

Matthew 20:1-16 | “Grace vs. Merit”  
*Preached on February 18, 2024 by Pastor Matt Brown*

Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew 20, verse 1.

We have been working through the book of Matthew, and now we come upon the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. *[pauseeee]*

As I begin, I want to ask you this question: what is the difference between grace and merit?  
*[pause]*

Well merit is something *deserved*.

It is something rightfully earned.

So if you work at a job for 8 hours, then you merit 8 hours of pay. *[pause]*

But grace is inherently *undeserved*.

It is receiving something that you haven't earned, receiving it solely because of someone else's kindness and generosity. *[pauseeee]*

Sadly, the truth is that many times we live our lives based on merit. *[pause]*

Politics is pretty much driven by the idea of “quid-pro-quo” -- you give me something, if I do something for you.

But also in our workplaces we operate this way...

We do some great things at the job place, and we get angry if we don't get all the recognition that we think we deserve. *[pause]*

We live life thinking, “I deserve that raise! I deserve to be named first! I deserve the award! I deserve to be recognized!”

We dwell upon all of our hard work, and immediately consider that our work deserves a certain amount of return. *[pause]*

We even treat each other based on merit when we act like life should be a “You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.” *[pauseeee]*

I want you to really think about how you relate to others...

When you do something for someone else, are you expecting them to do something for you and when they don't, do you get upset?

That's living your life, believing that your good deeds always deserve something in return.  
*[pauseeee]*

That kind of mentality is what we saw last week with the young rich man, who thought his good deeds could merit eternal life.

He approached God with a merit mindset, and we do the same...

We think we can earn God's grace and merit more and more from Him.

And it's this merit mindset that Jesus will go after in the parable this morning. *[pause]*

Look down at Matthew 20, verse 1, as I begin reading. *[READ 1-16]*

Jesus begins by telling us that the kingdom of heaven is like this master of a house, who goes out and hires laborers.

And this would be done back then especially around harvest time, for they needed temporary workers to help with the work. *[pause]*

So he makes an agreement with the first ones to work for 1 denarius. *[pause]*

Then he goes out throughout the day and hires more workers at different times, simply promising to pay "whatever is right".

But when the end of the day comes, he pays the workers all the same amount, no matter how many hours they worked. *[pause]*

This makes the first hires very angry because they felt like they deserved more, since they worked more.

And the master responds by pointing out that he didn't do anything wrong towards them, for they agreed to 1 denarius.

He had simply decided to be generous with the late arrivals. *[pauseeee]*

Now what is this parable talking about?

This parable is given in the context of rewards. *[pause]*

Remember how Peter just asked what rewards that he and the disciples would get?

Well now Jesus is giving a parable about how we should approach the topic of rewards. *[pause]*

And as we analyze the parable, we can see that the master of the house is obviously God, and the workers all picture believers. *[pause]*

The first workers hired seem to be believers, who think that they deserve more rewards from God over those believers who came later or seemed to put in less effort.

And what I would like to do this morning is first look at the first people hired and their mentality, and then we will see how God is pictured. *[pauseeee]*

*So the first ones hired, who complained, show us how we often think...*

### **I. With a merit mindset.**

What is a merit mindset?

Well a merit mindset is sort of like how Peter is thinking when it comes to rewards. *[pause]*

Look back in chapter 19, verse 27...

Peter says, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will *we* have?" *[pause]*

Peter seems to be approaching the topic of rewards with a merit mindset.

He's thinking, "Look at how much we gave up, so now what do we get out of it?" *[pause]*

It's this thinking that says, "I gave up this much, so now I deserve that much." *[pause]*

Peter is approaching rewards with the wrong kind of thinking, and Jesus' parable seems to be a rebuke against his mentality...

Just because Peter and the other disciples gave up so much and were the first followers doesn't mean that they should approach God like He is required to give them more than everyone else. *[pauseeee]*

The problem is that we think that God operates the same way that we do, but He doesn't.

So when it comes to rewards from God, we think it goes by our human scales and measurements.

We think rewards should always equal the amount of service rendered.

We think that God will say, "OK guys, you earned and deserve this, so here you go." *[pauseeee]*

We will certainly receive rewards, but we ought not serve God and then say, "OK Lord, pay up according to all that I've done."

If we do that, we are just like the first hired workers in the parable. *[pauseeee]*

Is that your mentality when you serve God?

