



## Pastor Kyle Mercer

### Glasses of Grace or Focals of Fairness

December 31, 2023

Series: Plot Twist

Matthew 19:27-20:16

### **BIG IDEA – WHAT LENS WILL YOU LOOK AT LIFE THROUGH?**

Happy New Year's Eve, Two Cities Church! Have I told you lately that I love you? There are many things I love about you, but one of the things I love about our church, love about you guys, is how generous you are. If you're new, here's what I want you to know: we believe generosity is contagious and, unfortunately, so is stinginess. Around here, we have an abundance mindset, not a scarcity mindset. There's enough of the grace of God to go around, and somebody else doesn't have to lose for me to win.

We are so excited about Matt McCarthy and City Light Church. Now, we plant churches all over the nation. We've helped to plant churches all over the nation, and we're really excited about that. We also like doing it in our backyard. Here's why: we think it takes all types of churches to reach all types of people. Do you hear what he just got? I mean, how exciting, guys.

If there's one church that should be excited about another church getting a building, it's us. We know the importance of buildings. When it comes to buildings, I'm an Old Testament guy...the tabernacle, the temple, the tent. I believe in buildings. I am so grateful they got this building, but we have to do something about those walls and something about that carpet. You heard it. So here's what we're going to do.

We do an end-of-the-year Hold the Rope offering. We don't have a financial goal; we have a participation goal. We want 100 percent of the people who call Two Cities Church home to give a one-time gift by the end of the year, which is today, to help somebody go farther faster. Guys, listen. Here's how serious we are. I want you to

know this. When you give to Hold the Rope, 0 percent comes to Two Cities Church, 100 percent goes out.

We're so serious we thought, "What could we do to uniquely bless our city this year? Let's get creative." So we partnered with a company that pays off all available medical debt for needy people in and around the Triad. We found out, because we want to be good stewards, that for tens of thousands of dollars we could pay off millions of dollars of medical debt, and we're going to do it. Praise the Lord.

If you're a Christian, you understand debt. You understand spiritual debt. So we're all about paying off the debt. We're excited about that. Also, I just have to tell you this. Happy New Year. Our goal was to be in this building by the end of the year. We were praying about it and planning and preparing for that all of 2023. We skidded in just in time. This is our third Sunday in the building. I just want to thank, again, your generosity and thank our staff for that.

Guys, come back next week. Get ready. Next week is one of my favorite weeks of the year. It's Vision Sunday. I'm going to try to answer two questions. I think every leader, which would be mom, dad, boss, or whatever... You have to always answer two questions when it comes to vision. Here's what they are: "Where are we going?" and "What is my role?" I'm going to try to tell you that next week.

Where are we headed? The future is so bright. We're just getting started, and in 2024 we're pressing the "Go" button. We want you to be a part of it. We don't have as much a church vision as we want you to have a personal vision for your life to follow Jesus. We want to help you do it. With that said, let's end this series. We're in the *Plot Twist* series in the parables. Let's end this year by praying together. Pray with me.

Lord, thank you for our church and the generosity. We are excited to help Matt McCarthy and City Light Church go farther faster, to bless him, to encourage him. We're excited to serve and bless our city by meeting needs in Jesus' name, and we're excited about where you're leading us. Lord, I pray that we would be super clear where we are headed and everyone in here would say, "I know where we're going, and I know the role I'm playing." I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Guys, don't say this out loud, but who is the worst boss you've ever had? If he's here, don't look at him. Don't look at him right now. No, no. You know this, and if you're a boss you *should* know this. Any employee knows this. The boss can be the biggest burden or the biggest blessing about work. Whenever we talk to people about "Why did you leave?" when they do these exit interviews and they find...

I mean, we know why people leave jobs. There are not that many reasons people leave jobs. People leave jobs because of bad pay. People leave jobs because of no flexibility, no opportunity to move up, but at the end of the day, the reason people tend to leave jobs is the boss they work for.

If you'll turn to Matthew 19, I'm going to introduce you to the parable of the good boss or the gracious landowner. You probably know of it as the *parable of the vineyard workers*. We'll get there. It's in chapter 20. Go to chapter 19, verse 27. We're going to pick up there in just a few minutes. Here's what the parable is about today. Let me just tell you, then we're going to read, and then we're going to talk about it like we do every week here.

