



Words that transform—Grace

Matthew 20:1-16

The second word in this series of 'Words that Transform' is Grace. It's a word with which Christians are very familiar. We talk of it often, we frequently sing about it and it lies at the centre of much Christian communication. But do we understand it?

One writer described grace as the last great theological word. What I think he meant by that is that the word has been less spoiled than many other words in our Christian vocabulary. We use the word and derivations of it in so many contexts:

- We are “grateful” for kindness expressed
- We say “grace” before meals
- We talk about someone being a “gracious” host
- We sometimes want to leave a “gratuity” when someone has acted over and beyond what is expected.

These various uses all seem to point to something that does not need to occur or is not necessarily required. However, even though undeserved, we express our deep thanks.

In Matthew's Gospel, we come to the “labourers in the vineyard”. In this parable, there is a strong declaration of grace at the heart of its message.

The workers or labourers are employed from the crack of dawn and at various intervals throughout the day up to the point when the last workers are hired just an hour before the end of the working day.

Those hired last are paid a denarius (v.9) which was a day's wage for a labourer and so we can understand how those who had worked for varying degrees of the day—or the whole day—would feel unhappy, to say the least. They would anticipate a greater payment, but they are paid just the same.

It is important for us to understand that a denarius was the recognised payment for a day's work for an individual, not a family, and so this story would be about poor workers. One writer on this parable drew attention to the fact that many labourers were not only poor, but died young, because they hardly had the means to feed themselves and their family.

However, the ones who had worked all day received exactly what had been promised to them (v.2). We are given an insight into how they felt in verses 11-12. They plead:

- This isn't fair
- This isn't just
- We deserve more

The parable, however, is not a trade union description of fair wages – nor a guide to employers' federations about how they should treat their workers; it is much more about fundamental attitudes to God's grace.

Matthew 20:13-15



“I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want to with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

The parable is set within two versions of a significant saying of Jesus, but expressed in a different order: in 19:30 and 20:16.

The earlier chapter suggests that Jesus has been concerned to focus upon the questions of rank and order and there is nothing more divisive in people’s minds than the concept of promotion or demotion.

The parable reflects life at a time when unemployment was something that was greatly feared. This is true now, but those were the days before any formal assistance was given in such situations of people being without work. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells of relief work in Jerusalem to give work to 18,000 people who became unemployed after the building of the temple, because they had little work to occupy them.

The parable is very realistic with ancient farming employment methods. Up until the second half of the twentieth century, such employment recruitment was known in many parts of the developed world and I suspect is still the pattern in many poorer places.

Jesus draws a radical distinction between how people generally expect to be rewarded and the way God deals with people.

Taken literally the parable of the workers in the vineyard would very likely raise the hackles of any employer, whether in the corporate or the “for purpose” world. The parable is not essentially about fair wages or just recompense for work done.

So my intention is to unpack the parable and focus our attention upon this issue of grace. I have a very precious little book in my library at home in the section relating to parables. The writer, John Hargreaves, suggests that this particular parable has a chief meaning and that we should hold to that if we are to understand what God is saying to us.

Hargreaves conclusion is addressed to all of us: “God is merciful and I am merciful. He values those who you call outcasts and sinners. You think this outlook of mercy is wrong, but it is your outlook that is wrong and needs to be changed.”

We remind ourselves that the parable is given a very significant setting, defined by Jesus who begins with the words, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” (v.1)

Let me return to the word grace and suggest that this parable gives us an insight into understanding what this means.

Its meaning is linked directly to the way of salvation. Ephesians 2:8 is the central text of our Protestant faith. Paul insists that it is by grace that we are saved. We have not earned salvation, nor could even the best of us ever had done so.

It is always God who gives and we who take. Our works of goodness can have nothing to do with earning salvation. All the good works in the world cannot put us right with God. There is a spiritual law which tells us if someone loves us, as opposed to just liking us, we know we cannot deserve that love or it would not be love!



It is the unique Christian contribution

A conference was being held in Oxford on the theme of Comparative Religion. Thinkers and experts from across the world were debating the unique contribution of Christianity. They began eliminating possibilities and some of the great ideas were discussed. The debate was in full flow when C S Lewis walked into the room.

He asked, "What's the rumpus about?" and he was told that his colleagues were discussing the unique contribution of Christianity among world religions. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

This is an important truth when we are debating and discussing what the Christian faith has to offer today.

News reports do not fully tell of the key contribution the Christian faith played in South Africa's relatively peaceful revolution. In making this point, Philip Yancey wrote:

"Nelson Mandela broke the chain of ungrace when he emerged from twenty-six years of imprisonment with a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, not revenge. FW De Klerk himself, elected from the smallest and most strictly Calvinistic of the South African churches, felt what he later described as 'a strong sense of calling'. He told his congregation that God was calling him to save all the people of South Africa, even though he knew that would mean rejection by his own people."

This example can be replicated in communities across the world. It is a message in Bosnia, Rwanda and Burundi and wherever the power of forgiveness can be let loose!

The grace of God transforms ordinary lives. I read of a distinguished visitor who was spending a few days with the late Albert Schweitzer in Africa. Upon entering the dining room the first evening, he saw a piano which he described as old, broken down and warped.

After the meal was finished, Dr Schweitzer, as was his custom, sat at the keyboard of the decrepit instrument and began to play. Within a moment the room was filled with beautiful and majestic harmonies. Describing the incident later, the visitor wrote in his diary: "The old piano seemed to *lose its poverty* in his hands."

