



Embracing Grace

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 19:27-20:16

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The more we study the Word of God, the more we find that Jesus Christ is not always as we would expect Him to be. He is not like us. He does not think like us. He does not respond to things in the way that we do. It's like Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 55:8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9, ESV) He doesn't do things as we would do them. And if that is true of us who have the benefit of the fullness of Scripture, imagine what it was like for the disciples for whom all of this was continually brand new. This morning, as we continue in Matthew's gospel, we see this truth highlighted once again.

Looking at this text today, we need to think back to what we looked at last week In Jesus' encounter with the rich, young ruler because it is Peter 's observation of that whole interaction and the questions which it raises in his mind that sets the stage for what we are looking at this morning. Truthfully there is no way to overstate Peter and the other disciples' confusion and shock at what they saw take place. They are all kinds of messed up. This rich, young ruler was, from everyone's perspective, the ideal candidate for the Kingdom of Heaven, an ideal candidate to be saved. This was a guy that had the reputation of being moral, righteous, and faithful to the Law. He was seen as a man who was favored by God because of his supposed righteousness with vast wealth and great possessions. If anyone were to be saved, it should be this guy. He's earned it– that is what all of the disciples are thinking. But Christ calls him out on his self-righteousness, on his imagined faithfulness to keep the whole of the Law and says: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Matthew 19:21, ESV) And like I said last time, the emphasis in the Greek is on the command "Follow Me." Give up all of your wealth, all of your self-righteousness and follow me. It is following Christ that is the key issue here, as we will see in a little bit. And the rich young ruler is unwilling to do that. He is unwilling to give up his way of salvation – self-righteousness, imagined adherence to the Law, his great wealth that he saw as

a reward from God for his faithfulness and throw himself on the mercy and grace of God. He simply would not humble himself and repudiate his reputation and possessions to trust Christ, to follow Christ and have eternal life and he walks away. And Christ just lets him go. It is unthinkable to all of them. He first confronts the guy and calls him out and then lets him walk. Peter and all of the disciples are thrown for a loop. How in the world does this man fail to enter the kingdom of heaven? And if this rich, young ruler does not get in, what does this mean for them? So Peter, having observed all of this asks

A Concerned Question (v. 27) “Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”” (Matthew 19:27, ESV) Try to put yourself in Peter’s sandals here. He is struggling to understand what he just saw and heard. Remember that Peter is coming out of corrupted Judaism, a Judaism that thought that you could earn merit with God. Peter and the disciples recognize this man’s moral “merit” and wealth, his apparent blessing by God, but they have also seen him turned away by Christ because he refuses to leave all and follow Him. So His question seems to be a sincere one, although it reveals his ignorance, his confusion, and the very real struggle he is having in order to understand the ways of Christ and the way of salvation. He is still struggling to understand grace. He is still thinking in terms of merit.

So, pointing to the truth that he and his brother disciples had, in fact, left behind everything they had and everything they knew in order to follow Jesus, Peter wants to know what that will get them. Since they have given up all to follow Jesus, what does that mean that God will give to them in return? Are we going to be saved? Are we going to have treasure in heaven? Are they ok? That seems to be the underlying issue to which Peter has to have an answer. Jesus understands that Peter is confused and trying to understand all that has just taken place and what affect it would have on them and so Jesus’ response to Peter is exceedingly gracious. Look at this

A Grace-Filled Response (v. 28-30) “Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Matthew 19:28, ESV) Jesus affirms Peter here and relieves his fears. Jesus explains to Peter that there are great and amazing blessings, great honors awaiting the disciples (except for Judas, of course). The disciples that have faithfully followed Jesus will have a peculiar place of honor in the new world when Christ sits enthroned as Lord and King over all. When Jesus reigns in the new creation, literally the

regeneration, then the disciples will themselves sit upon twelve thrones, in a place of honor and authority, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Now, Jesus doesn't tell us all that that means. He doesn't digress into a discussion about the future state and the new world that is coming and so neither are we. That is not the point. Jesus is instead telling Peter that he and the other disciples were going to receive great honors, honors that he had no idea about, a special reward. But they were not the only ones who would be so blessed as Jesus explains in verse 29. He says:

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Matthew 19:29-30, ESV) Do you see this? Everyone – that is the key – everyone who has followed Christ, suffering loss for the sake of His name, (for the sake of following and serving and honoring and loving Christ as pre-eminent) will receive far greater reward in far greater proportion to anything they have ever given up. Do you see it? This is not to be understood as a tit-or-tat arrangement, a quid pro quo kind of promise from Christ. He is not promising a hundred houses and a hundred fields, etc. Jesus is speaking symbolically here and His point is that God's reward is disproportionately large in comparison to anything we might lose or suffer. Those who follow Christ will be richly rewarded.

