



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“GOD DOESN’T OWE US ANYTHING”

Scripture Lessons: **Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16**

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, August 11, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Matthew 20:1-16

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And 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?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, “Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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 doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

Leader: The Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In 1990 my father made a deal with me. If I achieved a certain grade point average during my freshman year of college, he would buy me a car. Well, I’ll have you know that I studied hard that year and I achieved the target GPA...and my father lived up to his end of the bargain as well. I ended up getting a beautiful one year old burgundy Honda Accord, and, as far as I was concerned, I had arrived, and I arrived at just about every destination of my choosing from that time on and for the next 14 years.

I can still remember the day my Honda Accord called it quits. I was on my way to the Presbyterian Home in Florence, SC, in order to lead an afternoon worship service. I was about 15 miles away when my car gave one good and violent shudder, and then lights that I didn’t even know I had lit up the dashboard and the steering wheel locked securely in place. It was all

I could do to steer what was essentially a lifeless car to the shoulder of the road. Even before I popped the hood I could see a pool of radiator fluid pouring from the underside of the car, and the heat emanating from the engine was unmistakable.

I had the car towed to a local shop in Marion, SC, near our home. After the mechanics assessed the situation, they called me in. They showed me how the timing belt had snapped, the water pump had broken, certain seals had become unsealed and the heads of the engine were locked in place...and for those of you wondering what all that means, I'll use the words the mechanic used with me: "Game over!" Those sure weren't the words I wanted to hear. I mean, even though that car had about 280K miles on it, I had plans for it – that was going to be Harrison's car one day.

I was sharing all of this at the time with a good friend of mine, Will Eskridge, and I still remember what he said to me. He said: "Holton, that car doesn't owe you anything." And you know what, he was right.

That car had carried me from place to place for about 14 years. It didn't have to - it just did. And considering my less than stellar track record of car maintenance, you could almost say that it did it all on its own. I never had to wonder if, when I put my key in the ignition, it would start, because I always knew that it would.

I often wonder about the extent to which we may relate to God's grace in a similar fashion. Oh, there may have been a time when God's grace felt fresh and new – we recognized it and appreciated it – "it saved a wretch like me" we sing! But the days and the months and years...they pass, and, sadly, too often the case, we continue to crank up our spiritual lives and as we continue on our journey of discipleship, we often do so with little more than a passing glance at God's everyday banquets of grace which line the very highway of the human heart...we just assume that God's grace will always be there.

And I suppose we come by this relationship with God and God's grace honestly. After all, we know the stories – the parables, like that of the Prodigal Son. We watch as that younger son makes an unusual request of his father, asking for his inheritance early. We see how the father is surprisingly gracious and gives his son that for which he asks, and now the son, in turn, takes the money and squanders it on dissolute living.

We recall how the Bible also says that he "came to himself" - and returns home, and that when he arrives, he is not condemned...not by any stretch of the imagination. On the contrary, he is welcomed home with open arms, clothed with a fine robe, a ring is placed on his finger, and a fatted calf is killed to celebrate his return.

Ah, there's that God of ours who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That's the grace we have come to expect! Indeed, we expect to find grace when we stand off in the corner of the sanctuary and humble ourselves before God. We expect to get a full day's wage, even when we've only worked about an hour. We expect that such a prophetic voice will visit our nation, if not the souls of our people, and that God will always give us ample time to turn from our sinful ways and turn back to Him. Oh, but friends, God doesn't owe us time or wage or salvation, in fact, God doesn't owe us anything!

Fred Craddock recalls noticing in a class some years ago, that the students gravitated heavily toward the stories of a reversal type, the kind in which the offer of grace was extended to the wayward son, the tax collector, the eleventh-hour worker. They loved those stories, but oh how they frowned upon such stories that emphasized punishing one-talent misers or slamming doors in the faces of poor girls who forgot to bring oil. Basically, Craddock noticed, at least on the part of some of his students, that grace had lost its unexpectedness. In fact, it was almost as if it had become something other than grace, or if it was grace, it was cheap grace, at best.

