

There are three chief teachings of Christianity that invite the most scorn. The first two are historical events. First, that God became man. Second, that this God-Man died on the cross for all the sins of everyone who ever lived, and then rose bodily from the dead. Those are the two big stumbling blocks to unbelievers. What we celebrate at Christmas and during Holy Week are regarded as foolishness at best and utter blasphemy at worst. That the infinite and eternal God became man, suffered, and died, that is the greatest and unforgivable sin in Islam. These two teachings are the foundation of the Christian faith. Without them there is no Christianity. So, it is no wonder that it is these that are rejected by all other religions, and what the History and Discovery Channel specials and college professors try so hard to prove to be foolish myths that rational people must grow out of.

But there is one more thing. A third foolish and offensive teaching. Not just to the world, but even lifelong Christians struggle with it. It is the teaching at the heart of today's Gospel: grace. It is demonstrated in the master of the house who calls laborers for his vineyard "**early in the morning...agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day.**" A denarius was simply the wage that was paid for one day's work. The master of the house goes out again at the third hour. He sees "**others standing idle in the marketplace.**" They slept in a bit, cared little for getting to work right away. He bids them to go a work. He goes out yet again at the sixth hour, at the ninth hour, and still yet again at the eleventh hour. While such people would not exactly be the kind of people you'd want to hire to work on the farm, the master of the vineyard continually goes out to call workers for his vineyard. He has no qualms about hiring such people. And at the end of the day, he begins with those hired last, and he gives them each a denarius, the pay for a full day's work. All the way down to those hired first.

Those hired first see it as unfair. They "**have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.**" Perhaps there has been some mistake. Maybe the master of the house has forgotten. But he is no fool. He is not like the employer who notices he's overpaid his worker, and so the overpayment is simply deducted from the once-overjoyed worker's next paycheck. No, it was all rather intentional. He knows what he is doing. He is generous. He is gracious. He gives to each on the basis of his own goodness, his kind regard for them. He gives not because of what they have done, how long they have labored, but simply because he wants to give what is good.

Jesus tells us that this is what "**the kingdom of heaven is like.**" This is how God is. This is how God deals with us. This is, in fact, why He has come as a man, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried, and rose again from the dead. His desire was to do all this for us. To bear not just the pains of physical labor, but to carry the weight of the whole world's sin. To suffer the scorching heat of the sun as He is nailed to a cross for hours, and where He suffers the far greater scorching of God's fiery wrath for sin. And it is His merit, His status of being the sinless, spotless, perfect, holy one of God, beloved by the Father and pleasing to Him, that is given to sinners.

The call goes out to all: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" It is the call to confess and repent of sin and turn to the Lord Jesus Christ who has borne that sin in His body, and paid for that sin in His blood. And to any and all who cling to Him, His life, suffering, death, and resurrection by faith, who say, "Amen," to what Christ Himself says and promises in His Word, they receive the wage, the merit, the great and glorious treasure of forgiveness, salvation, and life with God. Those who repent of their sins and desire to do better are absolved, forgiven, meaning that sin doesn't exist anymore. It is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

God be praised that for many of you, this happened when your parents brought you to be baptized. God be praised that your parents and family read you Bible stories and brought you to church where you heard and learned the Word of God, even when you were feisty and unhappy to be there. Your parents took you to church because they wanted you to learn that being in the house of God is the most important thing. So even in midst of the terrible twos and the thrashing threes, that's when you learned the Lord's Prayer. And God be praised that you are here today, because you recognize what God is doing and giving here, and that you need it.

So also, God be praised, there are those who come in at the third, the sixth, the ninth, the eleventh hour, who hear the call, the invitation, to labor in the Lord's vineyard, to be a member of His church, the Body of Christ, and in heeding His invitation to faith are saved. Sometimes it's people like what our fathers in the faith once called "noble pagans."

Upstanding people, sophisticated philosophers who just hadn't heard the Gospel, who didn't grow up in a Christian home, and are converted later in life. It happens. Other times, it's notorious, terrible sinners of the worst sort: serial murderers, drunkards who beat their families, adulterers, abortionists, men dying of AIDS, opioid addicts, lying politicians. Perhaps we see such people go to the front of the line to paid, as it were; confessing their sins and receiving absolution, and we think that we must receive some better, some greater reward for being better than they, that we are more entitled to God's love and favor than they are.

But you will not receive some better inheritance. You are not more deserving than they. The world is scandalized by deathbed conversions. Hollywood mocks those who come to faith and cease living lives of godless hedonism. The world expects and exacts just desserts for crimes, real or imagined. And often, when we see such people taking refuge in same the infinite mercy of God as we, being consoled with the same comfort of the promise of the forgiveness of sins, we catch ourselves thinking, "It's not fair."

Do not grumble at God's generosity. Do not think that you can stand for one minute on your own labor and make demands on God for what is fair. What is fair to any and to all, including you, is hell, not heaven. The fair wage is death, not life. That is what is just. What is deserved. But that is not what God desires to give to each and every person whom He has created. What He desires to give, to shower upon you and all humanity is grace.

Grace is not fair. Grace is different. Grace, by its very nature, cannot be demanded. It is entirely undeserved, unearned. The gifts are His, to give as He pleases. And in His Son God gives generously what we have no right to demand. The fair and bright Morning Star, there from before creation, wholly innocent – is put to death. The first became last, an obedient servant, unto death. And we, who could not abstain from sin, but were held in its sway, ever increasing in our guilt – we go free. Not free to continue on in sin, but cleansed, freed from it by His death. We who were last, in the muck and mire of sin, death, and damnation, are made first, greatest, in the kingdom of God. Knowing that is what our God has done for us, who are undeserving, we rejoice that He has done and continues to do the same for others.