

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

January 18, 2015



(grace) the stuff of life

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Discussion Guide

A Table Set by Grace

Matthew 20.1-16

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- What do you think about the statement, "You earn what you get?" Could you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read Matthew 20.1-16, slowly. Reread Matthew 20.1-16 once more, seeking to imagine the scene. Read the parable once more, attempting to find your place in the story. With whom do you resonate? Could you elaborate?
- In what ways does grace appear in this story? Seek to find as many as possible.
- In what ways, if any, does the concept of earning stand in tension with these appearances of grace?
- Where do you see people functioning on the unspoken expectation that they must earn the things they have? In what ways, if any, do you see this idea at work in the ways people relate to God?

- In one sentence or less, what does Jesus have to say about the idea of earning what we need in life from God?
- In this parable, Jesus indicates that God wishes to grant freely the basic necessities of life apart from any actions of merit. This means that God is less concerned about interacting with us fairly and more concerned with interacting graciously. What reactions, if any, does this thought evoke in you? Would you explain?
- If your relationship with God was rooted in a grace which freely provides our needs, how might this change the way you pray? The way you view God? The way you worship?
- What might keep you from interacting with God in this way?
- What steps might assist you in approaching God as one rich in grace?
- Consider concluding your time by thanking God for his many and plentiful gifts of grace. You might do this by having a time in which you freely share the good gifts of God like light, coffee, love, the beach, etc.

Context and Background

Parables

Parables formed the core of Jesus' teaching. At their heart, parables are any form of teaching which is used to make a point, through symbol or story. A parable can be a single sentence or wisdom saying or a long, elaborate story (Matthew 22.21; 22.1-14). The reasoning behind Jesus' use of parables is probably two-fold. On one level, Jesus, most likely, taught in parables in order to connect with his audience. He told stories about landowners, tax collectors, sheep, peasants, and servants, all everyday elements of life in Palestine. However, Jesus also taught in parables in an effort to hide some of the deeper, more difficult elements of his teaching, elements which he only would reveal to his closest disciples (Mark 4.9-12).

Interpreting Jesus' parables can be a difficult task, because they both invite and hide at the same time. Traditionally, the Church has interpreted the parables allegorically with each element of the story standing for something. For example, the father's robe in the parable of the Prodigal Son could be interpreted as the righteousness of God being given to a sinner (Luke 15.11-32).

The problem with this form of interpretation is that the allegorical elements were often left up to the individual or particular church tradition causing them to vary widely. More recently, scholars have rejected the allegorical interpretation in favor of an approach which views each parable as making a single point. This line of interpretation is not unlike how one interprets Aesop's fables with the parables becoming moralisms. In reality, the proper way to interpret the parables is probably somewhere in the middle. In the majority of Jesus' parables, the main characters do represent specific individuals, individuals present in Jesus' audience. For example, the prodigal's older brother represents the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law (Luke 15.2). In this way, they are somewhat allegorical. Some parables do make a single point, but other parables make more, usually not more than three. Typically, the points are associated with the main characters or groups of characters which, interestingly, Jesus never uses more than three. Thus the key to the interpretation of Jesus' parables is first to identify the main characters and whom they represent. Second, one must identify what main idea or point is being made with respect to these characters. With this approach, one gains great insight into Jesus' parables.

The Text

Matthew 20.1-16: *But I "earned" it!!*

The context of Jesus' parable about a landowner who hires day laborers to work in his vineyard is that of a question about what it takes to earn eternal life (Matthew 19.16). While the immediate parable does not specifically address eternal life directly, it does address the idea of earning those things which God gives. In the parable, the landowner clearly represents God the Father and the groups of workers represent people as they relate to God. The main question answered is whether God works by the unspoken rules of earning what you get.

The parable begins simply, with a landowner going out early in the morning (6 a.m.) to hire workers for his vineyard. Grapes were one of the most common and important of crops in ancient Palestine. Landowners often used day laborers at key points such as harvest. Day laborers were men who had lost their land and thus had no means of supporting themselves. As such, they had to resort to hiring themselves out every day in order to make a living. These people lived a hand-to-mouth existence in which the possibility of starving was very real.

The typical pay for a day laborer was one denarius which is the approximate amount of money needed to support an ancient nuclear family for one day.

