

# Grace That Isn't Fair

## *Meaning of the Cross*

In 1944 a young Polish man was captured by the Nazis and was set to work cleaning rubbish out of a hospital which housed German casualties from the Russian front. This young man, a Jew, was later to become recognised throughout the world. His name was Simon Wiesenthal. Simon Wiesenthal had watched as the SS had killed his grandmother, and had forced his mother into a railway cattle wagon. Altogether 89 of Wiesenthal's relatives would die at the hands of the SS.

In the hospital, Simon Wiesenthal was summoned to the room of an SS officer whose face was covered in bandages. The man was dying. This Nazi officer said to Wiesenthal "I want to confess to you, because you are a Jew. My name is Karl. I was brought up a Catholic. I had faith when I was a child but when I joined the Hitler youth I lost my faith. Then I joined the SS and fought on the Russian front. When we came into one village 30 of our soldiers were killed by booby traps left by the Russians. So in an act of revenge, we rounded up 300 Jews, herded them into a three-storey house, doused it with petrol, and fired grenades at it. We encircled the house and shot anyone who tried to escape. I can still hear the screams. I saw a man with a small child in his arms and a woman next to them. His clothes were on fire, and as they jumped, I shot them. I cannot get that picture out of my mind. I can't die in peace, unless you as a Jew, will forgive me for what I have done." Simon Wiesenthal says that he sat for a long time staring out of the window of that room as the man waited for his forgiveness. Without a word, he walked out of the room, and the SS officer died without being forgiven.

After the war Simon Wiesenthal was so troubled about that incident that he went back to Stuttgart, and tracked down the SS officer's mother. She told them how spiritual her son had been, and what a lovely boy he had been before he went into the army. That just made Simon Wiesenthal feel worse. So he wrote to the brightest ethical minds that he knew, both Jew and Gentile, Catholic, Protestant and irreligious. He told them the story and asked them what they would have done if they were in his place. 32 men and women responded. Only six said Wiesenthal should have offered forgiveness. One Christian writer said "I would have strangled him in his bed". A novelist wrote back saying "Let the SS man die unforgiven. Let him go to hell."

### **What Would You Have Done?**

What would you have done? If you met a man who had been a sniper in Sarajevo, shooting little children and using them for target practice, what would you have said to him if he had asked for forgiveness? What would you say if one of the Taliban recruiters of suicide bombers in Iraq if they asked you for forgiveness? Would you offer forgiveness, or tell them to go to hell? What would you do?

Hold that thought in your mind as I read a parable that Jesus told. It's recorded in [Matthews Gospel chapter 20](#).

***"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the market-place 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 and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour 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 ones hired and going on to the first.' The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 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? 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?' ( Matthew 20: 1- 15 NIV)***

No matter how many times we have heard this story, or read this story, our reaction is usually the same as the people who heard it then for the first time. How come the people who only did an hours work in the coolest time of the day, got paid exactly the same as the people who were hired first thing in the morning? One lot did a whole days work in the heat of the day. Some started part way through the day, and some started work right at the end of the day, yet the owner of the vineyard treated them all exactly the same. What kind of a deal is that?

When Jesus began telling this story he started it with ***"For the kingdom of heaven is like.."*** The story is a parable. It's a story with a purpose. It's meant to teach a spiritual truth. And the spiritual truth is that Gods kingdom doesn't operate according to normal values. Normal values would say that the guys who started first and did a whole days work get a whole days pay. Those that do half a days' work get half a days' pay. And those that work for an hour get what they deserve – one hours pay. But Jesus turns all this on its head. In the economy of God, the guy who is a late starter gets just as much as the one who has gone the whole distance. It's called grace. And yes, it really is amazing.

Have you got your head around the implications of this? Here's how it works. And I'll illustrate it with a true story of a man I know. Barry is in his late fifties. He's been married to Jackie for years. But it's not much of a marriage. She is a gentle, loving saintly woman who loves Jesus and does her best to serve him. He is a foul mouthed, selfish, abusive husband who spends most of his day propping up the bar at the local Returned Serviceman's Club. He's a drunk who contributes nothing to society or his family. Everything about him is repulsive. But sweet Jackie keeps praying for him and sharing about Jesus with him. At times she gets so despondent she comes into my office to have some peace and quiet where she can spill out her frustrations and shed some tears. She's been praying for this drunk, abusive, foul mouthed man for 25 years, and he's getting worse rather than better.