The reward is the same for all who respond

I can understand, from a human point of view, how this parable can sound unreasonable. It is even more unreasonable when we have considerable sympathy for the workmen who had borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat of the Middle East.

I want to suggest a writer's conclusion about grace is a helpful insight: we have "an inbuilt resistance to grace... and Jesus talked about it often."

I don't know how familiar you are with the biblical misquote, when people moan about the weather – or something going right for someone. Such people often say, "The sun always shines on the righteous". In the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, we read a rather different text: "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous," (Matthew 5:45).



May I quote Yancey again? He says, “Jesus saw grace everywhere. Yet he never analysed or defined grace, and almost never used the word. Instead, he communicated grace through stories...”

In the teaching of Jesus, he gives tax collectors and sinners a share, even though it might be undeserved. So the question, “Are you going to grumble at God’s goodness?” is something for each of us to explore.

One of the most penetrating parables has to be that of the tax collector and the Pharisee. It was shocking and incomprehensible, yet the good news of Jesus was and is disturbing and unbelievable at one level. However, at the same time, it is the grace that elicits a response from us.

God’s reward of life and purpose does not vary in proportion to the amount and value of service rendered. It is true that in life some people’s contribution may appear to exceed that of others. But God’s reward is never according to ability or merit, but according to grace.

One of my mentors, Donald English, wrote a series of Lent reflections in 1986 and tells the story of a tent evangelist who used to take his tent around the country, preaching as he went. He went into one village, set up his tent, laid the seats and the hymnbooks out and he started his mission.

A young man sat at the back of the meeting every night and had a whale of a time! He laughed and he giggled; he made undertones and asides which all those sitting around him could hear. When anything that was said was not quite right, he made the most of it—and night after night he ruined the meetings. The evangelist used to dread seeing him taking his seat every night.

When the last meeting was over, and it had gone pretty much the same way, the evangelist began packing up his materials. To his amazement, the young man didn’t move; he remained in his seat. The evangelist approached and the young man moved towards him. He said, “I have ruined your meetings this week, haven’t I?” The evangelist had to reply, “Well, yes you have, actually.”

The evangelist was shocked when the young man said: “But I listened tonight and I want you to tell me what I can do to be a Christian.” The evangelist just kept collecting his materials and said, “You’re too late”, and picked up another whole row of books. When he got right to the back, the young man took hold of him and said: “I’m not going until you tell me! I’m sorry! I’ve done the wrong thing. What can I do to be a Christian?” And the evangelist turned and said: “You’re too late; Jesus has done everything to make it possible for you to be a Christian. Just accept what he’s offered.”

Most of Jesus’ listeners then and potential followers today find it very hard to believe that Jesus treats people in such a generous way.

The kingdom of God is not about earning your way or receiving a long service medal; it begins and ends in the experience of receiving the gift of God in Christ.

It was Elizabeth Barrett Browning who wrote: “God’s gifts put man’s best dreams to shame.”

None of us needs to be jealous of how God bestows His gifts

One of the most common and yet difficult pastoral situations is when we are alongside someone who feels they have been ‘hard done by’.

In the earshot of Jesus, as he was teaching, there may have been religious leaders, who would certainly feel that they had earned their wages in full. However, before we are harsh about them, one



writer is correct in saying about the first workers: “In their favour, we must note that the parable nowhere suggests that they had not—and even so, none of them had ground for complaint; none of them could claim they had earned more than the agreed rate.”

The main point about the kingdom that God offers in Jesus Christ is that it is a gift which is both present and coming. Those who worked an hour are paid the same as those who have done a full shift. It may make us angry, but if you and I have received of God’s love, we have no cause for complaint.

I am glad that God doesn’t reward us on the basis of deeds; it is all of grace.

The kingdom belongs to God and he has the right to determine the terms and qualifications for entering his kingdom. We can be certain that his gift of love is both the starting point and the continuing principle of our Christian discipleship.

Paul Tillich concluded about this grace of God: “We cannot bridge the gap between God and ourselves through even the most intensive and frequent prayers; the gap between God and ourselves can only be bridged by God.”

George Matheson, the wonderful preacher and hymn writer, served God in a pastorate in Edinburgh. After some months of his ministry, the twice-yearly Kirk Communion was to take place. The minister had got to know an old woman who lived in a cellar in filthy conditions. When the elder went out with the call to communion card, he found she had gone from her cellar.

The elder tracked her down and found her in an attic room. She was poor and so there were no luxuries, but the attic was as light and clean as the cellar had been dark and dirty. The elder said to her: “I see you’ve changed your house.”

“Aye,” she said. “I have. You canna hear George Matheson preach and live in a cellar.” The Christian faith had rekindled her life with fresh dignity and worth; such is God’s grace.

The old hymn put it this way:

“Deep in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore.”

Grace has to be one of the most beautiful words to enter the languages of the world. It embodies the most wonderful of human qualities that we ever find in others:

- Grace accepts people as worthy of kindness, whatever their circumstances
- Grace shows warmth to those with the coldest exterior
- Grace will show mercy when it is so obviously undeserved.

In the world of business and ideas, many focus upon hard work, effort, good choices and management skills. We are told: “Genius is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration!”

It is little wonder that we struggle with the biblical concept of grace, which tells us:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,” (Ephesians 2:8).