

## Study Guide for September 24, 2017

Theme: Unearned Grace     **Matthew 20:1-16**

Other Lectionary Readings: Jonah 3:10-4:11; Psalm 145:1-8; Philippians 1:21-30

The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is bracketed by two versions of the Jesus saying, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first" (Mt. 19:30; 20:16). It also comes after the parables of the Lost Sheep (Mt. 18:10-14; Lk. 15:1-10), which we spoke of two weeks ago, and the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt. 18:21-35) from last week. The overwhelming theme we read in these passages is the "economy of God's grace." This week, I believe Matthew offers us a way to see God's grace in more modern terms; fairness and compensation in the workplace. It doesn't take us long for our gut to shout, "Hey, this is unfair!" I agree. And I believe Jesus agrees too. It's not fair. In the Kingdom of God, where grace and love flow freely and abundantly, all receive equally whether you are new to faith or have been faithful your whole life. This is a hard lesson for our American work ethic. But a good one.

**Q:**     How does this reading affect the way you see fairness in the world? (Think about those who are on welfare; the poor in need of health care subsidies or living wages; illegal immigrants who put their children in our schools and work in our fields and factories; etc.)

**Q:**     How might Jesus' words in this parable help you have a conversation with your state and national Representatives?

Jesus is forcing us to see things not through our own set of political or social lenses where we believe "we" rule the world, but to see through God's eyes. In my sermon I give the example of the day laborers, which are all over Los Angeles, and how they see this parable differently than our middle class point of view.

**Q:**     In what ways have you experienced unfairness or injustice? How has it affected who you've become or what you believe to be fair and just? Has it ever worked in your favor when you didn't expect it?

**Read: Exodus 16:1-12 (or 1-36); Matthew 6:9-13**

Again, I point you to the Lord's Prayer. In verse 11 we ask God to provide our most simple, basic need: enough food to get us through the day. In the midst of all our grumbling and complaining, God is still providing. We see this in the story of Israel in the wilderness. God hears our complaints and addresses them. Why? Because God cares about us! God loves us so much that it can often seem unjust and unfair. Like the landowner, God does not cheat us. We get what we need, when we need it. For those who have been faithful their entire life, God has blessed you. And those who are new to faith, God is blessing you. And those who are going to come to faith one day, God is ready to give the same amount of blessing. (Note: a denarius, or a day's wage, was basically enough for one's 'daily bread'.)

**Read: Luke 15:11-32**

**Q:** How does the story of the Prodigal Son relate to that of the Landowner and the Laborers?

**Q:** Describe God's grace in each of these three characters in this story. (For example, "God's grace is shown in the way the father loves both his sons, no matter what.")

**Read: Galatians 6:1-6**

**Q:** What "vineyard work" is Christ calling you to do?

**Extra Credit!**

Slowly read Ps. 145:1-8, and meditate specifically on the words in v. 8 that describe God's feelings towards you. Close your eyes and picture God in your midst, silently acting these very words out for you. Where are you? What is your reaction? What does it make you want to do? During this exercise, don't forget to breathe and don't let your mind wander. Instead, allow the Spirit of God to walk you to where you need to go.

**Prayer:** Lord God, so gracious are your gifts. Too often I feel like I am not worthy to freely receive them. And too often I feel like I have not done enough to earn them. For some wonderful reason, you disagree. Thank you for giving me Jesus through whom you have shown me your love and blessed me with forgiveness and grace. Thank you for your Holy Spirit that encourages me and empowers me to be more like him. Thanks to your mercy and grace, I can live freely and love others generously, just as you have taught me through Jesus Christ my Lord, Amen.