

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most common internet urban myths spread by emails is that Microsoft founder, Bill Gates, once spoke to a high school graduation and shared some practical life rules. Bill Gates never did that. But California educator, Charles Sykes, DID create the rules attributed to Bill Gates. So using Dr. Sykes' list, let's countdown the top seven life rules you won't learn in high school:

Rule 7: Television is not real life. In real life people actually have to leave the coffee shop and go to jobs.

Rule 6: Life is not divided into semesters. You don't get summers off, and very few employers are interested in helping you find yourself. Do that on your own time.

Rule 5: If you mess up, it's not your parents' fault so don't whine about your mistakes. Learn from them.

Rule 4: Flipping burgers is not beneath your dignity. Your grandparents had a different word for burger-flipping; they called it opportunity.

Rule 3: If you think your teacher is tough, wait till you get a boss. He doesn't have tenure.

Rule 2: Be nice to nerds. Chances are you'll end up working for one. (That's probably why the list was attributed to Bill Gates)

And the #1 Rule you won't learn in High School is: Life is not fair. So get used to it.

When Charles Sykes was asked how he felt to know that everyone from Ann Landers to Paul Harvey wrongly attributed his list to Bill Gates he said, "I don't get upset because, hey, life isn't fair, so I'm used to it."

Sykes says the average teenager uses the phrase "It's not fair!" 8.6 times a day. The kids got it from their baby-boomer parents who were the most idealistic generation ever. It's not fair that some people are taller or faster and some can eat gallons of Häagen Daz without gaining a pound. It's not fair that some high-school dropout, coke-snorting Hollywood actor makes more money on one bad movie than all the high school teachers in Tyler combined.

Or we may complain, "I've been with this company for years, and that young upstart gets the promotion? It's not fair!" "I've been a good parent, and I raised my child to know the Lord, and they have rebelled against God. It's just not fair!" "I lived a clean life, I've never smoked, and now the doctor tells me I have lung cancer? My uncle smoked a pack a day for 30 years and he's fine. It's just not fair!"

I've often said, "Life isn't fair, but God is good." In this parable today, Jesus is going to demonstrate the truth of that statement. Before we read Matthew 20:1, slip back into the last verse in Matthew 19. Remember, the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible were inserted in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and sometimes they were put in the wrong places. Let's read Matthew 19:30 and then Matthew 20:16, because they provide identical bookends to this great parable.

Jesus said, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." Then He says the same thing but reverses the order in Matthew 20:16: "So the last will be first and the

first will be last." Now, here's the full story in Matthew 20:1-16. To help us understand it, I've added times and dollars in our vernacular:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning (6:00 a.m.) to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius (\$100) for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour (9:00 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 the sixth hour (noon) and the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.) and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour (5:00 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. He said to them, "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 one hired and going to the first." The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour (5:00 p.m.) came and each received a denarius (\$100). So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius (\$100). 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 denarius (\$100)? 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?" "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

When we think about what the workers were paid, our immediate reaction to that story is, "Hey, that's not fair!" Jesus didn't say this is what the kingdom of this world is like. He said this is what the Kingdom of heaven is like. Heaven uses different math than the world uses. Jesus leaves the 99 sheep to go after the one lost one—the world doesn't operate that way. Jesus said that a widow's two pennies were more valuable than all the gold given in the Temple one day. The world would call that fuzzy math, but the Bible calls it grace.

I love this parable. In the heading in most Bibles it's called "The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard." Remember, the headings were added too. I think it should be called, "The Parable of the Generous Boss." In this story of God's amazing grace let's learn four lessons.

### **1. A LESSON ABOUT TIMING: It's never too late to come to God**

Some workers started at 6:00 a.m. and worked all day, others started at various times, but there was one group that started working at 5:00 p.m. and quitting time was at 6:00. I think those first workers represent folks who have been a part of God's Kingdom for most of their lives. I'm in that group. I have been going to church since nine months before I was born! Church has always been an important part of my life, and when I was nine years old; I trusted Christ and became a part of God's family.

