

Series: **POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE** - March 1, 2009

THERE ARE NO LABOUR UNIONS IN HEAVEN!
Matthew 20:1-16

I. INTRO

- A. I brought some fudge this morning! Anyone here interested. [Throw only to one section]. Now, did anyone notice anything about this particular fudge toss? How did **you** feel about it (section I threw to)? How did **you** feel about it (the section I didn't)? So, call yourself **un-fudged**—or **non-fudged**—you choose—and **sue me!**

-Boy, **justice** and **fairness** are built right into our genes, aren't they? We **notice** things like who gets the biggest piece of meat and the corner piece of cake with all the icing!

1. How many of you have **ever** said the words, **It's not FAIR!** How many of you have ever **thought** those words? They're pretty common among kids. I found a children's book with the title, **IT'S NOT FAIR!** Listen to the blurb describing it:

With a rhythm and rhymes that add to the fun, this book about the unfair part of life is a pleasure to share with children. My only warning is that you don't start a conversation about what hasn't been fair in their lives because it would be impossible to end. All children have a catalog of the wrongs that have been done them by siblings, parents, teachers, and even people in the grocery store.

2. Boy, it's a good thing it's only kids who remember that stuff, right? Right?!

- B. The nasty truth about life on planet earth is...life is **not** fair. Umpires make bad calls. Teachers sometimes favor the kids who behave and like school. Playgrounds? **Unfair!** Sometimes courts and judges—which are supposed to be the blind-folded lady holding up the scales of justice--aren't fair. Down through the ages, unfairness has expressed itself in government policy—sometimes blatantly racist—along with the economic system in the world—which starves some and fattens others. Really just about everything on this planet is affected. And screaming about it doesn't help! -The question people ultimately come to is...is **God** fair? That's a question Jesus got asked one day by his closest followers. And he told a very interesting story in response. Want to hear the story?

II. BUT THAT'S NOT FAIR!

- A. Before I read the story, do you mind if I set it up? Jesus is coming down to his last weeks before he is unfairly accused, tried, and executed. A wealthy young leader had just come up to him and asked what good thing he needed to do to have **eternal life**.

1. Jesus response is kind—but crisp. Keep the commands. When this young guys says, **Done that!** Jesus said, "Well—if you want to be perfect—complete, sell everything you have and give it to the poor. And the guy **walked away!** Like us, he had a **lot** of stuff.
-As he was going, Jesus made a comment that totally rattled his disciples;

I tell you the truth; it is *very hard* for rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. I'll say it again, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.
(Matthew 19:23-24 NLT)

2. See, they'd been taught that wealth was a sign that God loved you and the way you were living. It didn't compute—a nice, straight-living guy with a lot of stuff—who wouldn't be a part of Jesus' Kingdom? So Jesus clarified things further; He said,
Heavenly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible.
(Matthew 19:26 NLT)

-Peter thinks, then says, "Wow! We've given up **everything** to follow you—so, what will **we get?**" Jesus lays out the honor they will have when all things are made new—and that anything they give up will be **nothing** in comparison to what they receive!

-Do you sense that maybe there's kind of a spirit of entitlement here with Peter? Well that seems to be what Jesus goes after, first with his final comment—and then the story that follows:

But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then.
For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work.

At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing.

At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?' They replied, 'Because no one hired us.' "The landowner told them, 'Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.'

That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage.

When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, 'Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.' He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage?

Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?’

So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last. (Matthew 19:30-20:16 NLT)

3. A bunch of people hired at different times—and one group with a complaint. What was it? **THAT’S NOT FAIR!**

B. When Lori and I went to our first church, it was right smack in the middle of grape country. Anyone here ever heard of **Welch’s**? Well—we were in **Welch’s** country—along with a few wineries. When they were harvesting grapes—the smell of them hung heavy over the town. I **loved** it!

1. There were a number of migrant workers hired by the vineyards—to prune, tie and sucker the grape vines. By the time we lived there, the grape harvest, which had once been done totally by hand, was now automated.
-When I was a teen, however, I did try harvesting grapes to make some spending money.

After about 12 hours, I had picked about 12 crates—like this one. I think I was paid 50 cents a crate. Others had done 40 or 50! I do know this about harvesting grapes. Timing is **everything!** For maximum sweetness—they have to be brought in just before the first hard frost—or the rainy season in other cultures.

2. Everyone listening to Jesus’ story **knew** how the grape harvest worked—that it was time sensitive—and the grapes **had** to come in. By hand. And this vineyard owner was paying a good wage; a **denarius** for the day—which is what Roman soldiers made.