Beloved, you know this to be true. The blessings of God, poured on us through Christ, are beyond calculation. We have been chosen for eternal life through Him, been given forgiveness of sins, been reconciled to God in Christ. We are adopted into the family of God, sealed with the Holy Spirit, have been made joint-heirs of the fullness of God with Him. We have a great high priest who intercedes for us at the throne of God. We have access to the throne of grace. We have been made children of God. We are reconciled to God, accepted in the Beloved, imputed with Christ's righteousness and being sanctified by His Spirit. We have fellowship with God and fellowship with everyone who is in fellowship with God by grace through faith in Christ. We have a secure hope of eternal life, forever forgiven and redeemed. We have the promise of abounding grace and that all things will work together for our good. We have the power to walk in holiness and obedience to God. We are promised power to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. Blessings that far exceed anything that we have given up.

JC Ryle says of those who suffer loss for Christ's sake: They shall have not only pardon and glory in the world to come. They shall have even here upon earth, hopes, and joys, and sensible comforts sufficient to make up for all that they lose. They shall find in the communion of saints, new friends, new relations, new companions, more loving, faithful, and valuable than any they

had before their conversion. Their introduction into the family of God shall be an abundant recompense for exclusion from the society of this world. This may sound startling and incredible to many ears. But thousands have found by experience that it is true. To all who make sacrifices on account of the Gospel, Jesus promises "eternal life in the world to come." As soon as they put off their earthly tabernacle, they shall enter upon a glorious existence, and in the morning of the resurrection shall receive such honor and joy as pass man's understanding. Their light afflictions for a few years shall end in an everlasting reward. Their fights and sorrows while in the body, shall be exchanged for perfect rest and a conqueror's crown. They shall dwell in a world where there is no death, no sin, no devil, no cares, no weeping, no parting, for the former things will have passed away. God has said it, and it shall all be found true.

There are great blessings, great rewards for all who follow Him, for all who take up the cross and suffer loss, there are rewards and blessings that are incomparable, that are beyond measure. He is saying that there are blessings that will be unique to the Disciples themselves and then blessing for all but don't ever think that those blessings are the result of their merit. Don't ever regard the blessings of God to be something that is earned by human merit or that are deserved for certain sacrifices. God does not operate on a merit system. The Kingdom of God does not operate on the basis of exchange, or barter, or merit but on the basis of grace. And the rewards of grace are far greater, far more glorious, far more in value, far greater in scope than anything that we could ever hope to earn by our own sacrifice or merit. We are the objects of His grace.

Beloved, we really need to understand something. We know far more theology, understand far more regarding the ways of God than Peter does at this point. Again, he is coming out of corrupted Judaism that taught that you could make yourself acceptable to God. He does not fully understand at this point what we know regarding the way of salvation. Of course, we know the truth that the very fact that the disciples, except for Judas of course, followed Him, walked with Him, made their lives in Him, left all for Him, were received by Him, were His disciples at all was not because of merit or work on their part – it was because, by grace, God the Father had drawn them in faith to Jesus, changing their heart of stone to a trusting, believing heart. They followed Christ because of a work of grace in their hearts by which they came to believe in and trust in Christ – that faith the grace gift of God, not of works so that no-one may boast. We know they loved Christ only because Christ loved them first, they they followed only because they were chosen. Moreover, the only reason that they would perform any good works at all, any commendable works at all, any lasting works, is because God had prepared those works beforehand that they should walk in them. They are only doing what God had prepared for them. That is not to say that there did not have to be a clear choice made on their behalf to follow Christ and to live for Christ and to serve Christ, but it is the grace of God that empowers and makes that reality inevitable. The grace of God stands behind it all.

It is by the grace of God that any follow Christ. We know that, but they did not fully grasp that yet – they would – but as of right now they did not.

