**GRACE (#6)**

***A Parable of Grace***

As a child I very vividly remember my parents reading to my younger brother, older sister and myself Bible stories from *Egermeier’s Bible Story Book*. My two youngest sisters were six and eight years younger and not yet old enough to follow along. We would cozy up to dad or mom and listen to them read a Bible story while I stared at one of the 122 (I just looked that up) full page illustrations of that story. To this day I’m confident these formative years of learning these stories helped set our course for life. Two of my sisters have been married to elders in the church, my brother became an elder, and so did I. All of us trace our heritage back to those childhood memories where we first learned the Bible. (Note: Parents, read to your children! Do Bible devos with them. It’s priceless.)

I am a visual learner and must “see” what you are talking about for my memory to stick. One memory that “sticks” from Elsie Egermeier’s book was the pictures of the Lord’s parables. Depending on how you label a parable there are approximately 46 told by Jesus. One that has “stuck” with me from childhood is the Parable of the Vineyard Workers (Matt. 20:1-16). I didn’t understand it very well as a small boy (or even as an adult for many years) but it intrigued me enough to keep digging (the very purpose of parables – Matt. 13:10-17).

Take a moment to read Matt. 20:1-16.

Picture it. Sun rising. 6:00 a.m. Crowd gathering. Anxiety tense. The vineyard owners are carefully eyeing all the workers who have come to the market square in hopes of finding work to feed their families that night. The grapes are now ripened to perfection. They must be picked … today! Workers, young and old, are pressing forward saying, “Pick me, pick me.” The youngest and healthiest are chosen first and agree to the standard wage of a denarius to work the twelve-hour shift. With baskets on their shoulders they set off for the fields to sweat it out all day in the hot sun.

At 9:00 a.m. it becomes obvious to the owner he needs more laborers. Back to the market he runs and quickly finds willing workers who agree to his terms of “*what is fair*.” They are desperate and so take their chances. At noon he can see they are not going to get the harvest in without more help. Back to the market. Again, more accept the “*what is right*” contract and run to the fields to work the remaining six hours. At 3:00 p.m., and then again at 5:00 p.m., the owner knows he is running out of sunlight and hustles more workers into the fields, again with the understanding of “*what is right*.”

At 6:00 p.m., with the sun setting over the horizon, the whistle blows and men gather at the treasurer’s table to receive their pay. The owner stuns the paymaster with the unorthodox request to distribute the wages in reverse order. Nobody does that. You always pay the sunrise-to-sunset workers first so that they can be kept happy and get home to feed their families and be ready for the next day’s work. Instead they are told to get in the back of the line and wait their turn. The one-hour men who had barely broken a sweat are told to receive a full day’s pay, not “*what is fair*.” They are ecstatic with joy. Their children will eat that night!

Word spreads like wildfire down the line of workers. You can almost hear the buzz. The filthy, smelly, sweat-soaked full-timers are suddenly calculating in their minds what 12 denarii will buy instead of the customary one denarius. “Wow! Two weeks pay for one day’s work. This is going to be sweet!” The anticipation grows as they inch toward the paymaster. But when they reach him they are handed a single coin and a “thank you for your service.” Flabbergasted, they suddenly erupt in rage by crying out, “Unfair! Unfair!” They feel ripped off. The owner quickly corrects their analysis by reminding them of their shake-of-the-hand agreement.

*“‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’”*

This parable by Jesus was meant for the apostles. Read the setup to it in Matt. 19:16-30. The rich young ruler had walked away from Jesus’ offer of eternal life. These twelve men are stunned by the Lord’s statement “*It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom*.” They then proudly state: “*See, we have left all. What shall we get*?”

Jesus then tells them this parable about God’s grace. You see, the apostles are the twelve-hour workers who “*bore the burden and heat of the day*.” Being “first” into the kingdom should bring with it greater pay (i.e. greater reward and honor). Jesus’ parable says grace doesn’t work that way. Nobody, not even the apostles, deserve or earn heaven. The first are last, the last are first (Matt. 19:30; 20:16).

Do you see the point about God’s saving grace? Peter, Andrew, James, John, or even Paul – cannot earn their way into heaven. They will not “earn their wings” and receive a greater mansion, while others are sent across the tracks and given a broom closet to live in. In heaven all will be equal. The widow with two mites will be glorified on the same level as Noah, Abraham, David, Elijah, Mary, Barnabas or even “Saint” Peter and “Saint” Paul. I, a mere mortal who has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, will be caught up into Paradise, into the third heaven, and see and experience things which are inexpressible and full of glory (Rom. 3:23; 2 Cor. 12:4). Grace saves all men equally.

John Newton, who wrote the famous hymn *Amazing Grace*, said this:

“If I ever reach heaven I expect to find three wonders: First, to meet some I had not thought to see there; Second, to miss some I had thought to meet there; and Third, the greatest wonder of all, to find myself there!” And all of God’s people said, “Amen.”

Thank you Elsie Egermeier for your wonderful Bible story book. Thank you dad and mom for bringing me up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. And thank you dear Jesus for your amazing grace in offering me a hundred-fold blessings in this life, and in the one to come, eternal life (Matt. 19:29). Indeed, the last shall be first.

With love, Rick