The parable is about this boss, and he's this generous, gracious boss who keeps inviting people to work for him and with him, and then he generously pays them all at the end. So, God is the boss. God is a worker. If you're new and you don't know this about God, the first thing we see God doing in Genesis 1 is working. He's very busy. He works six days a week. He creates a lot of stuff...the world...that kind of stuff, so he's really, really busy. God loves work. Work is a good thing.

You and I are the laborers in the passage, but let me be clear. This passage is not about your 9-to-5 job. I mean, it is, but it's way more than that. It's not about your career path and your job and your 9-to-5 and all that. Here's what this parable is about. This parable is about Christian service. This parable is not about salvation. Some people read this parable wrong. It's not about salvation.

You don't work for your salvation. I've tried to tell you this before. If you think you work for your salvation, God says, "I count that against you." It's even worse. It's insulting. Say I owed somebody a billion dollars, and then I said, "Well, I can't pay, but how about a 20?" It would be insulting. Right? Me trying to pay a little bit is even more insulting than just going, "I can't pay. Would you get rid of this debt?"

Okay. This parable today... And you need this parable. I need this parable for 2024. I know you're thinking about your resolutions and your new commitments and the new you and all that. That's great. Here's what you need. You need to have the right motivations, the right expectations, the right perspective on your life.

What is the work of a Christian? This could be 2024 for you. If you don't have a goal, here's a goal. What is the work of a Christian? To do good works. That's it. Have you ever wondered, "What's the Protestant work ethic?" if you've ever heard of that, or "Why do we want to be so efficient? Why are we obsessed with being efficient?" Because we want to do more good works. All of your resolutions should be about the ability for you, at some level, to do more good works.

Well, I want to show you this today. We have to start one other place. If you've never been here before, you're like, "Is this just the intro?" Yes. Here's where we're going to go. Jesus has this interaction with this guy called the *rich young ruler*. He's the kind of guy you're probably jealous of. You know...*rich, young, and ruler*. You're either jealous of him or you admire him.

It's hard to be all three of those. This is why we don't like young celebrities. It's like, "You get to be rich and popular and young? Not fair." This guy has the American dream, or he would probably call it the *Jerusalem dream*. He's got all of it. He's rich, so he has a lot of money; he's young, so he has a lot of time; and he's also influential, so he has a lot of networks, and your network is your net worth. He has it all.

Anyway, he comes to Jesus, and in a moment of humility he basically says, "Hey, I want to follow you. What do I have to do to have eternal life?" Jesus says, "Sell everything you have, give it to the poor, follow me, and you'll have riches in heaven." It says he went away sad. Here's what I want you to know (this is going to lead up to the parable): Jesus wants to talk to you about the things you don't want to talk about. Yikes. Right?

That's different for *you* and for *you*. It's different for all of us. For some of you it's your alcohol intake. You don't want to talk about it. Jesus does. For some of you it's your identity issues. For some of you it's your sexuality. For a lot of people it's money. It's like, "Don't talk about that." Well, Jesus wants to talk to you about the things you don't want to talk about.

Anyway, the rich young ruler does what we'd probably do, if we're honest, in a lot of situations. "If you're going to talk about the thing I don't want you to talk about, I don't know if I can follow you." So he walks away. This is what's interesting. Peter picks up this moment. Peter is always speaking first and for the disciples. Let me show you what Peter says here.

The rich young ruler is walking away, and Peter goes... ***"Then Peter said in reply, 'See...'"*** By the way, this is really interesting. He literally says, "Look, Lord." Jesus is normally the one who tells *us* to look at things. "Lord, are you paying attention to this?" He says, ***"See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"*** Peter is concerned for himself.

He's asking this question, which is a question we all ask. We ask it in marriage eventually. We ask it in parenting. You ask it at your job. Basically, "What am I going to get for all that I've been giving? Am I going to get what I deserve?" This is the question Peter asks. I want you to see what happens here.

Verse 28: ***"Jesus said to them..."*** This isn't a Peter issue is what he's trying to say. He's talking to all of the disciples, because we all kind of think this way. We all kind of have the "I deserve" mentality. "What's in it for me?" You know, "I tithe. What's in it for me?" "I broke up with my unbelieving girlfriend or boyfriend. What's in it for me?" "I stayed pure till marriage. What's in it for me?" "I raised my kids in this environment. What's in it for me?"

Here's what Jesus says. ***"Jesus said to them, 'Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'"*** You need to know this. Jesus is going to say, "Hey, listen. There are rewards."