Jesus is in the process of teaching His disciples that their relationship to God and the salvation and the blessings that He gives to His people, the favor He showers upon them, is not directly proportional to certain things, certain acts that they had or had not done, not directly related to their performance in certain areas. It is rooted in God's grace. Jesus wants Peter to rest in the assurance that faithfulness to Christ has its reward, but He wants Peter and the other disciples to think rightly about all of this. Jesus wants Peter to understand that following Him is not committing to some sort of business arrangement with God – I do this, He gives me this. No, in following Jesus, Peter is committing himself, entrusting himself and the whole of his life and soul not to a religious contract but to a person, to the God of grace and mercy. He is entrusting Himself to His care and kindness, to His love and grace. You are trusting Him to care for you now and for eternity. You cannot relate to Him by merit, but only by grace. Jesus is and will be gracious, merciful, and generous to those who trust in Him, to those who follow Him. Peter can trust His grace and generosity. That is what Jesus is emphasizing to Peter. You can trust my grace and my generosity to you as you follow me, so follow me. And to press that point home, Jesus tells

A Parable of Sovereign Grace (20:1-16) This story is great and we can so relate to it. Now, as we look at this, remember that it is a parable. This does not teach in fullness the truth of God's grace. This is just a piece of the fuller truth, something for the disciples to wrap their minds around. So do not miss the forest for the trees by pressing the details too far. The point of this parable is to emphasize God's sovereign choice and right in the way that he pours out His grace and to show that He is a gracious and merciful God. Look, starting in verse 1: ""For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'" (Matthew 20:1-7, ESV) So here's the picture. In that day, in sort of the middle of town, everyday, the unemployed, the itinerant workers would gather looking for employment of any sort. Men who owned vineyards or fields that needed to be harvested would come and select out of those men that were gathered a group to come and work for him. I want you to see that to be chosen at all was truly a blessing. They did not

deserve to be chosen by this man to labor at all. They were unemployed and they needed money. There was no welfare or unemployment in those days, so to be chosen to work was a great blessing.

So in this parable, the master of the house, who represents God, goes and hires some men to work in his vineyard for a denarius a day. That would be around 6 am. But later on, at 9, he comes back and hires some more men promising to pay them whatever is right. This he repeats at noon, 3 pm and then at 5 when there was only one hour left to work. So all of these guys, chosen at different times to work, they are all in the vineyard working for the master and the day draws to a close. And verse 28 says:

“And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’” (Matthew 20:8, ESV) So the owner of the vineyard tells his foreman, who represents Christ, to pay the men and to do it beginning with the last guys that were hired that day. Remember, this is a parable, so don’t press the details too far, ok?

“And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius.” (Matthew 20:9, ESV) What a great deal for those guys! They had worked for an hour, just one hour, and each one received a full days’ pay. The master of the house blessed them exceedingly. Well, if you are one of the guys that got hired at the beginning of the day you are starting to calculate how much more you are going to get when you get paid. After all, it is only fair that you should get paid a lot more. You did more work. You deserve it. So they are watching as the guys who worked less than the full day, guys who deserve less, are given a denarius and they are thinking that they are going to strike it rich.

“Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’” (Matthew 20:10–12, ESV) That just doesn’t seem fair, does it? This has union lawsuit written all over it. It seems like these guys have a case against the master of the house. But they don’t. Jesus continues:

“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’” (Matthew 20:13–15, ESV) Did the master of the house defraud these men? No. Did he rob them to pay the others? No. Did he give them less than they deserved? No. He gave to them exactly what he told them that he would give to them but he determines to be generous with the other men. And he has the right to do as he pleases with what he owns. They cannot accuse the master of the house of being unjust. Their only ground of complaint against the master is that he has been too generous to other people.

The men who resented the master’s generosity and kindness did so because they thought in terms of merit and reward. They thought they deserved more and the other men deserved less. They were thinking in terms of what they thought God owed them, not in terms of grace. Here is the point – no man gets less than what he deserves from God, but some get immeasurably better than they deserve and God has the right to give grace to some as He sees fit. The rich young ruler got what he deserved. The disciples did not, nor will any who follow Christ. They receive grace, untold blessing. To a merit mindset that makes no sense which is why Jesus says what he does in verse 16.

“So the last will be first, and the first last.”” (Matthew 20:16, ESV) What does He mean by that? It means that God does not bestow His favors and His blessings in the way that man sees fit, according to the perception of man. From our perspective, some may seem particularly worthy of salvation or of blessing and others not so much, but Christ pours his favor and blessing, His grace, upon people according to His sovereign will and not according to our perceptions. He saves whom He saves. He blesses whom He blesses. He rewards whom He will in the manner that He will. Therefore, from a human perspective the one that may be thought most worthy by human standards will receive less than the one that may be thought less worthy. God acts according to His sovereign will and grace.