Do you serve only to *get*? Then you have a merit mindset. *[pause]*

Are you counting all of the works you have done, and the effort you have put in, so that you can bring it to God, and say, "Now what do I get for all this?" *[pause]*

How dare we approach the Lord that way! *[pauseeeee]*

Now let's look closer at the workers who got upset in the parable. *[pause]*

We see that a merit mindset will cause you to approach God with *entitlement*. *[pause]*

Do you see how entitled these workers are?

When they saw how much everyone else got, it says, "they thought they would receive more." *[pause]*

**That's entitlement to a T.**

They weren't thankful that the landowner hired them, and now they have money for their family.

No, they thought, "We DESERVE more!" *[pause]*

Even though they had an agreement for 1 denarius, they felt that they were entitled to more. *[pauseeee]*

These guys are contrasted with the workers who were hired later, who started working, not even knowing exactly how much they would get.

The landowner just promised to pay "whatever is right", and they went gratefully into the vineyard.

**They relied solely on the justice and generosity of the landowner.** *[pauseeee]*

You see, entitlement leads to ungratefulness. *[pause]*

If you are an entitled person, you will constantly show an ungrateful attitude for the things you do have.

And we see that in the first hired workers, who weren't thankful for what they got, but became angry about what they didn't get. *[pauseeee]*

Oh, how ugly entitlement can be!

And we so easily harp on the youth of our day for their entitlement, yet we do the same thing with God and don't even bat an eye. *[pauseeee]*

**Do you approach God with a sense of entitlement?**

Do you think that you deserve more than what God has given you?

Do you think that you deserve a better spiritual gift?

Do you think that you deserve a better life situation? *[pauseeee]*

We are never to go to God with entitlement because we don't deserve *anything*.

We were the dead, who were made alive.

We were the rebellious, who only deserved death, and we are now graciously turned into children, who have an inheritance in Heaven. *[pauseee]*

The Christian life is all of grace -- we don't deserve a thing.

Entitlement should be the last thing we ever display, considering what God has done in our lives. *[pauseeee]*

Alongside the entitled ungratefulness that the workers showed, we also see that it results in *grumbling*. *[pause]*

They grumbled at the master for what they didn't receive. *[pause]*

Grumbling is the sound of unmet entitlement.

It's also the sound that ungratefulness makes, for wherever ungratefulness is found, grumbling is heard. *[pauseeee]*

Do you ever grumble to God? What is it about?

Are you ungrateful about something?

Do you feel entitled to something better?

Grumbling is the language of someone who is thinking that they deserve better. *[pauseeee]*

I think of the grumbling Israelities in the wilderness.

*They were grumblers.*

They always thought they deserved a better situation, and that God was somehow failing in His duties to provide or protect. *[pause]*

That's how these grumbling workers approached the master.

They thought that the master had done them wrong or not given them enough.

They essentially thought that the master *was not good*. *[pause]*

You see, grumbling exposes something about our thoughts of God...

**Grumbling to God reveals that we think He's not good.**

But who are we to grumble to God: the all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God who saved us out of sheer grace?

It's because our merit mindset creeps in, saying, "You deserve better," when really, we should be standing in awe at the graciousness of anything we have from the Lord. *[pauseeee]*

One more thing about the workers who got upset is we see their *envious spirit*. *[pause]*

When they saw what everyone else was getting, they compared what they got and became envious.

This is because envy and comparison are tag-team partners, and what a nasty team they make. *[pauseeee]*

**It's so easy to compare our lives with others.**

This is especially true nowadays with social media, as we see what people are doing more readily or what kind of lifestyle they live. *[pause]*

We look around and see what people have, and then reflect upon what we don't have.

And this causes us to think, "I should get more than that person! Look at what all I've done."

See that merit mindset slithering in again? *[pause]*

We get upset because we deem ourselves more deserving than that other person, and this can even infiltrate our service to the Lord.

We say, "Look at all that I've done for the Lord, and He's going to give so much to *that* guy?!" *[pauseeee]*

But I want you to think about something...

Envy is never happy for the person that it envies.

Envy doesn't rejoice at the grace of God in someone's life. *[pause]*

That's why the master of the house says, "Do you begrudge my generosity?"