In fact, God is going to motivate you a lot of different ways. If you want to know the three primary ways God motivates you, it's probably the three primary ways you motivate your kids: love, fear, and rewards. Believe me, you're going to need all three of those if you're going to run after Christ like you should.

The love of God. It's like, "Oh, God loves me. Look at what he did for me." The fear of God. "I wouldn't want to disappoint." That's how you feel toward a good dad. "I love my dad so much I would be so afraid to disappoint him." That's exactly right. Then there are rewards. He's pointing to the rewards. You're going to need all three of these in fighting sin and all this kind of stuff.

Look at what he says here. Verse 29: ***"And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life."*** Jesus is saying, "Hey, Peter. I know you're worried about what you're going to get for all you've been giving." Jesus says, "Let me just tell you this." This is what he wants you to know.

When it comes to relating to God, you will always get more than you give. That's the principle. You can't out-give God. God is like, "I'm not going to be in debt to you." Could you imagine? In fact, in Malachi, chapter 3, God has this whole chapter (it's about money, but it refers to a lot of different things) where he says, "Go ahead. Try to out-give me. Let's play that game. I'm not going to lose."

Then you have to notice the second thing he says. This is where we struggle. He says, "All your rewards aren't here." Did you catch that? He talks about the new world. We call it *heaven*. He says, "Okay, listen. You can't just be thinking about earthly benefits; you need to be thinking about eternal blessings. If you're going to be earthly good, you're going to have to be heavenly minded."

Then he says this. This is very interesting. Look at verse 30. A proverb before the parable. In fact, this proverb I'm going to read you right here bookends the parable. It's at the beginning and the end. He doesn't do this in many or maybe any other parables where he bookends it with the same saying. Here it is: ***"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."***

You go, "What does *that* mean?" Well, at one level it's the upside-down, inside-out nature of the kingdom of God. The last are first and to lose your life is to find it...all that. Here's what he's saying. This is really great to know about God. This is a helpful thing to know about God. Here's what Jesus is saying if I could translate it: God loves to surprise people. God loves surprises.

You cannot read the Bible and not know God loves surprises. It's like, "The shepherd boy gets to be king? The guy who's retired, walking around in the desert, is going to lead the Israelites? Are you kidding me?" That's the whole Bible. That's why we called the series *Plot Twist*. It's all shocking and surprising. Listen. I've heard it said that those of us who are Christians... When you get to heaven, you're going to be surprised by two things: who's there and who's not there.

Jesus is saying things are not always as they seem or appear. Or maybe this is what you need to hear as you head into 2024: God has a different value system than you do, certainly than our culture does, certainly than the sponsored ads you're getting do. I mean, way different value system. It's usually the exact opposite of whatever the world is pushing or pressing.

In light of that, he has to tell this parable, and here's what the parable is on. So, that was all introduction. Now we're into the parable, but you had to hear that. The parable is a response to Peter's question, "What's in it for me?" This is important, because some of you are new in the journey. You're like, "What's in it for me? I have 40 or 50 years of following Christ ahead of me." Then some of you are toward the end of the journey, and you're like, "What's in it for me? It's been five decades."

This is a parable on perspective. Any good parent knows, especially as their children age, one of the best gifts you could give them is perspective. It's like, "You're headed to college. You're going to need perspective." Perspective and expectations are basically the same thing, two sides of the same coin.

I mean, how many people say, "I didn't have the right perspective heading into marriage. I didn't have the right perspective heading into parenting. I didn't have the right perspective heading into my job. I've got to work 40 hours a week." You know, that kind of stuff. So, I want to show you this. Look at the parable on perspective.

***"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."*** That's God hiring us. That's the image here. By the way, this is important. You're going to see the *third hour*, the *sixth hour*, the *ninth hour*, and the *eleventh hour*.

Back then, they worked 12-hour days, 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., from sunrise to sunset. The reason that we (and thank God for it) have an eight-hour workday (I think you know this) is Henry Ford. He popularized the eight-hour workday with his Ford factory, but back then they worked 12 hours.

***"After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard."*** This is subtle, but notice the first laborers get a contract. "I know exactly what I'm going to get. We've settled the terms." For some of you, this is exactly how you like to work. "I know exactly what I'm going to get." Okay, great. So they know they're going to get a denarius, which is fair. That's a day's wage.

***"And going out about the third hour [9:00 a.m.] he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too...'"*** Look at this. They don't get a contract; they get a promise. ***"...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..."*** We know that. That's the last minute. That's how we use that phrase. This is 5:00 p.m. for a day that ends at 6:00 p.m.

***"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.'"*** Look. They don't get a contract. They don't get a promise. They just get instruction. ***"He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'"*** Okay. So they went.

Here's the first surprise. ***"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."***

You can imagine. The guys who come and work for one hour get a denarius, so then... You know what it's like. The men start texting their wives. "This is so awesome. I found a guy who pays a denarius an hour." They start tweeting about it. "You've got to work here. This is the best job ever." They think they're going to get more.

Verse 10: ***"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..."*** Uh-oh. That's the wrong response. ***"...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?'"* Here's the proverb again. **"So the last will be first, and the first last."**

When you read this parable you go, "It's not fair!" One of the lessons of this parable is life isn't fair and you don't want it to be. If you're ever standing near anyone and they look up to heaven and go, "God, give me what I deserve!" I want you to do *this*. Get away from them. Please do not say that if you're around me.

This is going to be offensive to some of you who are new to Christianity, but it's helpful to know this. If you want to know what *fair* is according to the Bible... This is going to sound so harsh, but just hear it. Grace won't be sweet if you don't understand this. (We're going to talk about grace in a little bit.) What would be fair for all of us is that we would be on fire.

The Bible teaches that we deserve the just penalty and punishment from God for our sins. I know that's not a popular teaching, but it's a comprehensive, consistent teaching that the church has believed for 2,000 years. So you're like, "Okay. I'm not on fire. I'm having a pretty good day." "Okay. I didn't get the Christmas present I wanted, but I'm not on fire."

Here's the question you have to ask. This is a passage to teach us perspective. The question you're going to have to ask... It's a great time to talk about this because you're looking back. Like no other time of year you're looking back. Some of you are more sentimental than others, but you're looking back, and that brings a lot of different feelings. And you're looking forward.

This is a unique time of year. Maybe you do it at your birthday, but this is the time you do it. So then you have to ask this question... *Are you going to put on the "focals" of fairness or the glasses of grace as you look back and as you look forward in your life?* We'll unpack all this. I can tell you what happens if you want to play the "fair" game. Fairness is going to lead to grumbling, because life is not fair.

My father-in-law, when his kids were young and my wife and others would say, "That's not fair," said, "Fair? Fair is where you take your pig in the fall." (That was for those of you who live in Davie County. You're welcome.) The whole idea was to teach that there's no "fair."



The glasses of grace lead to gratitude. That's it. So, if you don't like how you're experiencing the world, maybe change how you're seeing the world. As you look back on the year, maybe go, "I'm going to have the glasses of grace, not the focals of fairness," and you'll know how you're looking because you'll know how you're feeling.

## **01 WHAT IS THE GRACE OF GOD (MOST UNIQUE)**

We have to talk about grace for a little bit, and then we'll unpack the whole passage. When you read this for the first time, one of the things you learn (this is, I think, why Jesus told us this)... You're going to get all of these feelings when you read this, if you're honest, and you read it a couple of times. It's hard to explain grace, just like it's hard to explain hope or faith or salvation, all of these big words that are religious and theological.

So, we have the word *grace*. Grace needs to be experienced more than explained. You normally feel something like this when you read this passage. I've been reading it for the last couple of weeks. Here's how I feel when I read it. "That's not fair" or "That feels a little excessive. It feels maybe unnecessary, maybe not the best use of resources, maybe not the best stewardship." So, grace feels a certain way.

It's like, "How do you talk about the grace of God?" The grace of God announces that God has done everything. That's maybe the best way to think about grace. It's an announcement that God has done everything necessary for you in Christ. Grace also is the announcement of the end of religion. We've had to talk about that a lot here. I'm talking about *religion* in the wooden sense of the word.

*Religion* is about earning. I could summarize almost every religion in the world as man's reach to God. Five steps, six pillars... It's all man's reach to God. *Grace* is God's reach to man. So, the grace of God should shock us, should startle us, should surprise us. The problem with us today... And I don't know why this is. We just assume the grace of God apart from the cross of Christ.

I'm not even just talking about Christians. I had this friend in high school. He wasn't a Christian. I was talking to him about God and ended up in a conversation with him and his dad about God. Neither of them were Christians. I remember his dad saying to me in kind of an arrogant way, "Don't tell me God loves me, Kyle. I know he loves me."

It's like, "How did we get here?" Is it the trophy everybody gets for every event they ever do? Is it the passive, pampered, permissive parenting? Is it that we just lie to each other all the time and never have the hard conversations about how we're experiencing one another? I don't know what it is, but people think they're a lot better than they are.

For about 2,000 years, the average person asked a question that sounded something like, "How could a holy God love me?" Now the question is something like, "How could God not think I'm cool?" I'm not sure how it changed. Here's what we need to see. Here's the lens we need to look through.

## **02 YOU SEE RIGHTLY WHEN YOU SEE GOD AS GENEROUS**

First, it's the lens of generosity, that God is generous. Look here. *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master..."* We've already established that's God. *"...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..."*

So, just a little background. This would be busy harvest season. Here's what it would be like. It would actually be like UPS and FedEx and Amazon and others during Christmas. It's like, "It's a busy season, so we need to hire workers who normally wouldn't be working for us, but we're going to hire them because it's a uniquely busy season."

So, he goes out to hire *this* guy and *that* guy. What's interesting is (and I don't mean this in an insulting way) these guys would have been unskilled laborers. They're not doing anything. By the way, they're completely dependent on the master or owner coming to them. Remember? They keep saying, "No one has hired us. We've been here all day. We're idle."

Here's what you need to realize to understand the grace of God: God initiates to you and you don't bring anything to the relationship except for your sin. The only thing you bring to your salvation is the sin that made it necessary. Sometimes people have this... I mean, they would never articulate this out loud, but sometimes people think things like, "Man! God is so lucky to have me on his team." God graciously comes to you.

## **03 YOU SEE RIGHTLY WHEN YOU TRUST GOD**

The right lens we have to see life through is not just one of God's generosity but that God is worthy to be trusted. Let me show you this. This is very interesting. ***"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.'"***

I want to talk about trusting God, because one of the reasons we start to grumble is we're disappointed with our lives. It's because the world is not working the way we thought it was going to be or the way it should be. So, we need to talk about trusting God. Now, whenever people talk about trusting God...

By the way, when do you need to trust God? You need to trust God when you're struggling to thank God. Sometimes God "Abrahams" you and sometimes he "Jobs" you. What do I mean? Well, if you don't know your Bible, God gives Abraham treasure and God gives Job trials. Abraham says, "Thank you" and Job says, "I'll trust you."

At one level, I know theologically we're always to trust the Lord. It's an element and aspect of faith. I'm talking to some of you who go, "I don't know. Life is not going how I thought. Okay. I'm struggling to thank God for my marriage" or "I'm struggling to thank God for my kids" or "I'm struggling to thank God for my health." Okay. Now you know you need to move from thanking to trusting. We can talk about that together.

We had a family in our church years ago. Something horrible happened in their family (without getting into details), and I remember they said something so profound. They said, "When this horrible thing happened, it took us a little bit to realize, but here's what we realized: nothing about God changed."

That's an interesting thing to think that the God of your wedding day is the God of your dad's funeral. Nothing about God has changed. It's hard to trust God. I want to talk about what trusting God is not. Trusting God is not understanding everything in great detail. Trusting God is often "I don't understand all of the details, and I'm actually going to embrace the mystery and admit my ignorance."

By the way, we talked last week a little bit about humility. Part of the way you cultivate humility is you just admit how many things you don't know or understand. This is why the prideful intellectual people of our day will try to act like they understand everything. It's like, "No, you don't." The best thing for you to do is to admit all of the things you don't know. So, when terrible things happen you have to embrace the mystery.

The second thing is trusting God is not about your circumstances but about God's character. Circumstances change; God's character stays the same. It's easy to praise God on your wedding day; it's hard to praise and trust God when you're still

single. It's easy to trust God when a healthy baby comes; it's hard to trust God when infertility sticks and stays and you can't get pregnant and you can't stay pregnant.

It's easy to trust God when you're in a great church and a great Community Group and growing a lot; it's hard to trust God when you feel like, "God might be calling me overseas or to help with new work or to start a new church plant or to go with a team." It's easy to trust God when you get the bonus and the raise and the promotion; it's hard to trust God when you get laid off or it's very difficult to pay your bills.