Most Christians come to Christ at an early age, but on rare occasions there are some who come to Christ late in life. Even more rare are what are called "deathbed conversions." When Jesus was hanging on the cross, a condemned thief looked at Him and said, "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom." That was a powerful profession of faith because Jesus didn't look much like a King at that moment. Jesus said, "Today, you shall be with me in paradise."

It's never too late to trust Jesus. Oops, I need to qualify that. There IS a time when it's too late to trust Jesus. If you die without putting your faith in Jesus, then it's too late. Someone observed about the thief on the cross that there is one deathbed conversion in the Bible so nobody should despair, but there is only one, so nobody should presume.

Jeff Stratton is a pastor in Evansville, Indiana. A few years ago he was called to visit a 93 year-old man who had terminal cancer. His name was Adolph Allen and he had been a hard-living, hard-drinking, union ironworker for most of his life. Two minutes into their first conversation, Adolph looked at Jeff and asked, "Is it fair for someone to live their whole life one way and then at the end of their life to ask God to take them to heaven?" After thinking for a minute, Jeff said, "No, Adolph it's not fair. But luckily for you and me, God is not fair." Jeff shared the plan of salvation with him and this 93-year-old man bowed his head and asked Jesus to come into his heart. Four weeks later Jeff preached Adolph's funeral and he talked about how some football games come down to a final play. The team that's behind might have been outplayed the whole game, but on this last play the quarterback fades back and heaves a Hail-Mary pass into the end zone as time expires. The ball might be batted around but if an offensive receiver catches it, the game is over, and they win. Jeff said, "That's what happened with Adolph. The devil was in the lead for most of his life, but the final score was Jesus 1 and the devil 0!"

If you aren't a follower of Jesus you may be thinking that someday, you'll get around to trusting Christ. Maybe you see yourself in a hospital or hospice and, like Adolph, you'll sneak in under the wire. The problem with deathbed conversions is that statistics tell us more people die out of bed than in a bed. So, don't wait. The Creator is walking through this world saying to everyone, "Come work in my vineyard." Will you accept His invitation? You may be thinking, "Not me. I've messed up too many times. There's no hope for me." You're wrong. Jesus is still calling you; will you run into His arms right now? Even if you've lived 70 years, or 80 years, or 20 years without Christ, He will receive you today! That's not fair, but thank God, that's grace.

## **2. A LESSON ABOUT GRACE: All who respond to God's invitation will receive all there is to receive!**

At the end of the day, all the workers received the same amount, a full denarius, which was a full day's wage. And all who are part of God's kingdom receive the same thing. So what is our "denarius?" If you said, "Heaven," wrong answer. Heaven is just one of the benefits of salvation. But the REAL treasure is a personal relationship with Jesus that lasts forever. Remember what Jesus said to the thief on the cross? "Today you will be with me in paradise." When you hear that statement do you focus on the word "paradise?" If you do, that's the wrong focus. You should be focusing on the words "with me." All who trust Jesus, whether young or old, receive a personal relationship with Jesus that lasts forever because wherever Jesus is that's paradise.

But, let's be honest. Some of us, who have worked in the vineyard all our lives, bristle a little bit at this story. You may be thinking, "Well, what about rewards, Pastor? Doesn't the Bible say we'll be rewarded for our faithful service to the Lord? And doesn't the Bible say not everyone receives the same rewards?" Yes, there will be rewards handed out in the form of crowns when we are gathered around the throne of the Lamb. But we aren't going to wear those crowns for eternity. We'll only have them for a brief moment. In Revelation 4 we learn we're going to cast our crowns before His throne. And the idea that I'll have a nicer mansion while you'll have a little cabin on a hilltop is not Biblical either. We'll all be in the Father's house, which has many rooms, and room for all.

In his wonderful book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Phillip Yancey makes this observation about this parable: "The workers' discontent arouse from the scandalous mathematics of grace. They would not accept that their employer had the right to do what he wanted with his money when it meant paying scoundrels twelve times what they deserved. Many Christians who study this parable identify with the employees who put in a full day's work, rather than the add-ons at the end of the day. We like to think of ourselves as responsible workers, and the employer's strange behavior baffles us as it did the original hearers. We risk missing the story's point: that God dispenses gifts, not wages. If paid on the basis of fairness, we would all end up in hell." (*What's So Amazing About Grace?*, 61-62).