-In our world, it would be Niagara—or California; and it would be someone like, say,
Ernest and Julio Gallo—who **serve NO wine before it’s time!**



It would be a big yellow school bus coming to pick up the workers—probably paying them about 10 bucks an hour. The Gallo Bros. have no trouble filling up the bus at 6 a.m.

-But they need more workers, so they come back at 9, at noon, and at 3 p.m. At 5 p.m., there are still more workers hanging around the hiring hall. Maybe they were older and weaker. Or overlooked. Heck, they **coulda** been the party crowd—head just starting to clear up—eyes looking like fried eggs with ketchup—but the driver says, “Get on the bus—we can use you!” And an hours wage would **almost** buy them a 6 pack! Before long, the whistle blows—and it’s time to quit.

3. Up to this point, there are no surprises in this story. A winery. A vineyard owner who pays an excellent wage—paid in **cash!** The strangeness starts when they pay the workers, in order, by who started **last.**

-And when those who were hired last open their pay envelope—they're **shocked!** 12 crisp 20 dollar bills! And the news leaks out. "They worked one hour, got \$120---Ernest and Julio are paying **\$120 dollars an hour!** But then the reality sinks in—that **everyone** got \$120. When the news gets to the last people in line—the gung-ho **6 AM-ers**—there's trouble.

-And it's also clear: the one hour slackers got paid just as much as the 12 hour gung-ho people. And they said.... **That's not FAIR!** Man, we've been out here in the **scorching heat** all day—and we...

-But the landowner in this story says something very interesting; **Friend (more along the lines of "Hey, Pal!) I HAVEN'T BEEN UNFAIR!** He says, "We had an **agreement**, didn't we? And I kept my end of that agreement. Deal with it!

4. In our world, the labor unions would've been **screaming!** The Vineyard Worker's Local would've picketed his vineyard. He would've been sued for compensation and maybe driven into bankruptcy. The message Jesus was giving was, God is absolutely fair and just in **all** his dealings. But if you think you can **earn** life and favor—and get Him on your side by working harder than everyone else—you haven't figured on how God operates. The word that describes Him—is **GRACE!** And **grace** trumps everything else.

-The one think our world system doesn't **ever** seem to get when it comes to being a part of His Kingdom for eternity is that, on our own, it's **impossible.** The point wasn't that it's harder for rich people like us to get into Heaven because we have it so good here; it's that it's impossible for **anyone** to find eternal life on their own—and the stuff we have can make us proud and unwilling to receive **grace.**

-**Grace** is when, out of his kindness, God does what is impossible for really, really **good** people—and impossible for really, really **evil** people—and accepts them into his kingdom forever. Paid for by Jesus. **If** they'll agree to be accepted. And this apparent unfairness sometimes gives religious people a **terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day.**

- C. This landowner closes with a penetrating question that pokes right into that sore spot we scorekeepers have when it comes to fairness and unfairness: **Should you be angry because I am kind?** And then Jesus' clinching line:

And so it is, that many who are first now will be last then; and those who are last now will be first then. (Matthew 20:16 NLT)

-In other words, if you've been in church and hanging around Jesus for a really **really** long time—or a really short time—or you know your Bible backwards and forwards—or

you don't have a clue—or you've pretty much either eliminated or excused your bad habits...or not—it doesn't matter!

1. Jesus is very clear at the beginning that He's talking about the **Kingdom of Heaven**. He's been teaching about it for three years; the leadership and authority of God coming to the earth to make all people and all things right—and shove out the powers of darkness that have spoiled and rotted life and creation. Within **weeks**, Jesus will spill his blood on a cross to pay for our sins—so we can be forgiven and find **grace!**
-This story is encapsulated when Jesus tells the thief dying next to him on the cross,
I assure you, today you will be with me in Paradise. (Luke 23:43 NLT)

Meanwhile, the people who've spent **all their lives studying the Bible, praying and giving to the poor** will probably **never** love Him or accept **grace**.

You'd think, **It's not fair!**

-Our work for Jesus expresses our love for God and others; keeping ourselves from things that destroy our lives expresses good sense. But that stuff **doesn't** earn eternal life. Jesus makes that clear. That comes from the kindness of the One who **owns** the "vineyard."

2. Peter had said, "So, what will **we** get—you know, cause, like, we've left everything!—and following you **hasn't been easy** Jesus!"
Jesus' replies, "Don't let your role as my closest followers and disciples give you a sense of entitlement—that, like you're a **little more equal** than everyone else!"