So Craddock told them a story, part of which I've shared with some of you before. There was a seminary professor who was very strict about due dates for papers. Due dates were announced at the beginning of a semester, and failure to meet them resulted in an "F" for the course. In one class, three students did not meet the deadline. The first one explained, "Professor, unexpected guests from out-of-state came the evening before the paper was due, and I was unable to finish it." "Then you receive an 'F'" said the professor. The second student explained, "On the day the paper was due, I became sick; I went to hospital; they gave me an IV and I'm feeling much better now." "Then you receive an 'F'" said the professor. The third student, visibly shaken at the news about the fate of the other two, cautiously approached the professor's desk. Slowly he began, "Professor, our baby was due around the time the paper was due. The evening before, my wife began having pains, and so I rushed her to the hospital. Shortly after midnight she gave birth to a boy. Our son weighs eight pounds. We named him Kenneth." The professor listened with interest, moved his chair back from the desk, and looked up at the ceiling. After a long pause, he looked across at the student and said, "Then you receive an 'F' for the course."

The news spread rapidly through the seminary. A large delegation of students came to the professor to protest. "Why have you been so harsh?" they asked. The professor replied, "At the beginning of the semester I gave my word concerning the paper. If the word of a teacher in a Christian seminary cannot be trusted, whose word can be trusted?" The students were dismissed.

Now, most of Craddock's students - they were not only upset with him for telling the story, but they were also angry with the professor in the story. They insisted that it was not at all like a story Jesus would tell. It was not at all like a parable.

It doesn't sound like a traditional parable to me, either. Probably because I have been in that situation myself - perhaps you have as well - I needed an extension on a paper - I expected the professor to understand, and, in my case, they did. But that's just the point I think Fred Craddock was trying to make.

You see, many of us have lost touch with the unexpectedness of grace. Grace has become for us something that is expected instead of something for which we are pleasantly surprised and exceedingly grateful. It has become for many of us like that daily manna from heaven; it's there every single day, but instead of standing in awe of God's provision we simply take it and we eat it and, after a while, we don't even say thank you!

My favorite verse within the whole of hymnology is one that we sang last week: “O to grace, how great a debtor, daily I’m constrained to be.” That verse points to the same idea which has driven our translation of the Lord’s Prayer over the years, a translation which communicates the more literal that which we owe and those who owe us as “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

That concept of debt is crucial, because if we forget the cost of grace - that debt which we can never repay, if grace loses its value and becomes something that we think we can just do with as we please...then we will have missed the whole point of grace! Mind you, there is nothing wrong with God’s grace. It is truly “amazing.” No! Any problems with grace reside on this side of heaven. Like the students in Craddock’s story, so often we expect that God is going to work everything out; and yes, ultimately God will work everything out, but there’s a difference in taking God at His word and taking God for granted.

Is that what we have done? I dare say, if when we hear the stories of our faith and they no longer astonish us, and if we have long since stopped hoping and praying that the unmerited favor of the living God would continually rest upon us...then, yes, perhaps that is exactly what we have done.

But just as surely as we wouldn’t want to think that we are somehow entitled to grace, neither should we lose trust in God’s capacity to give it. Heaven forbid that we begin to sound like Job and say that our fears come true and that the dread we expect continually befalls us; heaven forbid we walk along on that Emmaus Road of life and mistakenly presume that God’s story of salvation is all but finished and dead and gone.

A friend and colleague was visiting with a church member who was about to die. That particular church member was looking back over their life and they were feeling weighed down by all of the things that they had left undone. They didn’t feel as though they had done enough to be found acceptable in God’s sight, and they were more than a little bit concerned about their eternal welfare. They kept repeating one phrase out loud, over and over: “I’m not worthy.” “I’m not worthy.” My friend had a wonderful response. “You’re not worthy,” he said. “But, then again, no one is.”

Can we anticipate God’s grace being all around us all of the time? Of course we can! But it is not there because we expect it to be, nor because we somehow deserve it. As I said before, God doesn’t owe us anything; and yet, the miracle is, at the same time, God in Christ has given us everything!

Let us pray...

Lord, thank you for your amazing grace. May we await that which you have in store for us with baited breath, and may we be pleasantly surprised, if not blown away, by the work of your Holy Spirit in our life and the life of the world today. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*