If it's a wage you want from God, then the Bible clearly identifies it in Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death." But if you want grace, it's a gift that can't be earned. "But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." What is eternal life? Jesus defined it in John 17:3 when He said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You (He was speaking to His Father), the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Eternal life isn't living forever, eternal life isn't heaven, it is knowing God—that's the gift—that's the full denarius, and everyone in the kingdom receives it all. That's not fair, but thank God, that's grace.

### **3. A LESSON ABOUT AUTHORITY: God is sovereign; He has the right to do whatever He wants to do**

I love the part in the parable where the 12-hour workers complain to the owner. He just smiles and says, "I paid you what we agreed. If I want to be generous, then that's my right, because it's *my* vineyard and it's *my* money. Get over it." Grace disturbs our sense of justice and our sense of fairness, but God owns the universe. He created it and He created us. He rules and reigns and does as He pleases.

Some of you business owners are thinking, "Well, that's not the way I would run my business." Of course it isn't. God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways...as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

When Michael Sherer was in seminary, he had an unusual experience with grace. He stayed up all night studying for a final exam in one of his theology classes. As he entered the classroom he looked around and knew that there were some slackers who didn't study much, but he was ready to ace the exam. Before the professor passed out the exams he led a brief review of some topics

that would be on the test. He said it would be a fill-in-the-blank test. Michael was starting to panic, because those topics weren't in his notes. He thought, "This isn't fair!" Then the Professor said, "We didn't talk much about those topics, but they were in the book and I told you at the beginning of the semester that you were responsible for all the material in the textbook."

As the professor passed out the exam papers he told the class to keep them face down until everyone had received the test. When they turned the tests over, they were shocked to see that all the blanks were already filled in. There was a note at the bottom that said: "This is your final exam. All the answers are correct. You will receive a perfect score on the final exam. The reason you passed this test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did or didn't do in preparing for the exam did not help you get the A. You have just experienced ...grace." Michael said he learned more about God's grace that day than from any theological lecture. The professor had the right to do what he did because it was his class. God has the right to be as generous as He wants to be! That's not fair, but thank God, that's grace.

#### **4. A LESSON ABOUT ATTITUDE: Be thankful for God's blessings without comparing yourself to others**

The 12-hour workers grumbled because they compared their wage with the one-hour workers. Someone said that comparison is toxic to the soul. I really don't mind if you drive a new Lexus, but if I bought a new Chevrolet Malibu and find you paid less for your Lexus than I did for my Chevy, I'm not going to be so happy for you.

Abraham Lincoln was walking down the street with his two young sons, Tab and Willie, and they were both howling with displeasure. A friend met him and said, "What's wrong with the boys, Abe?" He said, "What's wrong with my boys is what's wrong with the world. I have three chestnuts and they both want two."

Many of us have worked in the Lord's vineyard for years. And the temptation we must overcome is to grumble when some newbie comes along and experiences God's blessings. Or when we hear of a death row prisoner who accepts Christ, we may think, "Yeah, right." But the Bible warns against grumbling. "Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!" (James 5:9)

Can you think of a couple of grumblers in the Bible who complained about grace? Jonah preached to the people of Nineveh that God would destroy them unless they repented. Well, they repented, and Jonah pouted and complained to God about His grace in forgiving them. Don't be like a grumbling Jonah. And do you remember the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son? I preached an entire message once on the "Parable of the Pouting Son." He refused to join the party and complained to his father about his grace and generosity to this rebellious sinner.

I have to smile when I think of how through the years God has brought all kinds of people into our church. I've had a few people say, "Pastor, I saw someone last Sunday and they had tattoos all over their body. I don't like it." Or "Did you see that guy that wore SHORTS to church?" "Or did you see that guy who had all those piercings?" I don't like it." I've always smiled and said, "Well, it's a good thing it's not your church then, because God loves those people, and this is

HIS church." Just be thankful for your salvation without begrudging those who come into the kingdom later. You say, "It's just not fair!" No, thank God, that's grace.

