

## Matthew's Gospel Chapter 20, Grace and Blessing

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

### Outline of the chapter

I will breakdown the chapter into the following five sections:

- vv.1-16 Unpopular grace.
- vv.17-19 The basis of both grace and blessing.
- vv.20-24 The wrong way to seek blessing.
- vv.25-28 Greatness through serving.
- vv.29-34 Blessing – based on grace.

### Unpopular grace (vv.1-16)

That almost sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? A contradiction in terms! If grace is defined as unmerited favour, or being given something good which we do not deserve, who could possibly object to that? 'What's not to like?', as the expression goes! It turns out that grace, more specifically, grace shown to other people, is not always universally popular.

In the first sixteen verses of Matthew chapter 20 Jesus tells a parable about the owner of a vineyard and his dealings with the casual labourers he employs, and it shows how grace is not always well received.

### A summary of the parable

The owner has some, unspecified, tasks to perform in his vineyard that will need more than his fulltime workforce. So, he goes into the marketplace at around 6am, where the men who are looking for work are to be found. He agrees with a group of them that they will do a full day's work for him, around 12 hours, for which they will receive one denarius each. This was the normal day's wage for a labourer, so both parties were presumably quite content with the bargain they had agreed.

At around 9am he goes to the marketplace again and hires more men. This time, rather than fixing a wage, he simply says, "Whatever is right I will give you." These workers evidently trust the vineyard owner and go to work. He takes on more workers at 12 noon and 3pm on the same basis of trust. He makes a final visit to the marketplace at 5pm and asks the remaining men why they have stood there idle all day. "Because no one hired us," they reply, and the owner sends them to work with a similar promise, "Whatever is right you will receive."

At around 6pm the day's work is complete, and the owner gives directions to his manager for payment of all the workers. The instructions are to call all the workers together and to commence paying them, beginning with the last men to be hired – those who commenced work at 5pm. In an act of generous grace, those who have only worked one hour are given a denarius, that is, a full day's wage. It is implied, though not explicitly stated, that those hired at 3pm, 12 noon and 9am also received one denarius.

Finally, the men who commenced work at 6am, the only ones who had actually agreed on the wages they would receive, come to be paid. Having seen that the other men had been given a denarius for a fraction of a day's work, they suppose that they will be given more than the denarius they had agreed on. When they also receive a denarius they grumble at the landowner, complaining that they, who had worked a full day, including through the hottest periods of the day, had received the same wage as those who had only worked one hour. "It's not fair!", would seem to summarise their attitude!

The landowner speaks personally to one of the aggrieved group, explaining that he has been paid exactly the wages that had been agreed between them at the start of the day. Furthermore, the landowner states that he wishes to give generously to the other workers and that he is entirely within his rights to do so since it is his own money, which he may dispose of how he chooses. Finally, he asks the grumbling workman, using the helpful paraphrase of the NIV,

"Are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15).

Jesus own comment on the parable He has just related is,

"So the last will be first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16).

### **What it all means**

The truth is, we can all instinctively sympathise with those grumbling men who had worked a twelve-hour day. Which of us have not looked at somebody other than ourselves being given an unearned blessing and thought, "They don't deserve that. I'm more deserving than they are?" It appears that grace is something which we happily receive for ourselves but can often begrudge being shown to other people.

### **Some details to note**

There are four simple points that I want to highlight from this section.

#### **1. The importance of faith**

The first group, the people who grumbled later, were the only ones to have an agreed bargain with the landowner – a full day's work for a denarius. All the other men relied on the landowner being fair to them, that is, they acted in faith. Our Christian service should not be done in a spirit of 'striking a deal with God' – 'I will serve Him and He will then give me the reward I deserve'. Our service should recognise that we really don't deserve any reward or blessing, and that working for Christ is in fact a privilege. We can work, trusting that He will be generous in ways that we don't deserve. Put another way, we can have faith in God's grace. It appears from the parable that Christ values our trust and confidence in Him, much more highly than He values the actual service we perform.

#### **2. The vineyard owner's law-keeping**

It's worth just noticing in passing that the owner of the vineyard scrupulously pay's his labourers at the end of the day; not waiting until a later time. This is in accordance with the instructions given to Israel in Leviticus 19:13 and Deuteronomy 24:15. The first group of workers may have grumbled against the vineyard owner, but they had no legal basis for complaint!

### **3. The reversal of expectations**

The fact that the labourers were carefully paid in reverse order is highlighted by Jesus in his summary of the parable when He says, “So the last will be first, and the first last.” He had used a similar phrase when speaking to Peter at the end of chapter 19, also on the subject of reward for discipleship – in that case the specific topic under discussion was what the disciples had given up in order to follow Christ. That leads me on to my final point for this section.

### **4. God views things differently**

Imagine that we were to watch someone for a whole day through one of those windows that are patterned to obscure the view through them. We would have a very limited, distorted view of what they had done. Imagine again that we had free access to their house and followed them round all day. Our view would then be much clearer. But imagine once more, if all their thoughts and intentions were somehow made visible to us, and we also knew everything that had happened to them in their whole life leading up to that day. How much better we might be able to understand and judge their actions!

