

It's 6:00 A.M. in the Union Hall. Several jobseekers are sipping a coffee and talking. All of a sudden a Vintner from Napa Valley comes in. "We need workers to pick grapes right now. I will pay you two hundred fifty dollars cash to work until 6:00 P.M." A group of men and women leave immediately. At nine in the morning the Vintner goes back for more workers, at noon he goes for more, and at 3:00 PM. He even picks up a few more workers an hour before closing time at 6:00 P.M.. He promises to pay them whatever is right.

It is quitting time. The workers line up to receive their pay with those who worked the least to those who worked the most. Each person receives an envelope and when they open it they are surprised that each one has been given 2 crisp one hundred dollar bills and a Fifty. The vineyard workers who are bone tired, dirty, sweaty, thirsty, and covered with stains from the grapes wonder why in the world those who are hardly broke a sweat are given the same as those who worked so hard. It just does not seem fair. It just isn't fair is it?

Here I have done so little to earn my salvation, in fact I have done nothing, nada, zilch. Yet God gives me, me a sinner who deserves to be cast off forever in eternal punishment, complete pardon and forgiveness for every sin every committed. Along with this forgiveness God gives me the treasure of his unfailing love. Here I have nothing to offer God and he gives me everything. Let's take a closer look at this story of the workers in the vineyard to gain a greater appreciation how our God in his grace gives us what we don't deserve.

Jesus loved to tell stories about the kingdom of heaven. When you hear these words about the kingdom of God, think of your God as a king who comes to you as this mighty, powerful, majestic king who is King of kings and Lord of lords. The King comes to you, bows down to you personally, and sets before you this large treasure box filled with the greatest treasure in the world. It is not filled with gold coins and priceless diamonds and jewels or stocks and bonds. It contains the blessings of the King's love for you, unlike any love you have ever known. The king earned this love for you by having his own Son die for you. His Son purchased this love for you by his innocent suffering and death for your sin.

It is part of our human way of thinking to believe that we get rewarded for what we do. We always think in terms of people getting paid for what they do. We say of someone who does not do his job, "He is not worth his salt." Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt which was a valuable commodity in those days. We have another expression, "An honest day's work for a honest day's pay." Some of the kids in school study hard because they want to earn good grades. An elderly woman once told her wealthy friend, "You sure are blessed." The woman responded with some anger in her voice: "Blessed, what do you mean blessed! I earned my money."

We are human beings who are born into this world programmed by sin to think that we can operate with God the same way that we get paid for picking grapes in the vineyard or earn good grades in school. This is our default position. The book of Proverbs says, "There is a way that seems right to man, but the ends are death." Jesus once told the story of a man who went to the temple to pray to God. Listen to how he bragged about himself, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men- robbers, evildoers, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." The Apostle Paul confessed how he once put his confidence

in his own performance. He recalls his former way of thinking with these words, “If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, in regard to the law a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”

There was once a brash young wood pecker who enjoyed pounding holes in trees much to the annoyance of other creatures in the forest. One day, as a storm was approaching, he was pounding away and proudly making a new hole. Lightning struck and knocked him to the ground unconscious and split open the tree. Woody came to his senses, shook himself a few times to rearrange his ruffled feathers. He looked up at the tree and proudly boasted, “My, I am good! Just look at what I did.” The human heart is no different. It boasts in its accomplishments and even thinks it has the power to eradicate sin and be rewarded by God and receive the blessing of his love in this life and for all eternity.

God’s reward system works differently as Jesus illustrates with his story about the workers in the vineyard. They are expecting to receive their money based on how much they worked. What a big surprise at the end of the day! The workers line up in a row with those who worked the least receiving their money first until it came to those who had worked the full twelve hours. “When evening came the owner of the vineyard said to the foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.”

How shocked they were to receive the same amount of money for each one regardless of how hard they worked. Listen to their complaint: “These men who were hired last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.” The land owner defends his actions with these words, “Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

Oh please do not think for a moment that Jesus told this story to encourage teachers to give all their students “A’s” however well they perform, or that all the parents in school should receive a bumper sticker that says, “My child is an honor student...” Jesus is not encouraging us to have a socialistic government where everyone gets the same wage. He wants us to realize that in the Kingdom of God, our God has every right to reward people not on the basis of their performance but his grace to them.

One of the toughest pills for people to swallow is that they are saved entirely by God’s goodness and grace and not by their performance. Think of the thief who was dying next to Jesus. This was not a life long Lutheran who has spent his life in joyful service to the Lord. Here was a man who not only lived his life as thief but he joined the other thief and the crowd in mocking Jesus. In the eleventh hour of his life he turned to Jesus and said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus turned to him and gave him Paradise with the words, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” I think also of the man, John Newton, who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace.” John Newton knew there was nothing he could offer Jesus except a life of shame, drunkenness and working on a slave ship. Jesus had everything to offer him. There will be many with us in heaven who receive the gift of salvation in the eleventh hour or their

lives.

I once asked a non practicing Muslim if he would consider reading the Bible if I gave one to him. He said, "I have read the Bible through three times and I want nothing to do with a religion that has Jesus turning to a thief and rewarding him with Paradise." It is counterintuitive to believe that I can do absolutely nothing to save myself. It is even more counterintuitive to believe everything depends on what Jesus does for me. But that is the way it is in the kingdom of God. That is the point Jesus is making when he has the owner saying, "Or are you envious because I am generous?"

To appreciate even more that grace is getting what we don't deserve we direct your thoughts to the well known words of Romans 6:23 that tell us "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." In God's system of justice and fairness he has every right to give us what we deserve for our sin. We deserve eternal death. He gives us the blessing of eternal life. To the person who does not know about the kingdom of God this seems unfair. But, dear Christian, you know what Jesus did to earn this eternal life and eternal love of your heavenly Father for you. Every sin of my past and yours was paid for completely. He even took his perfect life along with his perfect death and put into your account. Because of Jesus your God is committed to rewarding you not on the basis of how hard you have worked but on the basis of what Jesus has done for you. As we sing in the hymn, "Your works not mine O Christ, Speak gladness to my heart."

Someone once said to me. Pastor, you have been a Christian all your life, and you will receive the same gift of heaven just like me, who came to know Jesus later in life. Doesn't seem fair for you being a lifelong Christian. I told the person this, Oh yes, God has been more than fair with me. I have had the joy and peace in my heart knowing Christ, that you did not have until later in life.

And so in this marvelous kingdom of God Jesus tells us, "The last will be first and the first will be last." I can't hold up my finger this morning and say, "I am number one" but I can say with Paul: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst." I am like Paul last. But because of Jesus, I finish first. Grace is getting what I don't deserve. Amen.