

A New Way of Being

1. Warm-up question: Jeff shared a story about a time in grade school when a classmate kept tormenting him with a pencil. Jeff grabbed the pencil, broke it, and handed it back to the classmate. Jeff said, “Jimmy was beginning to learn an important lesson; we live in a world where behavior has consequences!” Tell us about a time in your early life when you either learned that lesson or taught somebody else that lesson?

2. The Bible refers to our present reality, life here on planet earth, as “the Kingdom of this World.” The ultimate governing principle of the Kingdom of this World is merit. And that is NOT a bad thing. If you do well, you get rewarded. If you do bad, you get punished. It doesn’t always work that way, but that’s the goal we aspire to. Rewarding good behavior is how we incentivize good behavior. Punishing bad behavior is how we contain bad behavior. Giving people what they deserve is both just and fair.
 - a. In the workplace, if someone works harder than somebody else, both doing the same thing, does that harder worker deserve to be paid more? If so, why? What would happen if workplaces didn’t operate that way?
 - b. In relationships, if someone does something wrong, or you do something wrong, should the wrongdoer face consequences? If so, why? What would happen if relationships didn’t work that way?
 - c. In school, should people be graded on what they do or don’t achieve? If so, why? What would happen if school didn’t work that way?
 - d. Many of us were taught that spiritual life works the same way. Many of us were taught that, if you do a lot of good in life, you will win God’s favor and get eternal reward, and if you do a lot of bad in life, you earn God’s wrath and get rejected. If that’s how you were taught, how did that make you feel about God and spiritual life? Did it seem right to you?
 - e. Giving people what they deserve is both just and fair, but it can also be harsh. In your own life, when have you felt the sting of failing at something and “getting what you deserved?”

3. If the world didn’t operate on the organizing principle of merit, it’s hard to imagine how else it could function. But then . . . along came a revolutionary named Jesus who came to inaugurate a new world order that would operate under a completely new organizing principle. Jesus referred to this new world order as the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God – both terms are synonymous. In this week’s parable, Jesus lays out the counterintuitive organizing principle for this new world order. Read Matthew 20:1-16, as printed on p. 3.

- a. If you were one of the workers who began at daybreak and toiled all day long, describe how you would be thinking and feeling when those who worked only one hour got paid the same as you.
 - b. If you were one of the workers who worked only one hour, describe how you would be thinking and feeling when you got paid a full day's wage.
 - c. Do you like the way the vineyard owner acts in this parable? Is paying the one-hour workers as much as the all-day workers fair and just? Why or why not?
 - d. The vineyard owner in this parable represents God and how God wants the new world order to function. What point do you think Jesus is trying to make in this story? What is the key organizing principle in the Kingdom of God?
4. Jeff suggested that this parable reminds us that, in the Kingdom of this World, merit is primary and grace is secondary, whereas in the Kingdom of God, the order is flipped: grace becomes primary and merit secondary. From this we drew two key thoughts. **First, in this parable Jesus is inviting us to embrace a fundamentally new understanding of God.** We tend to think of God primarily as Judge, but in Jesus' story God's highest priority is not judgment, but grace. Grace is classically defined as "unmerited love and favor" – the opposite of the world's organizing principle.
- a. Through his death on the cross, Jesus graphically showed us the heart of God. What Jesus did for us is like what Katniss did for her sister in "The Hunger Games." Jesus volunteered to substitute himself for us to take upon himself the just consequences for our sins. Who is someone you would give your life for? Why would you give your life for that person? What's the inner motivation? Are you able to believe that Jesus feels the same about you?
 - b. How does/should this new understanding of God's priorities change the tone and tenor of spiritual life?
5. **Second, in his parable Jesus is also inviting us to fundamentally change our own mindset to be as generous and gracious toward others as God is toward us, so that the Kingdom of this World can become the Kingdom of God.**
- a. Jeff called grace the single most transformative force in the cosmos. Is that consistent with your experience? Tell us about a time when someone has shown you great grace? How did that affect you?
 - b. For we who follow Jesus, is it ever appropriate to respond to people based on their behavior and merit? If so, how do we harmonize that with grace?
 - c. Who is someone you're feeling called to show more grace? What might that look like? How do you think it will affect you if you follow that path?

Matthew 20:1-16

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; ⁴and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.

⁶And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" ⁷They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard."

⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, "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."

¹³But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.