## CONCLUSION

One of my mentors helped me understand that whenever I share a Bible message I have to answer the question, "So what?" This is a nice story, but so what? What should I DO because of this story? How can it change my life starting today? Well in order to answer that question, I'd like to tell you another story based upon the one that Jesus told. A pastor friend of mine, Gary Carver, first told me this story, but I'll retell it to you in my own words. Imagine one of the workers in Jesus' parable who only worked one hour was named Joseph, and he had a wife named Sarah.

It was past dark and Sarah was getting nervous. As she sweeps the dirt floor for the third time she breathes a prayer, "Oh God, where is my Joseph? It's getting late and I know he didn't find any work today. I went by the marketplace this afternoon and he was still standing there with the other men looking for work. Where is he, Lord? Has something happened, or is he just too ashamed to come home empty handed again?"

At that moment, her five-year old daughter, Rebecca, pulls at her skirt. "Mommy, where is Daddy? I'm hungry. Will he bring us something to eat tonight?" At that moment Joseph comes through the door with a smile on his face and his arms full of food. He says, "Sara, Becky, prepare the table! Look! I have bread! I have cheese, and figs. And I have some honey for the two sweetest girls in my life!"

Sarah stares in astonishment and stutters, "But-but Joseph, where did you get all this? I know you didn't work because I saw you standing with the other unemployed men at 4 o'clock this afternoon. What happened?"

Joseph said, "Sarah, may God be praised, the most amazing thing happened to me this afternoon. I was standing there thinking that it would be another day without work and another day without food. I was so discouraged because I didn't think I could stand another night telling Becky that there was nothing to eat. And then at about 5 o'clock Mr. Ben Yacov, the rich man who owns the vineyard outside the village, showed up. He said, "Why aren't you guys working?" We said, "Because no one has hired us." He said, "Well, I'll hire you! Come on. Hop in this cart and you can work in my vineyard."

I knew since it was so late in the day I would only earn a few pennies, but that was better than nothing, and perhaps I could bargain for a few pieces of bread. When we got there, I saw lots of men working. I could tell some had been working all day because they were tired and dusty. I worked for about an hour when Mr. Ben Yacov called us to be paid. Can you believe it; he paid those of us who had only worked an hour first? I was first in line and when I held out my hand I couldn't believe my eyes. He gave me a denarius, a full day's wages! At first I said, "Mr. Yacov, did you make a mistake? I only worked for one hour, sir. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders and said, "I'm a generous man, and I have plenty to give, so just take it." I know it doesn't make sense, but he paid all the workers the same. He paid us the same as those who had worked twelve

hours, eight hours, or six hours. The others griped about it at first, but after a few minutes, they were just glad to be paid too.

I was so happy! I took the money and ran straight to the market and bought all this food. Doesn't it look delicious? Let's thank God, then we'll dig in. At Sarah set the table, she looked at the food and said, "But Joseph, there are only three loaves here, and the cheese has been cut in half. I know food prices. You should have been able to buy four loaves and a full wedge of cheese. Where's the rest of the food?"

Joseph hung his head like a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He said, "I didn't think you'd notice. I hope you don't mind, but on the way home with all this food, I passed the widow Elizabeth's house. I knew she didn't have much, so I stopped and gave her one of the loaves and some of the cheese. I hope you don't mind, Sarah." Sarah smiled and wiped a tear from her eye and said, "Of course, I don't mind, Joseph. You are a kind and generous man. Now, let's bow our heads and thank God."

The "so what" of this message is simple. Because God has been unreasonably generous to you, now you are blessed to be inexplicably generous to others. Maybe you can do something nice to someone who has wronged you in the past. Maybe you can be generous to someone who has no ability to reciprocate. You say, "But, Pastor, that's not FAIR!" No, thank God, that's grace.

## OUTLINE

1. TIMING: It's never too late to come to God
2. GRACE: All who respond to God's invitation will receive all there is to receive!
3. AUTHORITY: God is sovereign; He has the right to do whatever He wants to do
4. ATTITUDE: Be thankful for God's blessings without comparing yourself to others

"Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!"  
*James 5:9*

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes