

Removing Limits on Grace

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Pastor Cory Driver

Assistant to the Bishop for Emerging Ministers & Ministries

One of the beauties and challenges of parables is that they can be read in so many ways. Jesus spoke in parables that challenged his hearers back in his day and in ours too. The temptation with parables is to draw a finite, limited meaning and then think we have solved the interpretive issue. But this limitation of parables is a temptation precisely because it limits the power of Jesus' words to interrogate us and our lives. The parable of the landlord and the laborers raises multiple challenges for us as long as we don't shut our ears and hearts to the implications of Jesus' words.

First, we should hear the parable for what it is: a story of putting the last first and the first last. This upheaval is told in economic terms. The landlord goes out to hire day laborers to work his land. Unsurprisingly, a pecking order is established in the labor market. Those known as the best workers are hired first. As the day goes on, the people assumed to be less-than-capable workers—rightly or wrongly—still wait for work. The landlord keeps coming back to the market to employ more workers. Each time he returns, he is surprised to find people still hoping for work, long after most folks would have given up and gone home or started begging. The landlord eventually hires everyone who wants to work in the vineyard.

At the end of the day, the landlord wants to make a dramatic point for those who were once in the market but found themselves selected for the vineyard. The overseers are specifically instructed to pay the laborers who had worked the least amount of time as if they had worked a whole day. This gracious payment raises the expectations of those who had worked all day. But they, too, receive the same amount—a fair day's payment. They are angry enough to raise the issue with the landlord: how dare you pay them and us the same? The landlord replies, in essence, that it isn't their business what anyone else received. They haven't been cheated in the slightest. Instead, they are simply jealous of the grace shown to others.

This parable can and should be interpreted multiple ways. First, we should honor the genre of the parable that Jesus used—it's an economic story about the kingdom of heaven. But we *must* remember that the "kingdom of heaven" is not the place where people go after they die. Instead, it is the inaugurated but not yet fully realized reign of God on earth. In the kingdom of heaven, God chides those who complain about others who are given financial grace, either by overpayment for work or by erasure of debts. Indeed, Jesus says that those who see grace given to others as an insult to their own fair treatment have an evil eye (a sort of personalized universal force of jealousy in the Mediterranean world). Economic benefit to those who have not benefited from financial systems is a kingdom value that Jesus wants his followers to celebrate.

But, of course, the parable is not only about economics. The spiritual reality of God's grace should not be overlooked. Those who spend their whole lives working in the vineyard of the world—working justice and righteousness out of love for God and

neighbor—receive the exact same reward as those who are brought to the vineyard of the Lord at the 11th hour: God's grace.

This last-minute grace is deeply frustrating to some folks, and understandably so. I find myself challenged by the work of social activists Sister Helen Prejean and Shane Claiborne. They refuse to let us make God small or partisan, insisting instead that the God who is gracious in receiving and comforting the murder victim is the same God who is gracious to the repentant murderer. It is shocking and offensive—and true. Jesus welcomed Stephen and also the one responsible for his lynching, Paul.

This is not just a hypothetical exercise for me. Something deep inside of me resists God's offer of graciousness to the people who killed my three friends from grad school. Jesus says that thing deep inside of me is the evil eye. As we read previously, if I have been forgiven much, how dare I be stingy with grace? Still, this is difficult for me, to say the least.

The example of Jonah is important here. The early readers of Jonah knew that the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. As they moved from kingdom to kingdom, the Assyrians were wantonly cruel and famous in the ancient world for their barbarism. In this passage, Jonah was furious because God repented of the disaster that had been ordained for Nineveh because the massive city had repented ([Jonah 3:10](#)). How dare God relent from punishing the very people who would kill everyone Jonah loved and cared about? The moral of the story is that neither Jonah nor we get to decide who deserves grace or how much. Freed from the responsibility to make sure that folks are not loved more than they deserve, we are only called to emulate Jesus, who loved all without limit.