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The Prevailing Church: It's a Grace Place

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TEXT: Matthew 20:1-16 (ESV)

“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. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Dear Friends:

What would you say are the important ingredients that make for a thriving, prevailing church? Some might respond with answers such as good and relevant preaching, excellent music, inspiring worship, strong leadership, and good programming. Well, Jesus has an interesting answer to that question in today's text.

We have before us a parable from Jesus. Jesus has told it as part of his response to a question that Peter, His disciple, asked. Remember, Peter's the disciple to whom Jesus said, after his strong confession of faith in Christ, "Upon this rock, I'll build my church. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." A few verses prior to our parable for the day, Peter has asked Jesus a question after a rich young man has just walked away from Jesus because he refused to give up all they had to follow Christ. And Peter asked Jesus, "What, then, shall we have? We've left everything to follow you." In other words: "We've made sacrifices, Lord, we were the first to follow you. So what's our reward? Surely not the same as the rest who come after us." It strikes me as a selfish and prideful question. It exposes a lack of understanding of Jesus and of life in God's kingdom.

Well, Jesus is gentle with Peter; He doesn't scold him or berate him in front of the others. He assures him that he'll be taken care of. And He also says everyone who has left behind everything to follow Him will inherit eternal life. And then He concludes His response with this curious little statement: "But many who are first shall be last and the last first." What do you suppose He meant by that? Will there be surprises at the end?

He follows that statement up with the parable about overturned expectations, about surprises. That's what we see here, isn't it? When the early workers who put in a full shift see the ones who worked only an hour paid the same as them at the end of the day, they were surprised; and not only surprised, but resentful about it. They didn't like this at all. They thought they should receive more, a bonus. They deserved more. After all, they'd worked hard, even through the heat of the day. One of them even complained out loud to the employer on behalf of the others: "You've made these last ones who only worked an hour equal to us, who have worked through the heat of the day. That's not right, not fair." The employer's response is kind to the complainer, he's his friend: "I'm doing you no wrong, I gave you as we agreed upon, didn't I? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. It's not really any of your business what I choose to do with what belongs to me. Or do you begrudge my generosity?"

The statement literally reads, in the original language, “Is your eye bad because I am good?” In other words, “Are you jealous because I’m good, generous?” And then Jesus sums it up again with this same proverb he used earlier: “So the last will be first and the first last.” It appears that His kingdom is all upside down, surprising and shocking to the natural senses. We’re showing the ordinary expectations of the world being totally overturned, thrown out the window. Admit it: aren’t you just a little sympathetic towards those earlier workers? Imagine yourself, for instance, sitting in the doctor’s office for an hour waiting to be seen. You’ve seen many people come after you and sit down, and suddenly the nurse comes out and says that the doctor will see the person who came through the door last first. You wouldn’t like that at all, would you? Neither would I.

Aren’t you even just a little bit shocked by the way this employer operates his business in this story? Well, that’s exactly the purpose of most of the parables Jesus tells: to surprise us and shock us and challenge our thinking. This parable gives us an interesting picture of God. You see, we could really entitle this story “the kind employer” or “the generous employer”, couldn’t we? Jesus is giving us a glimpse of His Heavenly Father. He’s the kind, generous employer. He operates as He sees fit, with grace, generosity, unmerited favor towards the undeserving. We see that kingdom principles are different from the world’s principles and wisdom, which teach, “you get what you earn.” When it comes to forgiveness and salvation and Heaven, though, God operates totally by grace. It’s a good thing; not one of us is capable of being good enough to earn our way into Heaven. Try as we may, we will always fall short. While we were lost in our sin, God exercised saving grace towards us through the cross and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. We’d have been lost without grace. The grace of God, you see, is the central point of the parable. Jesus paints us a picture of a generous, mind-boggling employer; the unmerited favor of God’s grace. This story contrasts our human calculations with shocking and undeserved generosity with this unbounded and energetic goodness that simply reaches out in blessing, even to those who don’t deserve it. That’s God’s way. He operates with grace.

And so Peter’s question of, “Lord, what reward is there for me and the others?” is answered with a picture of God’s amazing, astounding grace to all who follow Him. You might consider this a summons to all disciples of Jesus, to those of us in His church, to abandon the petty, worldly, selfish calculations that can fill our minds and break up

our churches. We need to put that aside and instead celebrate God's generous grace in our lives and the lives of other believers, no matter how much later they might come to faith, even if it's on their deathbed. Grace is to be celebrated, proclaimed with joy and practiced in our ministry together. That can be a bit of a challenge for us. We still have a bit of pride and ego and selfishness in every one of us. It's a simple fact that people regularly understand and appreciate God's grace as applied to themselves, but they resent seeing it applied to others sometimes. I guess that's just our human nature at work, our sinful self.