The view through a patterned window is the best perspective we can have on other people and their service. The complete and total view is the one that God has. No wonder that many human judgements and assessments will be reversed on the last day!

### **The basis of both grace and blessing (vv.17-19)**

Having told the parable which we have just been considering, Jesus starts what will be His final journey up to Jerusalem. This is the second time that Matthew records Jesus telling the disciples about His impending death – the first was in Galilee and is recorded in chapter 17. We read Christ’s words,

“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again” (vv.18-19).

Matthew records no response from the disciples. The words of the Lord just seem to hang between the parable of the previous verses and the actions of James’ and John’s mother in the next section. Indeed, they illuminate both of those other two sections clearly.

The grace that is pictured in the parable needs a righteous basis. God can’t just give salvation and blessings to sinners as if they had done no wrong. God is righteous, and all that He does must be righteous and just. If God is going to be gracious, then a solid foundation needs to be laid for those actions. That basis is nothing other than the death and resurrection of God’s Son. Indeed, the Lord’s giving of Himself as a sacrifice is a most marvellous example of grace – entirely undeserved giving for the undeserving.

Our title for today is “Grace and Blessing”, and both of those things are completely dependent on Christ’s death and resurrection. It is fitting that these verses sit near the middle of this chapter, since everything else in the chapter centres around them, indeed everything else in the eternal plans of God centres around the work of Calvary!

## **The wrong way to seek blessing (vv.20-24)**

Our next section brings us down to earth with a bump! The wife of Zebedee brings her two sons, James and John, to Jesus, and kneels down before Him to make a request. When Jesus asks her what it is that she is requesting, she replies,

“Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom” (Matthew 20:21).

Jesus makes his answer directly to James and John, so it is apparent that they have agreed with their mother in advance on the request that she has made and are not surprised or embarrassed about her ambitions for them. Jesus speaks to them about the cup He is about to drink and the baptism He is about to receive, clearly referring to His own death that He has just been speaking of. They can hardly have understood what they were saying when they claimed to be able to share in those things, but Jesus, knowing the martyrdom and exile that they would subsequently suffer, agrees that they will share with him in that cup and baptism, but that only the Father can give the positions of great honour they are requesting.

The ten other disciples were not present when this request was made and are displeased with James and John when they hear what has happened. I get the impression that the ten were not so much cross at the two brothers for aspiring to the positions of authority and honour, but rather that they wanted those places for themselves, and were cross that James and John had got in first with their application! We know from Luke that on at least two occasions (Luke 9:46 and 22:24), the disciples openly argued about which of them would be the greatest.

The brazen ambition of the disciples is all the more shocking coming, as it does, immediately after the Lord Jesus has spoken about His impending death. They do not seem to have grasped the Lord's parable about grace and faith, or the fact that Christ's death was necessary to deal with sins such as their pride and selfishness! But whenever we find ourselves stirred up by the obvious faults of the disciples which are recorded for us in the Gospels, we should be looking for the evidence of exactly the same faults in ourselves! We are usually quickest to spot other people's failings when we suffer from the same flaws! Not all of us aspire to authority like the disciples did, but we all share a wish to be better than others in some way that fits best with our character. We want to be the most liked, the most listened to, or even the most humble! We have to be first in something, or we feel we have failed. In doing so, we forget the first and last reversal that we have just been considering, and we forget that our Saviour, who was first and highest in every domain chose a lowly place, which is something our next section speaks about directly.

## **Greatness through serving (vv.25-28)**

It is worth quoting fully the Lord's response to the disciples.

“But Jesus called them to Himself and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.’”

The first thing we notice is that Jesus calls them from discussions among themselves, “to Himself.” The first step on the road to sorting things out is to turn towards Jesus. He first directs their attention to the example of leadership that the Gentile rulers present. It is noticeable that it is Gentile rulers that Jesus refers to. Although Jewish rulers had often acted in similar authoritarian ways, the pattern of behaviour that God commanded of Jewish judges and kings was quite different. Jesus is gently reminding the disciples that they risked behaving like the worst examples

of the pagan Gentiles, whom they despise. This was an example which they (and by extension we) were to scrupulously avoid. Rather, they were to follow the example of grace that the Lord had described in the parable at the start of the chapter and would soon show in His death.

Anyone wishing to show greatness must act like a servant to his fellow believers, and if anybody wanted the first place (which all the disciples clearly did!), he must become a slave to his fellows. The words used for servant and slave in Greek are diakonos and doulos respectively. Diakonos means minister and may refer to a king's servant or an attendant. It refers to what the person does, that is, they serve another person, whether for pay or from choice. Doulos means slave and refers to somebody who is owned by another person and has no ownership rights of their own. In short, there is a difference between the two words and the implication is that the higher a person wishes to be in Christian service the lower the position they must take. Here is another reversal of first and last, with the one seeking to be considered first having to take the 'last place' of a slave.