-And Jesus is **very** clear. Unless you can live out the Sermon on the Mount **flawlessly**—you'll need grace. The life I give isn't something that you earn like a wage; it's not even a bonus for doing a good job. It's not about religion, it's not about performance, it's not about God as the great scorekeeper in the sky. It's about **grace!** And when you see the price-tag on grace—you understand how powerful, and amazing—and **scandalous** it really is! Labor unions and courts and religions would've **never** thought of grace. But **God** did!

III. GRACE DOESN'T FIT IN A BOOK-KEEPING WORLD

- A. How many of you are **6 a.m. early-bird-gets-the-worm people**? Hey—I've always wondered—what do worms taste like? How many of you admire the 6 a.m., **early bird gets the worm** workers in Jesus' story. I do. I think it's smart to get an early start, work hard, give it your best shot. I think history would prove that **hard work**—a strong work ethic--discipline toughens you, builds character—and ultimately **pays off..**
 1. This story is not about how God rewards laziness. There are lots of reasons why these workers may not have been there at 6 a.m. with the others. The story doesn't tell us—and it doesn't matter. The reality in that culture is that if you **didn't** get paid, you probably didn't eat—and the vineyard owner knew that.

-And I think **that's** why he says what he does to the 6 a.m. workers who were complaining.

Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others? (Matthew 20:14-15 NLT)

2. That's a **profound** thought, isn't it? I have to ask myself, **Am I jealous because God is kind to others?** Way kinder than **I** think is reasonable? This story Jesus told is about grace.

When He says, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a vineyard owner who hires everyone who will come along—and pays them for more than they actually worked"—He's saying, "This thing I'm doing and building is about **grace.**"

-In his book, **What's So Amazing About Grace?**, Philip Yancey describes grace as the **last best word**. Grace, in Jesus' stories, is vagrants and street people and beggars getting invited to a magnificent banquet--when they never got invited **anywhere**. **Ungrace** is people getting invited and then insulting the host by refusing to come.

-Grace is a boy who flips off his Dad, demands his inheritance—and then decides to come home after he's wasted it—and not only gets reinstated—but has a huge party thrown in his honor. **Ungrace** is the older brother who **hates** his younger brother and resents the party—and remains alienated from his Dad because He is the prodigal—extravagant father.

-Grace is a man who somehow accumulates a massive unpayable debt to a king, comes with some lame excuse about paying it back, begging for mercy—and has the debt **totally** forgiven—wiped off the books. **Ungrace** is the same guy going out and refusing to forgive the debt of someone who owed him—and having him thrown into prison.

-And, of course, the ultimate picture of **grace** is Jesus hanging on a cross, falsely accused by the religious elite—suffering dying, paying in full for all scummy things I've done—and you've done—and everyone in the world has done. **Grace** is Jesus' offer of life and forgiveness to the man hanging on the cross next to him—who has only hours—maybe minutes to live and can't do a **thing** for his Kingdom. **Grace** is Jesus begging the Father to not hold the sins of the soldiers against them who were, in that moment, driving 6 inch iron spikes through his hands into the cross.

- B. Sometimes people who have received **grace**—forget. We forget that life—and all we have is a **gift**. And when we do, we whine and complain—like the people in Jesus' story. At heart, we're scorekeepers. When God is good and kind and filled with love for someone **we** think doesn't deserve it—as much as **we** do, of course--we're ticked. And it's **very** easy to grumble about almost everything. Let's talk about complaining for a minute—because those who have received grace are sometimes legendary for their grumbling.

1. The church hadn't even reached toddlerhood when the grumbling started. The Greek widows felt that they were getting the short end of the stick. When it came to the daily distribution of food, **It's not fair! Wah! Wah! Wah!** So they appointed Greek deacons to organize the whole thing.

-Friends, honestly—this whole comparing and whining and complaining thing that Jesus brings up has plagued churches for years. Paul, an early church leader, addresses this stuff in a **brilliant** way in one of his public letters to the church. He says:

Do everything without complaining and arguing, so that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people. (Philippians 2:14-15 NLT)

-The Jewish people reading this would've immediately known from his wording that he was quoting from the book of Deuteronomy—and talking about the **Exodus**. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt—living under horrible circumstances.

Then God reached down, and in an amazing display of power, extricated all 2 million of them—give or take a few hundred thousand! The one word that describes them from that moment on—is **grumbling. Whining.**

-Ancient Rabbinic tradition says that when God made a way through the Red Sea for the Israelites escape, there were two men having a conversation as they walked. They are picking their way along the sea floor—**complaining** to each other about the mud sticking to their sandals and squishing up between their toes. Because their heads are down, looking at the mud—they **totally** miss the massive wall of water beside them that God in his grace is holding back.