Let me say it positively. Trusting God is simply believing what God has said. Now that sounds so simple, but why many of us can't trust God is we don't know what he said. We don't know the Bible well enough, so we're confusing God's promises with our expectations. Have you ever done that? You're like, "I have all of these expectations."

God made a lot of promises. God loves to make promises. But you're holding on to some figment of your imagination promise of the American dream which God did not promise you. You're thinking that God promised you somehow that you wouldn't suffer. No, he promised you he would be with you *in* your sufferings.

"Well, didn't he promise me that all things would work together for good?" Yes. Did you read the rest of the verse? It says, "To be conformed to the image of his Son." So he will work everything together for the good of your maturing into more Christlikeness. Okay. Now I understand that verse better.

Finally, trusting God has to do with God's track record. This is the great thing about living in (almost) 2024. Why is so much of the Bible narrative? Have you ever wondered that? So we could watch God dealing with people. It's like, "Oh, look! Abraham is on a mountain. Oh, he's in a valley. Oh, he's on a plain. No, he's back in the valley. He's up on a mountain. Oh, look. I can see..." We can see what's happening. At the time, Abraham couldn't see what was happening.

We read the book of Job. Job never finds out what happened. We get this perspective. We have (thank goodness we have it) 2,000 years of church history. Read biography. Read great biographies of faithful Christians and about their marriages, their kids, their suffering, their trusting God, and their finances. You're going to see God has a track record.

#### **04 YOU SEE RIGHTLY WHEN YOU LOVE THE GRACE OF GOD DISPLAYED IN OTHERS' LIVES**

Look with me at verse 6. ***"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?'"*** How sad and pathetic must these guys be. Nobody else chose them. These are the least and last and leftovers of society. ***"They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.'"*** Even in a busy season. ***"He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'"***

Just a quick note. You know this, but it needs to be said. God wants those no one else wants. I'll kind of give you the end of the story and we'll revisit it toward the end. You need to realize that you are the eleventh-hour worker. That's the key to understanding this parable and continuing to be grateful.

Come on. If we knew all of the things you did throughout your whole life... If we could see all of your thoughts and you could see all of my thoughts, if we could see all of your fears and all of your insecurities, you'd probably be the person no one wants, which is the person God wants.

So he goes after the eleventh-hour worker. Here we go. Look here. ***"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.'"*** This is important. There are two surprises in this story.

The first surprise is the main one you're thinking of. "Oh man! He pays everyone the same." That's the big surprise. The other surprise that people don't notice is he pays them in the wrong order. There's a reason. Nothing is in the story by accident. This is why you have to read the parables again and again and again to get them.

Why would you pay the last people first? You're going to pay them all the same. Why? Well, because if you pay the first people first... What happens when you get paid? You leave. It's like, "Well, thank you for my day's wage. I'll be on my way. Maybe you'll pick me tomorrow." Okay, great. If you do it in the reverse, then everybody gets to see the eleventh-hour worker get paid a denarius.

Principle: God wants his grace on display. That's it. He doesn't want you to hide his grace. Some of you tell too much of a biography and not enough of a testimony. Do you know the difference? A biography is like, "I can't believe it. I got into *this* school, and that was really cool, and then I had the opportunity to work for *this* company, and that was great. Then we bought this home, and then our kids..." It's like, "Me, me, me. I, I, I."

Less biography, more testimony. Testimony is "This is what God has been doing in my life in spite of all my foolishness, rebellion, and sinfulness. This is how the grace of God has worked in my life." God wants you to have a testimony and for you to be a

trophy of grace, so he orchestrates everything so that the grace of God is on display. It's beautiful.

Not everybody is excited, though. Verse 9: ***"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."*** This is where it all changes. This is where we have to spend a little bit of time.

## **05 THE GRACE OF GOD & GRUMBLING**

Verse 11: ***"And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house..."*** Okay. What is grumbling? *Grumbling* is comparing that leads to complaining. Think about this with me. There would be no grumbling if the workers just came, no one else had been hired, they put in their 12-hour shift, they got their payment, and they went on their way.

They get the exact same payment but 0 percent grumbling. Why is that? Because grumbling at the core has to do with comparing to something else or somewhere else or some other time and feeling like, "I'm not getting what I deserve." We grumble because we spend too much time on other people's social media accounts.

I heard of a women's group that called themselves *Wine and Whine*. I mean, they knew they were getting together to drink wine and whine. Some of you, if you would watch, would be surprised how much of your conversations around the water cooler or after work or the meeting after the meeting... There are a lot of those. Right? The meeting after the meeting where everybody grumbles about the meeting.

This problem is ancient. You could argue it's the main problem Israel had in the wilderness. Now, they weren't comparing their life to somebody else's life; they were comparing their life to their past life. "It was way better in Egypt." It's like, "You were a slave!"

See, we tend to see our past through rose-colored glasses. Then we tell people, foolishly, that the best years of their life are going to be when they're young. "High school is the best year of my life? I hope not. College is... Being single is the best year?" We have to quit telling people that. Then they look back on their life and are not happy. You get all that.

So they grumble. I want to talk about this. Look at what it says. ***"And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house..."*** Here's the key. Verse 12: ***"...saying..."***

They say the quiet part out loud. ***"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."***

Now, we've all felt this. I'm just going to say out loud what they said. They have an ungrateful heart, and this is what they're saying. Probably at some point in your life you've said this or you will say this. "God, it feels like what you've given me is too small. My finances are too small. My personality is too small. My gift set is too small."

Some of you are like, "I don't even like to tell people what I do for a living because it's kind of embarrassing, it kind of feels beneath me, and it kind of feels too small." The good news is God will only hold you accountable for and hold you responsible to what he has given you.

These men begin to grumble and say what God has given is too small. Look at what he says. Verse 13: ***"But he replied to one of them..."*** By the way, God always gets the last word. God is going to end here with three questions. Let me show you this.

***"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?"*** Then he gives the proverb again. ***"So the last will be first, and the first last."***

He asked three questions. You can see the first question. He said, ***"Did you not agree with me for a denarius?"*** In other words, "I gave you exactly what I told you. I kept my promise, and I always will keep my promises." Actually, one thing you learn about obedience... Before obedience is rewarded, obedience is right. It's just the right thing to do.

Could you imagine if I went to the police station or (I don't even know how this works) to the local government officials and said, "Hey, guys, listen. I don't want to brag, but I have been obeying all of the traffic laws recently, and I'm wondering what's in it for me." They'd be like, "You're supposed to obey the traffic laws. There's no reward." At one level, there is, like, "Okay. I'm just supposed to obey."

The other two questions actually get to the heart of the issue. I want to show you this. Look with me at the second question here. ***"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"*** God is basically saying, "My gifts are my gifts. My grace is my grace, and what it means to be God is to be free and give it to whomever I want to."

This is interesting. In the book of Exodus, which is an incredible book, there are two different times where Moses has this... Well, there are more than that, but I'm thinking of these two times where Moses has this intense interaction with God.

The first time is when God says, "Hey, I'm going to send you to Egypt to Pharaoh" and Moses isn't too excited about that, just like *you* wouldn't be too excited about that. He says, "Well, God, could you at least tell me your name?" and God says, "Okay." You could think about this the rest of your life. God says, "I Am Who I Am," which means, "I define myself. I am the self-existent, self-defining God." It's like, "Oh. Okay."

Later, even more profound, is Moses has this emotional moment where he says to God, "God, show me your glory," which is another way to say, "Show me your greatness." So God says, "All right. Go hide in this rock," and God passes by. That's really a neat moment, but what's most interesting is what God says when he passes him by.

Moses says, "Show me your glory" and God says, "Here's my glory." Here's exactly what he says: "I will be gracious to whomever I will be gracious to." So, God is like, "The center of my greatness and glory is my ability to be as gracious as possible to whomever I want to be gracious to." We'll get to this in a minute, but you should love grace when it comes in your life or when it comes in anybody else's life.

I was thinking about this. I'm like, "How do I talk about...?" Because it's such an interesting idea. All of the gifts we try to give to God, God already gave to us. It's all God's. I was like, "What's a good illustration for this?" Then I thought, "My kids getting me gifts at Christmas." Do you have the same thing where you give them the credit card to buy you a gift? Am I the only one? I think when they get older they don't do this anymore.

It's like, "Look at what I got you." I'm like, "With my money." I don't say that, and God doesn't say that unless he has to say that. The right response is to be so happy, to be so thankful, and to receive it. We've probably all had the kid... As they grow older, they start saying, "I don't want my brother or my sister to come into my room." Like, "My room? I let you live in a room in my house."

