

What's so Important about Grace?

Grace - Level Ground

In **Romans 5:1-2**, Paul talks about “this grace in which we stand”, and it is vital that we take the same perspective as we discover more about God’s grace to us. Grace is intended to be where we stand, our environment, our basis for living. When it is, every new discovery we make about it enriches our relationship with the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. If grace is not where we stand, then learning about it can be dry and irrelevant, even irritating.

Grace is not the same as mercy. Someone has said that ‘God by his grace gives us what we do not deserve and by his mercy does not give us what we do deserve’. In this passage, Paul makes the same distinction, looking at two aspects of what we have been given in the Lord Jesus.

Verse 1 deals with mercy, to do with forgiveness and peace with God. In the chapters leading up to this, Paul has spelt out man’s state of separation from God and how the only route to getting into right relationship with him is through trust in Jesus. **Romans 3:24** talks about “being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus”.

So his mercy in sparing us from condemnation is part of his grace, but certainly not the whole thing, as the ‘also’ in verse 2 tells us. It is not just a matter of having being put into a ‘legally’ right relationship with God; there is something ongoing for the present, as well as hope for the future.

What does it mean to ‘stand’ in grace? Simply standing at the receiving end of God's giving, and going on doing so!

* * * * *

Jesus gave a parable in **Matthew 20:1-16**. We think of it as ‘the parable of the labourers in the vineyard’, but perhaps we will see more clearly if we look at it as ‘the parable of the unemployed men’.

Have you ever been unemployed, perhaps made redundant, worrying about how your family will cope, will there be enough money for all your needs? These men had no dole to fall back on and there was no guarantee of getting a job from one day to the next, so they had to make every effort. They didn’t have to report to an office, they simply went and waited in the marketplace, hoping that someone would come and hire them.

‘Early in the morning’, probably at daybreak, about 6 am or so, the landowner went to the market place and found the really keen (or desperate?) men there already. Their best hopes were fulfilled - he offered them a full day's work and a proper rate for the job. Grateful? They were ecstatic! ‘Thank you so much, sir, it is so kind of you to take us on’ and off they went to the vineyard.

Why did the other men not get jobs at daybreak? Because they were not in the marketplace at daybreak? Nine o'clock was a reasonable time to turn up, perhaps, especially if there were important family matters to see to, like getting the kids off to school, but how about 12 noon, 3 pm or even 5 pm? Not much urgency, was there? Other priorities, perhaps, or was it just laziness? Or were they just unseen in another part of the marketplace? Anyway, they got hired in the end, having to rely on the landowner's fairness to get a reasonable wage for their work.

We can read what happened at ‘knocking-off time’, 6 pm. They all received a full day's wages! Those who had been working in the vineyard all day thought they should get more. What had happened to their joy and gratitude at being given a full day's work? It had vanished as they started to compare themselves with the others. Their complaint? ‘It's not fair! You have made them equal to us’.

Their joy and gratitude had disappeared because now they were looking at what they thought they had earned, what they were entitled to receive, their claim on the landowner.

* * * * *

Who and what is the parable about? The landowner represents the Lord. The workers? Those who are serving him, you and me, perhaps. The working day - our present life on earth. The wages - what we receive at the end of it.

It is interesting that only the earliest-hired workers complained. Those who started at 9 had almost as much to complain about as those who had started 3 hours earlier, but they accepted that they had received more than they were strictly entitled to and so did not worry that others had the same for even less hours.

Jesus did not say, “This is a parable about grace” but “This is what the kingdom of heaven is like”, and that comes to much the same thing, especially when we remember that ‘the kingdom of heaven’ does not mean life after death but living under the kingship of Jesus. This is how it is when we live under his rule or, to put it another way, when we stand in his grace.

What about the vineyard workers? All those who had worked less than a 12-hour shift seem to be happy to 'stand in grace' - after all, they were on the receiving end of the landowner's giving and they knew that he had given them what they did not deserve. The only thing they could say was, 'Thank you very much, sir, you have given us more than we deserve. It was kind of you to employ us in the first place, and to give us a whole day's pay for less than a whole day's work is more than we could expect. Thank you again.'

What about those who had done the full 12 hours? Do we feel a bit sympathetic towards them? 'It's not fair!' is a very common complaint, from early childhood onwards. After all, they had worked longer than the others. Why shouldn't they have more reward?

* * * * *

This is the point of Jesus' story. Life in God's kingdom doesn't work on the same basis as in the world system. What you receive from him is not based on your own effort or achievement, but on his generosity. Or, to use traditional words, on his grace, his unmerited favour to us. What does that mean? We don't deserve anything, we have no claim on him, but he gives to us anyway!

Among those first-hired workers, there may have been some who felt from the beginning that they were entitled to get a full day's wage, that if they put in a day's work they could demand their rights. In the same way, there are some people who think that, by supposedly 'serving God' all their lives, they can demand their reward from him at the end. It doesn't work like that, says Jesus.

Others in the first group probably started off full of gratitude and warmth towards this kind man who had helped them out by giving them employment for the whole day, but then, as the day wore on and they saw that they had put in more work than others, began to feel entitled to the money. The emphasis had changed from 'his generosity' to 'my achievement'. Peter writes about the man who "is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins" (**2 Peter 1:9**). Have we started to forget how much we have received?

* * * * *

As we begin to see what Jesus is getting at here, other things begin to fall into place. Status, position and seniority have no place in the kingdom of heaven. They have nothing to do with the basis of my relationship with God, and so have no relevance.

Success or failure do not determine our standing with him, so why do we so often feel that we are specially acceptable to God when we have made some particularly wonderful achievement?

As Paul said to the church in Corinth, “For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (**1 Corinthians 4:7**)

Are we content to live like this? It will mean that we will find the Holy Spirit ‘nudging’ us to remind us that we have no reason to think of ourselves as better than anyone else. It also means that we will find ourselves less and less afraid of other people and their opinion of us, because we stand secure in our position before God.

If we stand in grace then we stand on level ground with the lowliest sinner and the most impressive saint, because we stand in what our Father has given us in his Son.

His grace to us in Jesus starts with the amazing gift of forgiveness from our debts to God - Jesus paid it all for me, all my IOUs of trying to earn God's favour have been cancelled - I have been rescued. A wonderful position to stand in, day after day, thanking my Father for his acceptance of me in Jesus. (See **Colossians 1:21-23**)

But there is more (much more!), and we are encouraged to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” (**2 Peter 3:18**). Jesus promised that we are not alone in this process, as one of the chief tasks of the Holy Spirit is to “guide you into all the truth . . . he will glorify me, for he will take of mine and will disclose it to you.” (**John 16:13-14**)

A few days ago, I heard someone pray about a particular group of people, saying to the Lord, ‘They need you more than any of us’. Consciously or not, the one who was praying thought that they had some standing of their own before God and perhaps had not realised that we all stand on level ground. Level firstly because we stand in equal need of his grace, and secondly because, for those who receive that grace through faith in the Lord Jesus, “of his fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.” (**John 1:16**)

To start an exploration of grace is to start a voyage of discovery of our inheritance in Jesus. But we will only find more when, instead of trying to claim our rights, we acknowledge our need.

Dave Taylor September 2001

Further copies can be downloaded from www.justonecandle.uk