

When God's Generosity Seems Unfair

Jonah / The Parable of the Vineyard Workers

Matthew 20:1-16 Jonah 3:10-4:11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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September 24, 2023

At times, we've probably all asked ourselves that common question in relation to God: Why do bad things happen to good people. But have you ever pondered the flip side of that: **Why do good things happen to bad people?** Why, for example, do some without integrity or good moral ethics often prosper, or those who misbehave according to societal rules often succeed, or those whom we determine haven't earned it often benefit?

We question such things because we have a built-in sensor to what is fair and what is unfair. And that, in turn, is undergirded by a merit-based system, where people should get what they deserve, both good and bad. But here's the rub. Like it or not, that's not how God works. That's not how grace works.

There are many biblical examples that illustrate how **God functions on a grace-based system, not merit-based, where people don't have to earn or prove themselves worthy for God to bless them.** This concept of radical grace is something that is still hard to wrap our minds around because **it seems to violate our understanding of fairness.**

The two scripture passages we just heard both address this issue of what we might call God's gracious unfairness. Today's Old Testament Reading, from the Book of Jonah, and our Gospel Reading from Matthew, the Parable of the Vineyard Workers, both present scenarios when people are envious, resentful, and disapproving because God is generous to those they think are underserving. If we're honest with ourselves, we often have the same reaction. Let's explore why that is often the case. And I want to begin with a look at our Old Testament reading from the Book of Jonah.

How well do you know the entire story of Jonah? Most of us, since childhood, remember the part about Jonah running away from God, getting swallowed by a huge fish (the Bible never said it was a whale), and staying in its belly for three days before being regurgitated up on a beach. Less familiar is **the specific mission** that God calls Jonah to in the first place. God commands Jonah, who is Jewish and from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, to go to the very large and notoriously 'wicked' Gentile city of Nineveh, the capital of the ancient Assyrian Empire in Upper Mesopotamia. By the way, the ruins of this ancient city are located along the banks of the Tigris River near the modern-day city of Mosul, in northern Iraq. Jonah is to tell the Ninevites to repent and turn to God, otherwise the city will be destroyed. Jonah delivers this message, and much to his surprise the Ninevites *do* repent from their evil ways and turn to God. God, therefore, spares the city from destruction.

Even less familiar to most of us is what happens next in the story. Instead of being pleased that he is successful in his mission and that the city isn't destroyed, Jonah becomes angry. After God questions whether Jonah has the right to be angry, Jonah heads out of the city and waits to see what would become of it. God continues to be gracious to Jonah, even after his little self-absorbed tantrum, and appoints a plant to

grow to provide him shade, saving him from discomfort. Jonah is very happy about the plant. But in a bit of a twist that will lead to the lesson that God wishes to teach Jonah, the next morning a worm, appointed by God, attacks and kills the bush. When the sun beats down on Jonah, he becomes faint and again cries out, "It is better for me to die than to live." God again questions whether it is right for Jonah to be angry, this time about the plant. Jonah replies, "Yes, angry enough to die." (Many of us at this point would just as soon let him have his wish. But not God.) God questions Jonah's concern for the plant, which Jonah did not grow himself. Then, God turns this around and asks why God shouldn't be concerned about the people of Nineveh, whom we are told did not know their right hand from their left.

That's where the story abruptly ends. It's open-ended and we are left hanging, not knowing Jonah's response or his next move. This effective literary technique, also common in the telling of a parable – which most all modern biblical scholars believe this story of Jonah to be, not a literal historical event – leaves us to question for ourselves what we would do if we were in Jonah's shoes. Would you or I continue to be angry that God has the right to be gracious, forgiving, and merciful to whom God chooses – even to people we despise, or think are undeserving – or will we come to see the radical impartiality and grace that God extends to all people?

Here's where we are often like Jonah. We want God to extend that graciousness to us but not to those whom we judge as undeserving. We cry foul and get upset that God doesn't play by our rules of fairness. Doesn't justice, especially from a judicial standpoint, demand that people get what they deserve? (That's basically the case made in the Book of Deuteronomy.) And if that's punishment, then so be it. After all, **a strong sense of fairness is a wonderful gift to possess, leading many of us to continue to nurture a sense of social justice, especially as it relates to issues of equality and human rights.**

It is out of this same violated sense of fairness that today's Parable of the Vineyard Workers should also offend us. Jesus presents a radical reversal of cultural understandings as it relates to what we think is an issue of equitable worker compensation. Does not our own Protestant work ethic also demand that those who work the longest hours in the same job should get paid the most? Upon further investigation, however, this parable is *not* addressing the issue of "equal pay for the equal amount of work." Nor, as it has been misinterpreted, is it a case of people being idle by choice, but rather by circumstance. This is not about people being lazy or unmotivated to work. Instead, the parable illustrates a very common theme in the Gospel of Matthew concerning the kin-dom of God, "the first shall be last and last shall be first" – a reversal of fortunes.

The workers who were hired at 5 p.m. and labored for only 1 hour receive an entire day's wage, one denarius – the amount of money needed daily to simply survive. These folks saw the landowner as extremely generous. But when it came time to pay the workers who had labored since 6 a.m., the entire 12 hours, they too were given just one denarius. Naturally they complain. So, let's put ourselves in their shoes. Even though they previously agreed to work the entire day for one denarius, is it wrong to anticipate and expect getting a bonus or a little extra than the persons who worked for only one hour? Isn't this, at least on some level, unfair? What about the work ethic, the merit system, the principle of justice?

This is when we learn that in the realm of God, God's economy doesn't run on the same set of standards as the world's. We learn **the grace of God is not based on the**

merit system, where we get what we think we have earned. If it did, then it wouldn't be grace. But at some level, we must admit that disturbs us. We wonder if grace does not undermine the whole reason for being good in the first place – of observing standards, of keeping rules, of living justly and with good ethics and integrity. **Shouldn't our reward be greater for being better people?** This unbiblical principle is often taught by those who adhere to what is known as the prosperity gospel. In other words, don't all these stars in our crown count for something?

Note that the offensive character of grace also affects the relationships between those who work all day and the laborers who came late. The first workers become envious and resentful of the generosity shown the others. To which the landowner states, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (v. 15). **Again, like Jonah, these grumblers are not really against grace, they're simply against equal grace shown to others who they feel haven't worked hard or long enough to earn it.**

We learn a valuable lesson here about divine grace. **Grace is the great equalizer that strips away our presumed privilege and entitlement in the eyes of God, who puts all recipients on an even playing field.** That's hard to stomach when we have burdened ourselves with a merit system, wanting to see some extra reward, bonus, or God's blessing for all our labors and hard work. Let's face it, we all have categories of those we conclude are undeserving of God's graciousness. Who is on your list?

Here, then, is a different angle in which to approach an interpretation of this parable. **Instead of putting ourselves in the role of the all-day workers who feel cheated, what if we see ourselves as the eleventh-hour workers, those who came at the very end of the day?** In that case, we are the ones who receive much more than what seems fair. God's apparently 'unfair' graciousness is then seen for what it truly is: God gracious generosity to all. A little humility goes a long way in recognizing God's generous grace.

In the kin-dom of God, which can be defined, in part, as the way we are to live and be in relationship with others and all of creation in the here and now, the merit system is set aside. There are no stars for our crown! We serve God and others not for reward, recognition, or prestige, but out of a grateful response to God's love, goodness, and generosity to us. **By definition, grace is not and cannot be earned; grace isn't about fairness or our worthiness, but solely about the nature and character of God's lovingkindness.** Therefore, if and when you and I become envious because others also receive God's gracious generosity, take a step back and redirect that response to one of **gratitude**. After all, **that undeserved, generous, and radical grace of God has also been extended to each of us – to you and me.**

Reflect this week upon how God has been gracious and generous to you. Don't compare yourselves to others and what they have received. Reflect upon how *all* people are beloved and blessed by God!

I wonder if Jonah or those all-day workers ever came to understand this.

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Gospels

Jill Duffield, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 9-18-17