But you don't want to have that conversation if you don't need to, and if they're grateful, you don't need to have that conversation. What he's saying is all of the gifts are God's, and he loves it when you take his money to buy him the Christmas present, and he loves to act surprised and all that.

The final question is very important. Look here. ***"Or do you begrudge my generosity?"*** The literal Greek translation into the English is "Is your eye evil because I'm good?"



This is good news, because if you're seeing the world in a way that's making you resentful, change the way you're looking at the world.

You're not going to change the world. No one in here is going to change the world. Okay? I hate to break it to me. But you can change the way you *view* the world, which will change the way you *feel* about the world and about God by putting on the glasses of grace, not the focals of fairness. Let me say it another way. You cannot see the goodness of God with a jealous eye.

Stop asking the question... You maybe didn't articulate it this way, but this is what it sounds like when it's articulated. Stop asking the question...*Is God doing too much for someone else?* With social media in our hands at any moment, with everybody posting pictures of basically their fake, filtered lives, it's very easy to look at one dimension... By the way, that's all you're ever doing. You're just seeing one dimension of their life.

We should love when the grace of God shows up in anyone's life. A mark of maturity is the ability to root for one another. You would be surprised in how many marriages and how many families they can't do that. They can't stand it when somebody else gets something. In fact, they kind of rejoice when things don't go well.

This is why Paul says to us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a very famous pastor who's now with the Lord... He pastored in London. Anyway, he made an interesting observation about the verse, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." He said it's always easier to weep with those who weep than rejoice with those who are rejoicing.

The reason is... Think about this. If someone is not doing well... You wouldn't say this, and I don't mean this in an arrogant, dismissive, or demeaning way, but if someone is really struggling, what you basically say is, "I will come down to you. I have kids; you don't. Let's cry about it together. You're struggling financially; I'm not. I'm going to come down to you. Your marriage is a mess; mine isn't. I'm going to come down. I'm going to come down to where you are."

For most people that's somewhat natural. It's instinct. It's inborn. When you have to rejoice with those who rejoice, you have to leave where you are and usually go to somewhere higher. It's very hard on people. It's like, "Okay. I've been a bridesmaid in 42 weddings now, wanting to know if I'll... I'll try to be the best bridesmaid in this wedding while not thinking about my wedding the whole time, or lack thereof."

Jesus ends with the saying, "The last will be first, and the first will be last." That has never been truer than when we talk about the gospel of Jesus Christ, because when

you look at the cross of Christ, which is the very center of our faith... We sang about it already.

What we saw was the first become last. We saw the reversal of the value system of the world. We saw the upside-down, inside-out nature of the cross and of the gospel. We saw something that looked ugly on the outside was beautiful to God. Something that looked like death was bringing us life.

See, here's the thing. People don't like grace sometimes because they feel like (and I get this) it's against justice. Well, I can tell you this: God is not fair, but he is just. In some mysterious way that only the grace of God can fully explain, the grace of God is not God lowering his standards; the grace of God is God meeting his standards in Jesus Christ. The grace of God is that Jesus Christ lived the life you couldn't live, died in your place, and rose on your behalf.

Now let me translate it into the parable we just read. When you read back over that parable, here's what I want you to think: Jesus was the only early worker. He's the only one who made a contract with the owner. Actually, it wasn't just a contract; it was a covenant. He said, "I will do this, and I will pay. I will pay with my own blood." Jesus is the only person who worked from his birth until his death.

So, as we close, I just want to encourage us one more time as we look back to 2023 and look ahead to 2024. Do not put on the focal of fairness, but make a conscious, faith-filled decision to put on the glasses of grace as we head together into 2024. Let's pray.

With all heads bowed, I just want to give us a moment to be grateful. The Bible says, "This is the will of God: to be thankful." We know the will of God for our lives is to be thankful. Let's take a minute, just by yourself, to thank the Lord for some things he did in 2023. Don't think about anyone else; think about your life. What are the things you can celebrate? As we think about 2024, let's trust him together. We are going to trust God together in 2024.

If when I'm done praying you need to step out... The prayer teams will be at both sides to pray for you. Sometimes you just need to say, "I'm struggling to trust God. Can someone trust God with me?" Some of you need to confess the bitterness. You need to confess the resentment. The good news is by the grace of God you can change the way you see the world, and it will lead to gratitude and not grumbling. We ask all this in Jesus' name, amen.