

GOD'S SAVING GRACE

Stop being jealous; be grateful.

Is 55:6-9

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

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.

Phil 1:20-24,27

Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me life is Christ, and death is gain. If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. And I do not know which I shall choose. I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, for that is far better. Yet that I remain in the flesh is more necessary for your benefit.

Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.



I conducted Bible sharing with a group of lay leaders in East Timor. Most of them were subsistent farmers. Life for them and their families was not easy. They experienced war from 1975 to 78; then twenty years of Indonesian occupation; and the destruction of their land by the pro-Indonesian militia in 1999. We sat down and read the passage of Matthew 20:1-16, 'the parable of the workers in the vineyard.' I asked them: 'What do you think about the landowner?' One by one, they answered: 'He was unjust. He should give the wages according to the hours of work.'

The Wage of the Kingdom

What is grace? It is an undeserved gift or help freely and lovingly provided by God. Above all, it is God's gift of being saved in Christ through faith. Paul in his famous passage from the letter to the Romans wrote: "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24). The letter to the Ephesians is even more precise: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of

Matt 20:1-16

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.'

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.'

And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. 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.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am

God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8). This grace of salvation God wishes to give to all human beings: "God our Savior want all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). This grace is the only 'wage' that someone can expect in God's kingdom. What can be greater than to be saved in Jesus Christ?

The parable of the workers in the vineyard makes that point very clear: a denarius for each of all the workers, whether they worked twelve hours or one hour. In God's economy there is only one 'wage,' his saving grace.

Envy

Have you ever been without work? Do you know how it feels? Your money gone and the bills to be paid kept coming. The longer it lasted the worst you were. You could not sleep. You easily got upset. You envied those who had work. You were desperate and you complained to God who did not want to answer your prayers. That was

how the workers, who waited the whole day to be hired, felt. The landowner saved them and their families from hunger. It was a matter of life and death. If only the other workers could see it that way?

'Are you envious because I am generous?' asked the landowner. Augustine saw envy as 'the diabolic sin'. "From envy – he said – are born hatred, detraction, calumny, joy caused by the misfortune of a neighbor, and displeasure caused by his prosperity". We are often guilty of committing that sin. We are sad at the sight of another's success and prosperity. We would like it for ourselves. So deep in our hearts we say: why s/he (they), but not me?

The first workers should be happy that the others also received the wages that would secure the food for the table. We should rejoice and be happy that God blesses people

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? ' So the last will be first, and the first last.

around us. ``Would you like to see God glorified by you? Then rejoice in your brother's and sister's progress and you will immediately give glory to God. Because his servant could conquer envy by rejoicing in the merits of others, God will be praised," said John Chrysostom.

The Last

The people of Israel were the smallest nation among other nations. Gideon was the least in his family and his clan was the weakest in Manasseh (Judges 6:15). David was the youngest son of Jesse. He was not invited to the celebration at which he was supposed to be anointed as the king of Israel (1 Samuel 16:1-13). Jesus says that many who think of themselves as having booked the seats at the feast in the kingdom of God, might find themselves outside, whereas someone else will take their place. 'Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last' (Luke 13:30).

The first group of the workers had a contract with the landowner: 'So many hours to work, so much money to earn.' Those who were hired later were happy that they had work and left the reward to the landowner. We often carry inside us the question of Peter: 'Lord, we have left so much for you. What shall we get in reward?' Only those of us who experienced hardships and failures stop asking this question. Those are the last and the least, those who at the last hour - when all hope is gone, when they want to pack their things and go home, without earning anything - suddenly are hired. They are so grateful.

Conclusion

There is only one coin in God's kingdom, namely God's grace. It is not a reward for lifelong goodness and piety, but an unmerited gift. It brings meaning and direction to our lives. We have the privilege to work in God's vineyard and build the Kingdom of God. Instead of being jealous we all should be grateful. We have a wonderful God, generous and caring, bringing to his vineyard all who accept His offer of salvation. Amen.

Concluding Prayer

Dear Lord,

create within me a grateful heart. When I see people being blessed with work, health, and happy family, let me praise you. When I see people having more than me, let me praise you. Let me be thankful for what I have, for my life, my family, and my friends. Most of all, however, let me be thankful for my faith, for knowing and loving you, and for knowing how wonderful is your love and grace to all of us. Amen.

May God bless all who remember us in prayer and support our ministry.

New Life Asia Team