<sup>9</sup> So, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we align our motives toward pleasing God with gratitude for his grace toward us. And what naturally flows from that right disposition is love and concern for others. Scripture is clear, rewards are real and God rewards faithful labor, but rewards are never the goal. However, they're rightly received when our gospel labor flows from a heart of gratitude and love for God for who he is and what he's done for us. Because a life of gratitude and love for God pulls our heart away from our selfish ways and anchors it in the finished work of Christ on our behalf.

### **Conclusion:**

Jesus Christ is the true Master of the house. The rightful owner of the vineyard and the sovereign King of glory and yet he did the unthinkable. He humbled himself by becoming poor and needy for us. He was the first in the vineyard, and he bore the full burden of our guilt and the scorching heat of suffering on a blood-stained cross. And unlike the first workers, he didn't grumble, or protest. Rather, he remained perfectly obedient to the will of the Father; by dying a death he didn't deserve in order to cancel a sin debt we could never repay. And at the end of the day, there was no denarius waiting for him; only a borrowed tomb. In sum, he who was first became last so that we who were last might become first.

And through the power of his resurrection to new life, he secured the grace that we so desperately need and we've been given new life in him. As recipients of his grace, we've been brought into this already not yet kingdom of God and called to labor diligently for the sake of his gospel. And we don't labor trusting in our own merit rather we rest in the merit of Christ. He's the one in whom the Father truly delights and because we are in him; the Father delights in us. So may we labor together out of hearts of love and gratitude for what our gracious king has done for us, is doing for us and will continue to do for us as his people. And may we endeavor to walk in the gracious way of our king as his faithful disciples from this time forth and forevermore. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> δηνάριον (*dēnaron*) coin, a denarius, *i.e.*, about a common laborer's wage for one long day's work (Mt 20:2, 9; Mk 14:5; Lk 10:35; 20:24; Jn 6:7; Rev 6:6).

<sup>2</sup> We should probably understand the day laborers as being somewhat indigent. Those who belonged to a household, such as slaves and hired servants, had the security of membership in a household unit, but agricultural laborers working for a daily wage had nothing of the sort. They depended for their livelihood on being hired each day. Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 499.

<sup>3</sup> γογγύζω (*gongyzō*): complain, grumble, mutter (Mt 20:11; Lk 5:30; Jn 6:41, 43, 61; 7:32; 1Co 10:10+), This verb is in the imperfect mood.. Denoting "ongoing action." Meaning, the complaints were an ongoing action, not a one time act.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, 502.

<sup>5</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, vol. 1, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Mt 19:30–20:16.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, 503.

<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 294–295.

<sup>8</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Gratitude," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 900–901.

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Bridges and Bob Bevington, *The Bookends of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009); logos software.