



Looking Inwards (15 mins)
Caring For Each Other

*Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however: 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:*

- Thanksgiving?
- Prayer?
- Encouragement?
- Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins)
Concern For Others

*Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours; or church, which you would like to share (please be careful not to pass on anything that is **confidential** or which you think the person/people concerned would not wish to be shared) for:*

- Thanksgiving?
- Prayer?
- Encouragement?
- Support in any way?

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HG97: Listening To Jesus On ...
First And Last

Matthew 20:1-16

Home Group Study Notes

13 July 2014 - Pauline Woolnough



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group with you, along with any previous notes and other resources which might be helpful.



Welcome (10 mins)
Ice Breaker

What is the best job you have ever had and why?



Looking Upwards (10 mins)
Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



Looking Upwards (40 mins) Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1: On reading the passage at first how did you feel about the latecomers being paid as much as those who had worked all day?

2: If the landowner is God and the workers are the believers who do you think is the manager. Why does the manager pay the wages?

3: This parable suggests that all we need in order to live is enough to feed ourselves for the day. Do you feel challenged about what you have in relation to what others don't?

Amazing Grace

Jesus told this story in response to the disciples question when Peter asked, "*what will my reward be*" and what Jesus is warning them is that although they are fortunate and privileged to be with Him, it doesn't mean that they must expect any special kind of reward. They have been lucky enough to be chosen for a special purpose by Him but every single person is special to God, all of us matter equally and all are precious and loved. The first set of workers were jealous, and mean spirited and their sense of fairness and justice couldn't cope or generously accept such outrageous acts of mercy and kindness by the landowner mainly because they were missing the point. They saw the money that the landowner gave to the last lot of workers in terms of a wage when in fact what he was doing was giving them a gift, it was an act of grace.

The first lot of workers hired at 6am got what they expected, a denarius was exactly what was agreed. Those who came later were taken on on the basis that the landowner would pay "*whatever is right*," that could be anything depending on the character and goodness of the landowner and it worked to their benefit because they received more in payment for the work they had done and much more than they deserved, and that is exactly what God does, that's how He treats us, He doesn't treat us fairly, we don't get what we deserve, its not about fairness, its all about Grace. Outrageous, extravagant, scandalous and stunningly undeserved Amazing Grace. Grace cant be measured or calculated using some mathematical formula, its not about being first or last, its not about how much work you do, its not something we can earn, it is something God offers and we receive as a gift from Him.

When we see the landowner as God it tells us that He cares about the poor and the hungry, those who have no job security and who are desperate to work in order to feed their families for the day, and it tells us that He gives just enough for the day. It tells us that God cares enough to keep going out not just once but five times during the day to see if there is anyone standing around looking for work. It tells us that God is not some distant landowner who stays at home enjoying all the comforts His lovely house set in a beautiful vineyard instead He is like a Saviour who goes out into the world looking for those without hope and who need help. This story shows us a loving Father who has taken away from us the burden of trying to please Him with what we do for Him. As He offers us the gift of grace all we have to do is to receive the gift of His Son as Saviour.

No one is excluded from the offer, He can take the worst, most wicked kind of sinner and convert him because the blood of Jesus washes away all our sins in one stroke and forgives us. There is no time limit, the offer does not expire, it has no use by date, it doesn't matter if we accept his gift late, if we do then that's our misfortune because we miss out on a lifetime of knowing Him but we can even accept His gift with our last breath at the end of the day. The person who receives Christ on their deathbed will receive the same reward of eternal as the person who has been a Christian all their life. They will be go to be with Him when they die just as quick as the person who has served Him faithfully for years, they are loved, forgiven accepted and cherished just the same, is that fair, -no its not, thank God.

Life Is Not Fair

Shortly before an old man died he said these words, "*Life is not fair, thank God*," Hopefully we will echo that sentiment, thank God, life is not fair, lets Praise God! Grace is not fair that's the hard thing about it, on the one hand it is wonderful if you are on the receiving end of it but it's hard to swallow when you see someone who *you* decide is undeserving receive it also. Is it fair that someone should work all day any get paid the same as someone who worked an hour. No it is not, but then neither is grace. Grace is not about fairness it's all about Jesus and the work that he accomplished for us on the cross at calvary by reconciling us to a father who loves us who has forgiven us and whose generosity is beyond our widest dreams.

We may have worked away for years in God's vineyard doing hard unglamorous work, perhaps in the background then some new person comes through the door with gifting for much more noticeable and prestigious work. They may be rewarded with praise and thanks and quickly become an integral part of church life and how does that make us feel. Perhaps a bit like the disciples Peter, James and John whose animosity towards Paul was fuelled by the fact that he was born into privilege, educated at the finest establishments by the greatest scholars of the day, he hated and persecuted Christians yet he met Jesus, got saved and went on to write 2/3rds of the New Testament. Its just not fair, but God can raise up whoever He wants for whatever job he wants done and it is none of our concern. We need to be prepared to rejoice in our good fortune and support others in doing God's work.

Greed and Envy

The first lot of workers in the vineyard were greedy, they hoped to be paid more despite their contract with the landowner and they were envious of the other workers good fortune. Greed and envy can cause us to lose our peace quicker than anything. We can be going along happily feeling good about life and then hear about a friend who has been incredibly blessed and if we are honest we will admit to a tiny tinge of jealousy which very quickly causes us to lose our peace and start us feeling less content with what we have. Even though no one was cheated the men who worked all day complain, they say, *'These men who were hired last worked only an hour... and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'* v12. The first lot of men are not accusing the others of being lazy or slack, they did not complain of any wrongdoing on the employers part they are simply angry that they have had to do a hard day's work in the hot blazing sun whilst others got off light. They are annoyed at what they have had to suffer, but what they forget is for whatever reason the other men were taken on late, they have had their own things to endure, like the worry of not having any work, of not knowing how they are going to feed their children, they may well have stood around all day in the hot burning sun without the satisfaction of knowing they would be rewarded at the end of the day. Its just a different kind of misery and hardship.

None of them received less than they expected but many received a lot more. Basically the first lot of workers anger was born out of jealousy, they had worked all day and were angry that the others had had the good fortune to be taken on late and still be paid the same amount as them. They couldn't accept that the landowner had the right to do whatever he wanted to do with his money especially when it meant that others benefitted more than they did. I expect they had been perfectly happy to be taken on when others were left standing, and pleased to know that at least their family would eat later that day even if it meant that others would not. They couldn't find it in their hearts to be pleased at the others good fortune and at the landowners generosity that prevented some families from going hungry that night.

Two Types of Believer

There are 2 groups of people in this story and both represent believers, those who benefitted from the landowners gift and those who believed they earned their reward. Both sets received the same but those who knew they didn't deserve the gift would have gone home exceedingly grateful, whilst the others went home angry at the good fortune of the other workers. They had witnessed an amazing act of grace yet they could not rejoice in the other workers good fortune. It is human nature to side with the workers who had worked all day and with them say, *'Its not fair,'* but this set of workers represent the legalist who believes that salvation is earned by those who worked the hardest. He shows us how graciously God treats us and at the same time highlights a side of our nature that is ugly and may make us think about how unkind and ungracious we can all be at times. Philip Yancey in his book *What's so Amazing about Grace* asks this, *"If grace is so amazing why don't Christians show more of it?"*

4: The last set of workers may have been taken on last for a reason, maybe they late, maybe they were lazy. Are there things that you place in the way of working in God's vineyard, are there things that prevent you from using the gifts that God gave you?

5: Are you confident about God's offer of grace or are you still tempted at times to try and earn favour with the Lord?

6: Does it seem fair that someone like Hitler or Stalin could be saved at the very last minute and be granted eternal life yet another who has led a good moral upright life may die without repenting, trusting in Jesus and end up in hell?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



HG97: Listening To Jesus On ... *First And Last*

Matthew 20:1-16

Home Group Sermon Notes

13 July 2014 - Pauline Woolnough

Introduction

Jesus was an amazing story teller and He used everyday situations in order to help people look at themselves and the world in which they live and see things through God's eyes. He was controversial, and His behaviour and His teaching broke all the rules. This story was no exception and we might find ourselves initially on the side of those who had worked hard all day and saying with them, *"Its not fair."* How can it be fair for someone to work all day in the hot sun and earn the same wage as someone who had worked for an hour? In this story God is the landowner and the workers are the believers and Jesus warns us about the danger of feeling superior due to the length of time we have been Christians, its not about seniority, its not about how hard or long we work, its all about God's grace.

The Unspoken Question

This story is sandwiched between two statements the Lord made that are almost the same. In 19:30, Jesus says - *"But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."* He then tells this story and at the end of it says *"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."* (20:16). He said it the first time to Peter when he asked the question on behalf of the disciples about what they could expect as a reward for giving up everything to follow Jesus. Later on in Matthew 20 James and John were probably mortified when their mother asked Jesus that her sons reward would be for one of them to sit on his right and the other on his left in heaven. It's a question that is unspoken but we have probably all thought of at times, *"What's in it for me. If I do this thing, what thanks will I get, who is going to notice, what can I expect to receive for all my hard work?"*

So Jesus tells the disciples a story of workers in a vineyard and He paints a very vivid picture of a normal scene that could be found in any marketplace at the time in Galilee. He starts by describing the kind of thing that happens year after year when the grapes ripen towards the end of September and owners need extra help to gather it in. The market place was where men would go first thing in the morning for a 6am start with their tools and packed lunch, and wait for someone to hire them, they could wait all day as this story indicates because they were desperate for work. The wage was a denarius for a day's work, about 4p which was not a lot of money and it left no margin for luxuries, it was just enough to feed your family for a day.

A Very Unusual Employer

At 6am the landowner went out and hired men to work in the vineyard and he agreed to pay the a denarius for the day. Later on at 9am he went out again and saw men standing around and he offered them work, this time he said he would pay them *"whatever is right."* They accept what he says no doubt just happy to be getting some work, he does the same again at midday, 3pm and 5pm until he had enough workers.

He was an unusual employer because like others he had a manager whose job it would have been to go out and hire the labourers, so straight away we see that this landowner was different to others in his day, he was a very unusual boss. The men work for however many hours they are taken on for, and at the end of the day they would expect to be paid because justice demanded that such workers would be paid in the evening at the end of the day. Lev 19:13 *'Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.'* The landowner sent his manager to pay the wages with instructions to pay the workers who had been hired late in the day, first, and every worker was to receive a full days pay. As the manager started to pay out a denarius to those who had only worked an hour the rest of the workers, especially those who had worked from 6am, must have expected to be paid more as they had worked much longer but any hopes and expectations they may have had were short-lived when it became clear that they were all being paid the same. It was certainly very generous to those who had worked for just an hour but it seems unfair for those who had worked all day.

A Sovereign God

Jesus is deliberately challenging our normal view of reward systems and our idea of what is fair and what isn't. As usual He is being controversial and provocative and turning everything that we believe to be right on its head. Barbara Brown Taylor said *"The problem is, many of the people in need of saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do."* Our culture judges on merit, employers speak of merit based pay, work hard and get on in life, employers use salary scales, increment points, profit share, they certainly don't pay equal wages for unequal work but Jesus challenges us as we live in a world dominated by profit, celebrity and achievement instead of a world concerned about the needs of every individual human being. He wanted to teach us something about the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven where God's mercy and justice and His vision of equality is for all. Jesus also reminds us through this story that God is sovereign, He can do whatever He likes with His resources, His ways are different to ours. *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord*" Is 55:8

Our Sense of Fairness

As adults we believe in first come first served, and even as children we learn that it is best to be fastest, strongest, cleverest. If I win then it follows that you are going to lose, it also follows that I am going to be pretty upset if I work hard, put myself out, go the extra mile and yet others who have done less get treated generously. Deep down that is our grumble and complaint and something we may all have experienced in the workplace as others who are employed later than ourselves, and who sometimes don't work as hard as we do, get treated as well and sometimes better than us, - its not fair. It's not exclusive to the workplace, we see it in families, most famously in the story Jesus tells of the Prodigal Son where the elder brother cannot accept the father's generosity to the younger son who returns and a feast is given in celebration. The older son complains, he says, *"Its not fair,"* he's angry by the fact that he has stayed at home worked hard and he fails to see his reward, he also fails to see the misery and hardship that his younger brother has endured whilst being away from the family home. We also see it in church. It can be easy for us Christians who have been church members for a long time to become resentful of a new generation that rises up and wants to do things differently, - louder, faster, less formal but God is not interested in seniority, he is not interested in the number of years we have served him, but he is interested in the *spirit* in which we have served Him and others.

Warren E Berkley said *"It is not merely the time that we put in. It is the heart that we put into the time we have."* God wants us to be satisfied with the gifts He has given us and not to be concerned about how He gifts and rewards others, its none of our concern how God chooses to use or bless others.