Really, he's saying, "Are you jealous because I'm generous?"<sup>1</sup> *[pause]*

**In our jealousy, we don't rejoice in God's generosity.**

In our jealousy, we don't celebrate the grace of God in the lives of other people. *[pause]*

There's something wrong with our hearts if we can't celebrate and rejoice in God's generosity towards others! *[pause]*

Instead of rejoicing with those who rejoice,<sup>2</sup> we are envious of those who rejoice.

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<sup>1</sup> CSB translation.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:15.

How awful and unloving is that?!

Shouldn't we be thankful anytime that God is generous and gracious towards someone else?  
[pause]

But we don't, for we compare.

We think, "But *I* didn't get that."

Or even, "I deserve more than what that person got." [pause]

We are way too self-focused instead of others-focused. [pauseeee]

Don't compare yourself with others, but be thankful for God's grace in your life and in the lives of others. [pauseeee]

You see, we often work with a merit mindset, and it causes all kinds of trouble and ruin in its wake. [pause]

When you operate in a way that always thinks, 'I put in this much effort, then I deserve this much as a reward', then you are going to be a miserable person.

You will become an entitled, ungrateful, grumbling, and jealous person when you don't get what you think you deserve. [pause]

We cannot approach God that way!

We cannot come with a merit mindset, for God is no man's debtor. [pause]

He is not bound to our human measurements.

Everything is His to give as He deems best, for everything belongs to Him. [pause]

He's in charge, not us.

We are not to grumble and complain, trying to move His hand, but we serve Him genuinely, knowing that He is always good. [pause]

We remember that we are merely recipients of grace, not meritors of grace.

The only thing that we merited was death.<sup>3</sup> [pauseeee]

*Now that we have seen how we often work, let's see how God works...*

## II. With gracious generosity.

Have you ever met two people and said, "You guys are *so* different from each other.?"

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<sup>3</sup> A reference to Romans 6:23.

Well the master of the house is so different from the workers who grumbled.

Both their attitude and their thinking is opposite. *[pause]*

This reminds us that in many cases, our thinking and attitude is different from God's, and the solution is not for God to become more like us, but for us to be more aligned with Him.

He is the One who is always right, not us. *[pauseeee]*

The fact that we sympathize and align so readily with the first hires shows how loveless and self-serving we are.

It reveals how merit-based we are, compared with God who is more so grace-based.

And we will see this more as we look closely at the master of the house. *[pauseeee]*

The first thing we see is that *He is just*. *[pause]*

Though the early hired laborers thought he was unjust, as a matter of fact, we see that He was completely just in his dealings.

He actually didn't do anything wrong when you really think about it. *[pause]*

He did not *underpay* anyone.

That's why he points out to them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?" *[pause]*

He did not hold back pay from his workers, but he paid the first hires exactly what they agreed to.

They were the ones in the wrong, for they were demanding more than they had originally agreed to. *[pauseeee]*

The truth is that sometimes God's justice looks "wrong" to us, but it's always right because He is the standard of justice.

He is always fair, but He will not always give you what you *think* you deserve.

But who says that what we think we deserve is right and fair and just? We are acting as the judge. *[pauseeee]*

The problem is that we think that God must work by our fairness rules, when He is the creator of what's fair and just.

And when we open our mouths trying to go against His standards of justice, we end up looking like fools and crooks. *[pauseeee]*



The workers actually demonstrated that *they* were the ones not desiring to keep with the agreement, and therefore, *they* were the unjust ones. *[pauseeee]*

He is just, but on top of that, *he is generous and gracious.* *[pause]*

The landowner had actually not underpaid anyone, He was simply more generous with some, and that is in His right to do.

It is His money, so He can choose how to use it.

If He wants to be extra generous with people, how could we say, “How dare you!”? *[pauseeee]*

You see, the first hired workers were actually showing that they were upset at the master’s generosity. *[pause]*

Since when is it OK or good to be upset at someone’s *generosity?* *[pause]*

Can you imagine saying, “How dare you generously give that needy person some money, I deserve more money too, you know!”

Yet that’s basically what the workers were doing to the master. *[pause]*

Just think: the late comers would now be able to provide for their family.

So the first hires should be thankful for the landowner’s compassion towards others, instead of being jealous.

But it showed that they had an extreme lack of love for others. *[pauseeee]*

Who are we to despise God for showing grace to the undeserving!

*We are the undeserving who have experienced grace, so how could we be upset that others get to receive grace, too?* *[pauseeee]*

We are so often like the older brother in the story of the prodigal son, not rejoicing over the restoration of his little brother, but bitter that the brother received grace.<sup>4</sup> *[pauseeee]*

God is a God of grace and generosity.