Peter wanted to know what he and the other disciples would get for their faithfulness, for following Jesus, for their discipleship. But when Jesus answers like He does here, He was teaching that although the disciples would receive rewards for following Christ, anything that

they received from God was a gift flowing from the grace of God, only. Follow Christ and be blessed in this life and in the life to come.

Do you see, God owes us nothing, but by His grace He delights to give us far abundantly above what we deserve. All of the blessings of God, all of the rewards of His grace, they all proceed from God's generosity and goodness – they are not ours to claim by right. Christ owed the rich young ruler nothing and Peter had to see that God did not owe him anything. He did not owe Peter the grace by which he was called to follow Christ. He did not owe him salvation. He did not owe him the honor of being one of his disciples. He did not owe him anything. Likewise, God owes us nothing – not even a chance to hear and respond to the gospel. As soon as we forget that God owes us nothing, but graciously gives us all things in Christ – as soon as we forget that – we will try to relate to God by means of merit and not by grace.

This is the kind of heart that Jesus is after in us. He is after a heart in us that knows that we owe our place among the Master's workmen to the sheer grace and mercy of God. We owe our place among those who will receive such a reward in this world and in the world to come solely to the generosity of our Master. He is after a heart in us that knows with more certainty than we know anything else that our only hope – my only hope—for eternal life is God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. Jesus is teaching His disciples to embrace grace as the principle by which relate to God and it is lesson that is not easy to learn. So the question for us is this:

Do We Embrace Grace? Do we embrace grace as the principle, as the basis upon which we relate to God and God relates to us? I want you to think very carefully about that question. If we are honest, many times we struggle with understanding grace and relating to God by grace as Peter did here. Certainly, if you have been coming here long enough and sitting under the gospel long enough, you can affirm – we will all affirm – that what we deserve from God is judgment and destruction. What we deserve – what I personally deserve -- from God is death and hell. We will all confess with our lips – I will confess with my lips – that it is only because of the finished work of Christ on the cross, His substitutionary atonement, His death and resurrection for me, that I am justified and redeemed, loved and accepted. It is not because of anything that we have done – that I have done – that I am received by God but because of all that Christ has done in my place – living a perfect life, dying the sinner's death, rising again from the dead.

We will all confess with our lips that we deserve nothing from God but hell and death and that everything that we receive from God other than hell and death is grace. Everything, not salvation only but our next breath, the food we eat, our next heartbeat, a home, clothes to wear, friends, family, a job, our health, every blessing, every mercy, even discipline from God's hand is grace and mercy to us. We can say that, but do we really believe it and live that out? It is one thing to say that everything that I have is by grace, that I deserve nothing good from God, that salvation is a gracious gift and I have not right to demand anything more. We say that if God never gave me anything else, salvation is enough. But, it is one thing to say it and another thing to believe it. Beloved, if we are honest, we have to admit that sometimes we grumble against grace, in our actions or with our attitudes.

We are in danger of grumbling at grace when we complain that we haven't received the same blessings as other people, when we believe that based upon our obedience or faithfulness to God, our adherence to certain standards of conduct that God owes us certain blessings. But He doesn't. We can never approach God with a mercenary mindset. Truly receiving the grace of God unto salvation, regeneration and the gift of faith results in transformed desires and transformed living. God grace transforms us "training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works." (Titus 2:12-14, ESV) But those good works cannot become the grounds by which we demand certain things from God. God is the one who has changed us and is working through us, not we ourselves. We must be careful of trying to earn points with God, to earn certain blessings, to earn certain responses to prayer and the mindset that produces. We may begin to feel that we will deserve a higher place of honor in His kingdom because we have walked with Him longer, or because we repented of our sins sooner, or because we have labored more diligently, or that our efforts were more valuable in human terms than others. All of those things, if they are true, are because of His grace toward us and working in us and they are not grounds for demanding anything from God.