And Jesus knows that about us. Notice how his parable really concentrates on the exact number of hours worked and on the hope of payment cherished by those early workers as they compare themselves with others. All these details may be artificial, but they effectively build a pattern of expectation in this story, don't they? The thinking of the early workers who have to wait till last is: "We should get more than the others. We worked longer and harder. They don't deserve what they're getting." Instead of celebrating the employer's generosity, they complain about it. The parable is a grand reversal of our normal values and way of thinking. Of course, this parable is not told as a recipe for work place peace. Of course not. The unions would be up in arms if any employer acted like that today, as they should.

But this parable has nothing to do with the workplace. It's about life, the kingdom of God; it's about eternal matters like salvation and forgiveness. And Jesus tells it with the intention of showing the principle by which God receives people into His kingdom: it's by grace alone. This caring and loving God in Christ Jesus is looking for workers in His kingdom. He blesses them all the same with forgiveness and life and salvation. And that's mighty good news because not one of us deserves that. Jesus seems to be teaching those of us in the church that length of service and hours of toil constitute no special claim on God. Because the truth is, we're all equally undeserving of so large a sum as a denarius at the end of the day.

You know, in the story, all were standing around in the marketplace, hoping to be offered employment so they'd be able to feed their family at the end of the day. I mean, it was hard times; anybody would have just loved to have a job. And all are given it by this kind, generous employer in our story. It's grace. Therefore, in the church there are to be no special rankings or jealousies or competitions before God. We're to understand that nobody can claim eternal membership in the Kingdom of God. The truth is we're

all beggars in God's sight – we're all standing around hopeless until the master graciously calls us into the vineyard to work for Him. All of us are recipients of God's grace, and that's an important message for those of us in Christ's church. Church is to be a grace place.

We're all saved by grace, not one of us can claim we deserve to belong to His kingdom. We learn from this story there's no place for personal pride or contempt or jealousy or comparison or competition in the Church of Jesus Christ. To one and all this parable is presenting a firm rebuttal of all that. It puts us in our place, telling us that one's standing in the kingdom of God does not depend on our merit, in any way whatsoever, or length of time. It depends on the unmerited favor of the only One who is ultimately good and who accepts all who could never be good. We live and have God's salvation in life by grace alone. And our attitude is to be: we're just blessed to be a part of it. That's the truth we, in the church, are to trust and live by in our life together as the family of Christ. That's where the emphasis is always to be if we are to be a thriving and prevailing church: that message of grace alone. We're to be about the business of celebrating God's generosity and grace – not only in our personal lives, but also in the lives of one another, wanting everyone to get in on that grace.

And that, my friends, is the kind of church Jesus had in mind when He talked of a prevailing, thriving church – “that the gates of hell could not stand up before” – a community that trust God's grace and lives by God's grace, filled with rescued people who are just plain glad for the privilege of serving God and being a part of the family, knowing that not one of us deserves the privilege. Having a sweet spirit, a grateful and loving environment in which we celebrate God's grace in our lives and remind each other of it constantly, and then happily proclaim it to a world that needs it. A church like that leads to a whole lot of peace and joy for all those who are its members; peace and joy like you've never experienced. And it leads to a church that prevails and thrives and is strong and attracts others in to receive God's grace. Grace is an attraction – God's grace.

I'd like to conclude this message with a thought-provoking insight that relates to this. It's from noted author and pastor John Stott, and he writes these words in his book, “The Living Church”:

We cannot proclaim the gospel of God's love with any degree of integrity if we do not exhibit it in our generous love for fellow kingdom workers. Perhaps

nothing is so damaging to the cause of Christ as a church, which is either torn apart by jealousy, rivalry, slander, malice, or preoccupied with its own selfish concerns. The church is to be God's new society, the living embodiment of the Gospel, a sign of the Kingdom of God, a demonstration of what human community looks like when it comes under His gracious rule. Christians need to look like what they're talking about. What communicates these days is basically personal authenticity.

Friend: may we, the Church of Jesus Christ, be a community that celebrates and values God's grace towards each one of us, and then faithfully shares that message of God's grace with the world around us. That is a church that will thrive and prevail.

Amen.