When the landowner hires the workers for his vineyard, he agrees to give them to going rate of a denarius. He then sends them to his vineyard. Three hours later, the landowner once more goes out to find more workers in the marketplace and he tells them to go work in his vineyard and verbally agrees to pay them what is right. The assumption would be that these men would receive a pro-rated wage. That the landowner goes out a second time seems to imply (at this point!) that the harvest is abundant and he needs more laborers. However, he goes out twice more, at three-hour increments, and hires additional workers. Finally, he goes out at 5 p.m., one hour before the end of the day and finds still more workers. At this point, it is becoming apparent that something more than an abundant harvest is in view. The landowner seems to be genuinely disturbed that men might not have been employed, and so he goes out seeking to employ as many men as possible. At this point, the landowner appears to be somewhat eccentric, more interested in giving people a job than in harvesting his crop! This is not the behavior of a typical landowner!

At the end of the day, the landowner instructs his foreman to hand out the wages, beginning with the last hired. Surprisingly, these men who labored less than an hour receive a full day's wage; that is, these men are paid twelve times what they earned. Seeing the rate of pay at which these men are paid, those who were hired first assume they will receive a higher rate of pay as well. However, they too receive a denarius which makes them angry. Their anger is rooted in the landowner's egalitarian treatment of the workers. Here we stumble upon an unspoken expectation of these workers. They assumed (wrongly!) that the landowner paid people according to how much they worked. Simply put, one got what they earned. They feel slighted as they assume they have earned more than those who did not work as much.

The landowner answers these men by first noting he is not being unfair. He paid them the agreed upon salary. Immediately, we see that this landowner is not concerned with matters of fairness; that is, he is not concerned with giving people what they earn. Rather, he states he is concerned about being generous and that he has the right to be so with his own money.

At this point, the true character of the landowner comes to the front. This landowner is not concerned with people earning. He is concerned with making sure each person has what they need for that day. This is what is behind his many trips to “hire” people in the marketplace. His heart beats to provide the basic necessities for as many as possible. Part of these necessities involve working and part of them include having money for shelter, clothing, and food.

Jesus concludes the parable by stating that in the Kingdom of God, the first will be last and the last will be first. Within the context, Jesus dismantles the idea of earning. God is like the landowner. He is more concerned with making sure people have what they need. It is impossible to earn with him, but rather, his giving is based upon grace.

Real life with Blake:

God cares about me, and he meets my needs out of his care and concern for me. I know this to be true, but many times I think that I have to earn it. I have to somehow prove that I am worth God’s investment in me. I need to work hard enough, be good enough, be obedient enough to merit God’s loving protection and provision. In this vein, I also imagine that if I go above and beyond, then somehow I should have an extra helping of provision and protection. I have been really kind lately, so God should make sure I get an extra helping of kindness in return. The problem is that God doesn’t seem to play my game, and it frustrates me. I don’t get an extra measure. I am good and I still get sick. I am kind and I am still mistreated. I am fastidious with my religious duties and I don’t have a big fancy house. What gives? I have worked so hard.

When I am honest, I realize that I am treating God less as someone with whom I am in relationship and more like a cosmic vending machine. I put in my goodness and he spits out blessing. God doesn’t work like this. He is better. God is one who gives generously regardless of what I put in. God gives grace. God provision for me is not something I can merit, but it rests fully on his grace. There is no earning with our generous God. God doesn’t play fair or keep score. He gives grace. He desires to give me what I need and wants to do this even when I don’t earn it. No, God isn’t fair. He is gracious and that is better.

Real life with you:

All good things come from God (James 1.17). Life. Breath. Friends. Family. Food. Shelter. Health. These all come from God, but why? So many times we act as if they come to us because we deserve them. We can see this most readily when we grow angry when we get sick or run into a difficult snag. We grow angry because we don’t feel that we deserve this. God owes us better because we have been good. We have done right. We are pure, or right, or _____. We seem to have this idea that God works on the concept of earning. God is fair and so we get what we deserve from him. The reality is that God is not fair. He is gracious. God is not concerned with what we earn but on what we need and he graciously gives these things to us apart from our earning of them. God dismantles the idea of merit and replaces it with generous and free grace, grace which supplies our daily bread (Matthew 6.11) free and without cost (Isaiah 55.1-3). No, God isn’t fair. He is gracious and this is better.

This week, you might consider counting the many gracious, underserved gifts God has showered upon you and your family. You might do this individually or as a family. Take a sheet of paper and each day, seek to write down at least 10 items which you enjoy, items which God has showered upon you. For example, my first day might begin with coffee, cherry pie, and running. I don’t deserve these and yet my life is richly blessed by them. See how many you can come up with in a week, and then keep going!



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