

September 6, 2020
Amazing Grace is Great, But ...
Genesis 50:15-26

Do bad things happen to good people?

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Absolutely. Just ask Joseph's brothers. The same rats who had sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt, end up in Egypt because of a famine. There, after a bit of giving as good as he got, Joseph (eventually) shows them kindness for their father's sake. Now, however, Jacob is dead. And Joseph's older brothers are wondering what he is going to do; they say, "*What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?*" They deserve punishment: slavery at best – possibly prison – maybe even death.

They sent word to Joseph, saying, "*Your father (not "our" father) left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father*" (Genesis 50:15-17).

If you were Joseph, what would you do? What does your sense of justice suggest?

Most of us have a sense of "cause-and-effect-justice": people ought to get exactly what they deserve. Good people ought to be blessed. Bad people ought to be cursed. The honest, conscientious employee ought to get the promotion. The scheming, shady, power-hungry employee should end up back stocking shelves. The person who has watched her diet and never abused her body ought to live to a ripe old age. The so-and-so who has done all sorts of dreadful things to his body ought to be the one who dies young. No-one should ever be unjustly accused. The convicted felon should never get parole, let alone a pardon.

Solomon, the great, wise king of Israel, complains, "*Meaningless. Meaningless. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless.*" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). He goes on: "*There is something meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. There is an evil I have seen under the sun: Fools are put in many high positions, while the wise occupy the low ones*" (Ecclesiastes 8:14, 9:11, 10:5-6).

Most of us can probably resonate with Solomon's frustration. Bad things do happen to good people. And sometimes – much to our consternation – cheaters and liars seem to prosper. I don't like it when good things happen to bad people. Life should be fair.

Back to Joseph. If you were Joseph, what would you have done? When the brothers' message comes to him, Joseph weeps. Joseph says to them, "*Don't be afraid. You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children*" (Genesis 50:17-21). Did Joseph do the right thing?

A problematic parable

Think about that question. Now hear this story Jesus told (Matthew 20:1-15):

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a usual day's wages and sent them into his vineyard. About 9 a.m. he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

He went out again about noon and 3 p.m. and did the same thing. About 5 p.m. he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

The workers who were hired about 5 p.m. came and each received a day's wages. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a day's wages. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a day's wage? 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?'

This is a disturbing parable. It offends our sense of cause-and-effect-justice. It isn't fair.

This is one of several parables which Jesus begins with the phrase, "*The kingdom of heaven is like ...*" It is a parable or a story which gives us a glimpse of how the kingdom of God works. It tells us what God is like. So ... if we don't like this, we are saying God offends our sense of cause-and-effect-justice. We are saying God isn't fair. Hmmm.

Let's look at the parable a bit closer. Context is always important. Jesus is in the middle of several surprising observations about who enters the kingdom of heaven/receives eternal life.

Shortly before, when Jesus' disciples had tried to stop parents from bringing their children to Jesus, he had said, *"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these"* (Matthew 19:14). After a discussion with a rich young man, Jesus observed, *"I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven; it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"* (Matthew 19:23-24). Peter smugly comments, *"Well, we have left everything to follow you."* Jesus responds: *"Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life"* (Matthew 19:29-30).

Immediately, Jesus tells the parable of the workers in the vineyard. So the story has something to do with who enters the kingdom of heaven or receives eternal life.

Consider the first workers, who go to work first thing in the morning, for a fair day's wage. Who do these people represent? These are the good, godly people. From childhood, they follow God's commands and do what is right. And at the end of the day, they receive their reward: the kingdom of heaven. Others of us are 9 a.m. or noon people; it was in our teens or as young-to-middle-aged adults that we accepted Jesus Christ as our Saviour. At the end of our days we receive the same reward – the kingdom of heaven. Still others put their faith in Christ later on in life – even on their deathbeds. Their reward is the same.

All of us receive the same "wages" or reward. We all ultimately share the same eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. There are no "levels" or "ranks" in the kingdom of God. (Once again consider the context. Right after this parable James' and John's mother comes asking special favours in heaven for her sons – they had been so faithful and given up so much – and Jesus rebukes her [Matthew 20:20-29])

Is this fair? Is God fair? What did the landowner promise the workers whom he hired at dawn? Remember? The usual day's wage. A fair day's wage. At the end of the day what did they receive? A fair day's wage. God is treating these folks perfectly well. What offends us is that the landowner gave the same wage to labourers who worked for a much shorter period of time. The landowner is too generous. God is too merciful and loving.

We love the fact that God is loving and fair to us. But, like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, we get upset when God extends forgiveness and mercy to someone else (Luke 15:11-52). When we feel like we're the dutiful son who has been faithful from the beginning, we get offended to see some Johnny-come-lately get the same reward we do.

Some of us have been "good" people all of our lives. We have gone to church, given our offerings, made sacrifices for the Lord. If our faith is in Jesus, we will receive our fair reward – the kingdom of heaven. But there are other people out there who have squandered their lives in wild and riotous living, who then come to faith – and get the same reward.

How come they can have all the fun, then repent, and get the same as those of us who sacrificed so much? (This makes an interesting assumption. It assumes that we who love

Jesus have less "fun" than those who don't. That's a myth. Those of us who have experienced life on the other side can attest to that (that's another sermon)).

The moral of this parable is God delights to be more than fair. He gives amazing grace. *"All of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* Scripture tells us (Romans 3:23). God doesn't care whether our sins taint us just a little grey or make us black as night; if we are off-white at all, we need His forgiveness. And the death of Christ, his blood shed on the cross for us, can save the gossip or the mass murderer. God doesn't discriminate. Jesus' grace is big enough for us all.

Back to Joseph

So that brings us back to Joseph. What would you have done in his shoes? What he did was extend to them unconditional love – grace – to his brothers: *"Don't be afraid: your lives have been saved."* He offers them complete forgiveness. In the end, Joseph isn't fair. He is more than fair. He is almost too loving. Does that surprise you? It surprises me. Apparently it surprised the brothers, too.

John writes (1 John 4:7-12): *"Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."*

God is not fair to us. He is more than fair. While we were still sinners, Scripture says, God loved us so much Jesus died on the cross for us. If God were fair, not one of us would have a chance. But God is more than "fair." Thankfully. He continues to be more than fair. He freely offers salvation – eternal life today and forever – to all who would believe, no matter how undeserving they are. That is God's gift of amazing grace. This is the good news.

Amazing grace (from God) is great, but ... We are called to be more than fair, too. *"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."* Can we love with that same kind of love? Can we be people of amazing grace to one another? What is God saying to you? To whom do we need to be more than fair? *"God intends (our salvation) for good to accomplish the saving of many lives."*

These are tough times. Depressing times. Upsetting times. Can we be people of good news, even now? Let's not get all negative or angry. The world desperately needs us to step up and share the good news of God's amazing grace. And to be God's amazing grace ...