Then one day she comes into my office and her eyes are shining, and she can't stop smiling. Barry has asked Jesus to be his Saviour. And in the space of a few days, his life is radically changing. He's becoming loving and caring. His foul language has stopped. He's reading the Bible and devouring everything about Jesus he can get his hands on. Jackie has difficulty convincing the Pastor that it's true. Barry comes to church and he even looks different. When he begins to understand that even though he's wasted most of his life, he still gets a full day's pay at the end of it all, it's almost more than he can take in. When the truth dawns on him that the same assurance of eternal life that Jackie has had for 25 years is his too, it's almost too much for him to handle. When he begins to understand what grace really is, and that he, Barry, is the recipient of God's grace, his eyes fill with tears of joy. Grace. It really is amazing when you understand it.

### **Grace At The Cross**

Now, let's get to the Cross, which is what this series of messages is about. In his Gospel account, Luke describes what happened between Jesus, and one of those being crucified with him.

***"Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals--one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:32-43 NIV)***

What if you had been Jesus, hanging on the cross on that first Easter, writhing in agony, enduring the taunts and derision of two criminals hanging next to you. "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us". When one of these criminals turns and says "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom", wouldn't you be tempted to say "Go to hell!" Isn't that what he deserved? Isn't that what we all deserve?

### **The Big Miracle**

Most of us here today have been Christians for so long that we miss the big miracle of the crucifixion of Jesus. The big miracle wasn't the three hours of darkness in the middle of the day. It wasn't the earthquake, or the tearing of the temple curtain. The big miracle wasn't the graves opening and the resurrected saints walking around the streets of Jerusalem. The big miracle took place on the Cross. It was the miracle of grace – a sin soaked sinner was received by a bloodstained Saviour.

### **Grace That Isn't Fair**

What did the criminal on the Cross next to Jesus do to deserve eternal life? Nothing! What did he do to deserve forgiveness for his sins? Nothing! What did he do to repay God for the forgiveness he received that day? Nothing! It just doesn't seem fair. It isn't. It's called grace. That's what bugs some people about the Cross. Some of us come to Christ at an early age, and spend our whole lives serving him, and some waster has a deathbed confession at the last hour of that of his life, and he gets the same reward that we do. It just doesn't seem fair. Is that fair? No. It's called grace.

Somewhere in heaven one day, we will see a grinning ex criminal walking the streets of gold, still shaking his head in disbelief three thousand years after the event -- marvelling at the amazing Grace of God. This criminal on the Cross next to Jesus was the first person to find eternal life through the death of Jesus on the Cross. And he got it all just by asking. Is that fair? No. Is it amazing? Yes. Did he do anything to earn it? No. Did he qualify because it was such a good citizen? No. Is he spending eternity paying God back for his amazing Grace? No. He just asked, and it was all his. That's all I had to do. That's all you have to do. Grace doesn't work according to our standards. It works according to God's standards. And yes, it is amazing.

### **Receiving Gods Grace**

Some of the shortest prayers in the Scriptures, come from the hearts of desperate people who know that they need a Saviour. When Peter was trying to walk on water and it wasn't working, he prayed a three word prayer - "Lord, save me". A tax collector who felt so bad about himself he couldn't even look up to pray, cried out "God, have mercy on me, a sinner". This criminal, in the last hours of his life said "Jesus, remember me when you come in to your kingdom." That's throwing yourself on the grace of God.

Friends, it's that simple. It's that amazing. And it's that profound. Through the Cross, we get what we don't deserve. Grace is getting spoiled rotten by God when we know we don't deserve it. And he lavishes it on us, to the point of embarrassment. He treats us in a way we don't deserve to be treated. God's grace invades our hearts so that we can never be the same again. We can never undo the grace of God, or act as if we have never received it. We have been spoiled rotten forever.

I want to finish today with two appeals. I appeal to those of you who have never experienced Gods grace, to ask him for it. Those of you here today who have never invited Jesus to be your Saviour, throw yourself on God's grace. Accept that that the death Jesus died on the Cross was to cover your sin and ask God to forgive you and treat you as you don't deserve. If you need to know how to do that, talk to a Christian friend that you trust, and ask them to tell you how.

### **Giving Gods Grace.**

My second appeal is to those of you that have already received Gods grace. I appeal to you to treat others with the same grace that you have received. For that's what God expects of us. He expects His grace to overflow out of us to other people. When it seems fair to retaliate against people who have hurt us, the Spirit of God whispers in our ear "Treat them the same way I treated you. Show them grace". When people are in your debt, repay them with grace. Instead of cursing people by telling them to "Go to hell", give them grace which points them to heaven. Just as you have received God's amazing grace, give it away to others.

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