The final clause of this section is worth repeating,

“Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (v.28).

The example which the disciples are exhorted to follow is not that given by the rulers of the Gentiles. Nor is it that of a great shepherd king of Israel such as David. The example held before them is that of Christ Himself. As the God of Heaven, He had every right to be served, and to be served by everybody, since every other created being is self-evidently lower in rank than their Creator. But Jesus came, “to serve and to give His life.” There really could not be any better example of grace than the One who is God coming to be a servant and to give His life as a ransom. If we are reluctant to take a lower place, considering it beneath our dignity to act as a servant to other people, we are brought up short by remembering there could be nobody higher and more dignified than our Lord, and that He deliberately spurned being served in order to serve others, and those others were vastly inferior to Himself in every way! If it is a question of how much we should give to, or for, others, the example we have is our Lord giving His life as a ransom.

### **Blessing based on grace (vv.29-34)**

In our final section for today, Jesus and the disciples are leaving Jericho on their journey up to Jerusalem.

Earlier this year my wife and I visited Israel for the first time. One day we stood and looked up the hill towards the West to see Jerusalem, and down the hill towards the East to see Jericho, which we had just left. There is still nothing much today between the two cities other than a barren, arid landscape with a few scattered sheep. You can clearly see the one obvious path to follow from one city to the other: it lies along a fairly steep valley, where you can almost imagine the thieves from the parable of the Good Samaritan waiting behind a rock, around a curve in the track, for an unsuspecting traveller!

Apparently, this would have been Jesus' normal route up to Jerusalem from Galilee, but He was now about to travel it for the last time.

Jesus and the disciples headed out of the city of Jericho, followed by a large crowd. Two blind men who were sitting at the roadside begging, heard, presumably from the crowd, that Jesus was passing by and called out to Him,

“Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!” (Matthew 20:30).

They at least seemed to have grasped that the way to blessing was through grace, or at least mercy, rather than by earning it or making some special claim for priority. We usually define mercy

as not being given what we deserve (i.e., it is defined negatively), and grace as being given what we do not deserve (i.e., it is defined positively). Here mercy is used in the sense of giving aid to somebody in trouble. They may have used similar expressions when asking for money, as they no doubt had to do, being unable to work in order to support themselves. Let's read what happened next.

“Then the multitude warned them that they should be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, ‘Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!’ So Jesus stood still and called them, and said, ‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ They said to Him, ‘Lord, that our eyes may be opened.’ So Jesus had compassion and touched their eyes. And immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed Him” (vv.31-34).

The crowd thought that these troublesome men ought to keep quiet. On other occasions, even the disciples tried to stop people from ‘bothering’ Jesus, believing that He had more important things to do than meet the requests of ordinary, unimportant people. Thankfully, the Lord was never too busy, or too preoccupied, to give His full attention to the needy, and we can be confident that He is just the same today.

These men were not easily put off. Perhaps they would never get another chance to ask for healing from this well-known Teacher and Preacher, so they were not going to be silenced by an unsympathetic crowd. In fact, they called out, “all the more” (Matthew 20:31), using exactly the same words as before.

We read that Jesus, “stood still and called them” (Matthew 20:32). He stopped what He was doing and turned His attention towards them, speaking to them personally. I love to think about the way that the Lord, as God, can turn towards each of us as individuals and give us His fully focussed attention. We, as human beings, can really only fully focus on a single person at any one time. God can be fully attentive, and personally involved with, millions of people simultaneously, as if He was completely focussed on each one.

Jesus asked the men what they wanted Him to do for them. He didn't promise that they could have whatever they asked for, but they were invited to make their request freely. It is the same with our prayers today. We are not guaranteed to receive all that we wish for, but we are encouraged to come openly and freely to make our requests to Him. They have a short and simple answer ready for Jesus,

“Lord, that our eyes may be opened” (Matthew 20:33).

They did not ask for generous amounts of money, or some assistance to make their lives as blind people easier. They asked for the apparently impossible, that their sight might be restored. Maybe I can learn something from the boldness and brevity of their request!

Jesus had compassion, that is, He entered into their feelings of hurt and need, and felt with them. As the One who is both God and Man, Jesus is uniquely placed to understand and enter into our feelings. But His reaction was not limited to sympathy; He reached out and touched them, and they were instantly healed. Compassion and power were combined in a way that completely transformed the lives of those two men from that moment forward. Their reaction? They followed Him. We may not always have our requests granted as positively and immediately as these two men did on this occasion, but we can always come away from meeting with Jesus with a sense of His love and compassion, and a renewed desire to follow Him as closely as possible.

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, we wish to say, 'Thank You' for the grace that You have shown towards us and the undeserved blessings that we have received and will receive in the future. Please increase the desire in our hearts to follow You and please start to create in our own hearts that same kind of grace towards other people, especially towards other Christians; and a readiness to be glad when people other than ourselves are treated generously by You. Amen.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Matthew Chapter 20, 'Grace and Blessing', talk number T1332.

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