He loves to shower grace upon the undeserving, and we dare not find ourselves angry over this, for what does that show about our hearts? *[pauseeee]*

The master of the house didn’t have to give the late comers extra money, yet He graciously was providing and showing love to more people. *[pauseeee]*

God doesn’t work by our merit scales, He works by lavish grace.

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<sup>4</sup> See Luke 15:25-32.

He gives according to His good pleasure, out of His heart of love. *[pauseeee]*

God works differently than we do.

We are all about human standards of merit - 'you do this, you earn that'.

But God works by grace, and this doesn't always make sense to us because we don't always work that way, but that just shows how much more good and generous God is than us!

We are often mercenaries in our thinking, but God is a benevolent Father. *[pauseeee]*

Our minds and ways always seem to go back to merit, but God's way is always on grace. *[pause]*

The Lord never gives you less than you deserve, but He always gives you more than you deserve!

As one commentator said, "All human merit shrivels before his burning, self-giving love."<sup>5</sup>

And in this story, Christ wants to break down our "I deserve" mentality when it comes to serving the Lord by reminding us that God doesn't work that way. *[pause]*

We don't hold God to our measuring sticks, but leave judgment up to Him.

He is not impressed by our list of efforts, whereby we say, "I deserve this much now."

No, He is pleased to give grace to the undeserving. *[pauseeeee]*

God doesn't measure by our normal performance standards, but often flips them, for when Jesus ends the parable, He says, "So the last will be first, and the first last." *[pauseeee]*

If you have a "me-first, I deserve" mentality, you will find yourself last.

You serve for the purpose of "getting" and you will be last.

You serve, acting like God owes you more, than you will be last.

But if you serve like the late comers, simply resting in the goodness and generosity of the Master, then you will be first. *[pauseeee]*

This means that some people we think will be rewarded more will receive less than we expected, and those believers that we think won't get much will get more than we expected.<sup>6</sup>

That is to say, we will be surprised by the rewards given in Heaven. *[pauseeeee]*

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven, The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 212.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, vol. 1, *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 319.

God works with gracious generosity, and what good news that is for sinners such as us!

What good news for people, who are dependent on Him for everything! *[pauseeee]*

We often work by merit, but He works by grace.

So don't approach God saying, "I'll serve the Lord to get this," but serve God simply saying, "Lord, whatever you deem is best." *[pause]*

*And that's what Jesus is driving us to see and understand. That...*

### **Gratitude for God's generosity should drive our service.**

We don't serve God *for* the rewards, but we genuinely serve God, who graciously rewards according to His good pleasure. *[pause]*

We must never operate with a performance-based, entitled mentality, thinking, "I deserve," when it comes to serving God.

Rather, we serve God, always saying, "I am undeserving, yet look at God has given me!" *[pauseeee]*

What's your mentality and motivation for serving God?

Is it to "get"?

Do you give money in the offering thinking, "I wonder what I will *get* now from God for the sacrificial gift I just gave!" *[pause]*

Do you serve others thinking, "God is gonna notice this and be so impressed and give me so much in return." *[pause]*

Do you live your Christian life with a sense of entitlement?

Are you bitter with God, thinking that you deserve a better hand dealt to you? *[pause]*

Are you jealous of others, who seem to get more?

Are you ungrateful for what you do have from God? *[pause]*

Remember that God doesn't work by our pay scales, but He works by grace.

He desires for us to be people who simply go to Him, knowing that they are undeserving, and rejoicing in whatever they receive from His gracious hand. *[pauseeee]*

This goes right with the message of the gospel.

We are all sinners, who deserve eternal death, and don't deserve anything good.

But out of the love and grace of God, He sent Jesus Christ to come to this earth and do what we couldn't do.

He lived for us, died in our place, and rose again victoriously.

And all those who recognize their need and cling to Christ for help, experience the grace of salvation and forgiveness. *[pauseeee]*

You see, at salvation we received life based solely on grace, not merit.

**And our lives are to continue in that path.**

We are to live focused on the grace of God, and not approach Him with a merit mindset, thinking, "I deserve more." *[pause]*

No, we bring nothing to the table, and the good things we do are only because of His empowerment.

So in the end, even our faithful service is because of His grace, and all we can do is cast our crowns before His throne.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A reference to Revelation 4:10.