The truth is this: God is sovereign over saving grace and over the expressions of His grace to His people, and He prefers some over others, for certain blessings and if we are not careful, that can often lead to jealousy and envy and rejection. We get bitter and resentful that we do not have the blessings that others have. No doubt, we all are thankful that when it comes to salvation that God is gracious and not fair. Fair is that we all go to hell. Grace is that God saves some...saves us. But when it comes to being in the covenant family of God and receiving

blessing from God, then we want him to be fair again. We don't want God's blessings to be a gift of grace, his appointments, or gifts to be rooted in His sovereign choice. That's great for salvation but then we want God to revert to fairness – the whole trophy for participation thing. Or even better, we want merit to be the deciding factor – because when it comes to merit, we always deserve more than the other guy. But grace is grace, period. And the truth that we all have to struggle with to some degree or another is that God does not treat us all the same. He does not give us all the same things or manifest His grace towards us in the exact same ways. He does not favor us all with the same blessings – starting all the way back with where we are born, the families we are born into, the advantages or disadvantages we had as children. All things the same the fact is, some Christians are smarter than others, some better looking, some more athletic, more successful financially, some have better marriages, better spouses, some have better jobs and more capable children, some have better health or live longer lives.

Some are favored by God and given greater honor than others, greater roles of responsibility in the kingdom, greater (from our perspective) or more public spiritual gifts. God deals uniquely with each of us. He does not manifest His grace toward us in uniform and the exact same ways and that is a matter of His own choosing. But that truth should not cause us to be jealous of others as if we have not received grace upon grace ourselves. We have. Jesus Christ is not fair – not according to the human concept of fairness – but He is and will be gracious, merciful, and generous to everyone who trusts in Him. We can trust His grace and generosity and embrace the path that God has chosen for us, gladly receiving whatever blessing He gives, walking faithfully and righteously for the sake of His glory enjoying the expressions of grace He lavishes upon us and trusting His grace toward others.

We really need to guard our hearts. If we are not wise and continually renewing our minds in this area, we have the tendency to catholicize grace. We will think of it as a limited substance that God doles out according to merit rather than seeing that grace is, in reality, the vast, unlimited, unchanging, loving favor of God manifested in various ways to His people. We start to think that whenever anyone receives blessing from God out of the “grace pie” that it is just that much less for me to receive. It explains why we often times struggle to rejoice with those who rejoice when they receive from God's hand. Do you see that?

But even more -- If we truly think that God has to be cajoled and enticed into blessing us and that we have to earn His favor and love for us, then we will be bitter toward and suspicious of God's heart toward us. If we think that God, rather than being generous and kind, and merciful

and good is really reluctant and withholding in the way that he provides for us or loves us, it will affect how relate to Him. It will destroy devotion to God and obedience to the commands of Christ out of a heart of love for all that Christ has done for us. Our hearts toward Him will whither.

One last way that we stiffen our hearts and make little of grace and exalt merit is when we brag about what we have, when we make much of what we have been given by God, the gifts and blessings and use them as a point of distinction between ourselves and others. We strive against grace when we brag about our accomplishments or see the blessings that we have received as having been, in any way, earned from God's hand. We are all of us recipients of grace, recipients of mercy. We did not receive anything from God because we deserved it. It is foolishness and pride that sees ourselves as anything but thankful recipients of unearned favor and kindness and compassion from God. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:7: "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7, ESV) We do not deserve the salvation and the great graces besides that we have been given in Christ.

Beloved, when we consider this text, we have to ask ourselves, "How do I approach God and His Christ? Do I approach him on the basis of his grace and mercy or do I try to approach him on the basis of my merit? There are two ways of relating to God – by merit or by grace and the two are not compatible. Grace brings life and attempts at gaining merit bring misery and death. Which will we choose?

Again, as I said earlier, Christ is after a heart in us that knows that we owe our place among Is people to the sheer grace and mercy of God. We owe our place among those who will receive such reward in this world and in the world to come solely to the generosity of our Master. He is after a heart in us that knows with more certainty than we know anything else that our only hope – my only hope—for eternal life is God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. I cannot and did not earn my salvation. It was totally a gift of God's grace despite my wicked heart. And knowing that about ourselves – about myself – I cannot and will not resent that grace when it is lavished upon others as it has been upon me. Our heart needs to be this: God never gives us less than He promises, but according to His generosity and kindness, sometimes He gives far more than He promises and I will trust God's heart and His grace toward me, and I will rejoice in His grace toward others and trust God's heart toward them. I will embrace grace. I refuse to think too highly of himself or stumble at God's mercy to others, but be ever thankful for the

manifestations of His mercy to me – his exceedingly rich gifts of grace that I do not and could never deserve.

God give us all hearts to fully embrace the wonder of grace and reject once and for all the folly of human merit.

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