2. The word Paul uses for grumbling and complaining is very interesting: **gongusmon**. It's like a combination of someone pounding on a gong—and geese flying overhead. Noise. If you've ever been in a car with whining, complaining kids—after a while—it's just noise. Or if you've ever been around the water cooler in cubicle-land—and everyone's whining and complaining about life, about their job, about some minor irritation—it's just becomes **noise**.

-But sometimes, we don't hear our own noise. Others do—but not us. We lose the plot. In our families, instead of seeing the grace of God—seeing that life is a gift, we lose our way in the mass of little sticky hands reaching for us, paying bills, neighbors, car problems—and...**stuff**. -Friends—**everything** is a gift. Every breath. Every meal. Friends. Relationships. LIFE IS A GIFT!

3. Like the workers in this story, we also complain when we think we need more. We **deserve** more. We deserve more money, an easier life. We deserve to be heard. We deserve to be noticed and honored and esteemed. When we give our opinions—we want everyone to drop what they're doing and gasp; "Wow! Tell me **more!**"

-And I'll tell you what **stokes** this kind of stuff. Just like in this story, we compare what **we** get...or have...with what others have. It's like, on the great scoreboard of life, they're **winning!** And the Great Umpire isn't fair! And we can come to believe that God is shorting us. Ripping us off. "I was in line first." "**I've** worker harder and longer!" "They **have** it, but I **deserve** it!"

-Interesting, isn't it, that we do the comparison thing based on the tiny slice of life we see—and that slice is wafer thin. And we never compare ourselves to people who would **love** to have our lives! By the way, the whining, complaining life is a lonely life. I'll prove it: How many of you love being around someone who grumbles and whines and complains and criticizes? You pray, "Lord, send **more** people like that **my** way!"

-When you lose the plot—and there's all this gonging and honking—**gonggusmon**—coming from your life, you could be also voting for a lonely life!

- C. Author, Bill Hybels, talks about going sailing one day—and seeing this magnificent sailboat go by in the harbor. You know how boat sometimes have names across the back? **Emma Lou!** Or **I Owe, I Owe—So Off To Work I Go!!** The name on this boat was **DESERVED!** Only in North America! We have this sense of entitlement. I heard an interesting definition of that concept: **Entitlement is being born on 3rd base—and thinking you hit a triple!**

-And I think Jesus was trying to get through to his disciples, "Just because I chose you to work with me—and it would appear that you're first in line—doesn't mean that you need less grace than this rich guy who's clinging to his stuff!

-This early leader, Paul, surely must've known of this story of Jesus—and these workers complaining about having worked all day and getting the same wage as everyone else. He wrote these words:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23 NLT)

-And who does that include? Paul answers that question earlier.

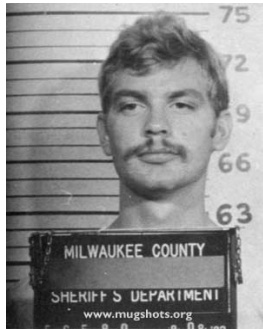
For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. (Romans 3:23-24 NLT)

1. **Grace** is the most amazing thing in the world. We find a \$20 bill in our pants pocket. **Grace.** We leave a dent in someone's car in the parking lot. They say, **faggadaboudit!** Grace.

Your kid takes the hose, turns it on, and puts it in your car—thinking they will help you wash the **inside!** And you after some weeping and gnashing of teeth,

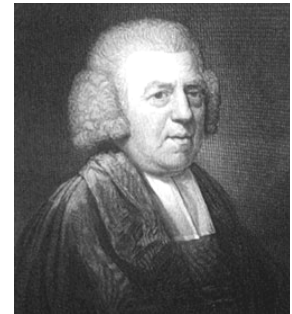
you hug them and thank them for being helpful—“But **don't be helpful again without asking!**” Someone throws fudge—and no fudge comes your way—and you still smile and love that person. **Grace.**

2. But sometimes **grace**—especially **God's** amazing grace--just doesn't seem to make sense. It doesn't seem **fair!** Like in this story of people all getting paid the same whether they worked 12 hours—or one. God offers grace to people **we** think ought to burn in hell. **Grace** is Jesus' offer of life and forgiveness to the likes of **Jeffrey Dahmer**



- who murdered and cannibalized 17 young men.

Grace is God offering forgiveness to someone like **John Newton** who had participated in the capturing and selling of 20,000 human souls into slavery.



Grace is God forgiving **David Berkowitz**



- the Son of Sam serial killer from NYC - who said that his neighbor's dog told him to shoot 13 people in the head with a .44 revolver. God has a sense of humor - because he turned David into a minister!

3. As strange and unfair—and sometimes downright weird as **grace** seems—where people get what they would never, **ever** deserve—there's one thing worse.

Anyone know what it is? Well, it carries the same title as the sailboat I told you about. **DESERVED!** It's when we go through life thinking that we are entitled to what we have—and **more!** It's when we see our own sins and failures and screw-ups as light gray—and others as dark and evil. It's when we are **so** deceived that we think that our own performance is so stellar—that God should give us life in His space **forever** and be honored to have us there!

-You could call this **un-grace.** And it is the single most prevalent attitude in our world. It was what Jesus ran into again and again and again in his 3 year trip to

the cross. Heck, the religious people didn't just think they were better than others—they were convinced that they were better than him—and they **deserved** to live, and He deserved to die That's pretty obnoxious, don't you think? To see yourself as better behaved than **God**.

-And that attitude is **rampant** in our world. Religion—**all** religions, in fact, tell you a bunch of bad things to avoid and a bunch of good things to do, "Follow this prescription, take two Tylenol—and you should be okay." And all that stuff does is ramp up our pride—and this massive panel of judges.

-God's diagnosis? **Everyone** needs grace. No one can—or **will** find life on their own. That's why He had to send His Son, Jesus—to pay for our sins on a cross, accept us **just as we are**, put His Spirit into our hearts—and then recruit us for his mission of making **all** things new in this world. We become the workers Jesus talked about in the vineyard. **We cannot, CANNOT do this on our own.**

-It's possible, this morning, that you've been playing hard to get. Because of Jesus, God's arms are **wide** open. He's ready to forgive you, make you new, give you a do-over—and fill your heart with wonder and awe of his grace. And I **have** to ask you—why don't you stop running **away**—and run to **Him**?

4. When we **receive** grace—our calling is then to **give** grace—in a world of **un-grace**. Un-grace shows up **everywhere**. It happens in homes with performance-driven parents. It happens in schools driven by classifying kids as slow, ordinary, or...**tad da!...gifted!** It happens in the hallways of schools and universities—where vulnerable kids get classified—and treated--as desirable—or as geeks, nerds and losers.

-And if you don't experience un-grace there—the **marketplace is waiting for YOU!** Your own office—cause **you** increase the bottom line—or **cubicle land forever**. Or worse.

5. But sometimes we aren't grace-givers. The worst sort kind of ungrace actually comes from people who ought to know better. Us. In our world like ours, people are **hungry** for grace. Dying for grace. The world system can do most things way better than the church. Except grace. Loving others, accepting others, forgiving others, and helping others—simply because it's **right**. Because Jesus Christ has loved us, accepted us, forgiven us, and helped us.

-Unfortunately, the people have God have been known more for their judging than their grace—and Jesus told us **not** to judge—but to show grace. And grace is **very** simple; **do for others what you would want them to do for you.**

IV. IS GRACE REALLY AMAZING?

- A. When I was in university, a good friend of mine—a **wild** pastor's kid—named Rick Witherow showed up at the college one semester. Rick had lived on the wild side—gotten into drug use and gotten his girlfriend pregnant. But he made his peace with God—and came to study for ministry.

-Rick was good-looking. Like **really** good-looking, cool, and great in sports. All the things I wasn't. And, like the score-keepers in Jesus' story, I remember this sneaky, ugly feeling of jealousy oozing into my soul. ***I've been the GOOD son! I've stayed faithful!***

-And I remember how awful I felt—playing the role of the **older brother**—and how far from God I felt with that junk sliding around in my heart. I thought, “What in the **world** am I thinking of—and **wishing** for? Would I be happy if he wrecked his life—and stayed wrecked? I thought about Rick's Dad—a man I loved—and how **glad** he was for the change in Rick's heart. And I was so ashamed of my own **un-grace**. Can anyone relate to me—or am I up here all alone in my underwear?

B. I have three longings for us at The Olive Branch:

1. If you've never accepted God's acceptance of you—just as you are—why don't you try it? Grace is **scandalously** good. Way better than staying as you are—thinking you don't need it.
2. Sometimes we need **grace** to accept life as it is. Paul once asked God to take a problem away—and God replied;

**My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.
(2 Corinthians 12:8 NLT)**

You may need God's grace just to put one foot in front of the other each day—without resenting people who seem to have an easier, more successful, more prosperous life.

3. My third longing is that we as The Olive Branch—would be magnificent grace-givers. That we would give grace—love, acceptance, forgiveness and help—as freely as we have received it. That as we go into our world every week, we would be like a **Grace** outlet. The Wal-Mart of grace. Because we live in a world that desperately needs grace! That's our calling—if we choose to accept it!