The kindness and severity of God

1. Introduction

a. Probably one of the most common complaints you hear from non-Christians is "If God is a loving God how can He let people suffer?" Many people struggle with a God who is portrayed as someone who is immensely kind and yet can also condemn people to eternal damnation. How do we address this?

b. Once again this requires us to gain a fuller revelation of the nature of the divine and once again the parables help us to do so. Human beings struggle to understand God because we limit His character to our understanding of human nature but Jesus uses parables to challenge our human expectations as he twists the story with an unexpected conflict to help demonstrate the nature of God.

c. The two parables we will look at in this session will hopefully help us to understand why God responds with both kindness and severity and how things work in the Kingdom of God as opposed to the kingdom of this world.

2. Masters and Kings

a. Both of these parables about the kingdom are set in the context of someone who has authority and those who respond to an invitation. In the first parable (Matt.20) we see a master who owns a vineyard and workers who respond to an invitation to work. In the second, a King holding a wedding feast for his son and those who are invited to the feast.

b. In both parables the way in which the person with authority responds to those invited is not what we would expect from our normal human experience. However, both parables show us significant insight into the nature of God.

3. The Owner of the Vineyard

Matt.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.* ***2*** *Now when he had agreed with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.* ***3*** *And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace,* ***4*** *and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went.* ***5*** *Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.* ***6*** *And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?'* ***7*** *They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.'*

8 *"So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the labourers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.'* ***9*** *And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.* ***10*** *But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.* ***11*** *And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner,* ***12*** *saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.'* ***13*** *But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?* ***14*** *Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.* ***15*** *Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?'* ***16*** *So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."*

a. The setting for the parable reflects the depressed economic conditions in which able labourers wait in the marketplace daily, hoping to be hired for temporary work. This reminds me of my first visit to Lebanon when the country had become a safe haven for many refugees fleeing from Syria. Having set up temporary homes in the Baqaa valley, a very fertile valley between the two mountain ranges that form Lebanon, they would congregate at a roundabout at the entrance to the main town. Each day land owners would come to this roundabout and pick up the workers they needed for that day to work in their fields.

b. Since the master needed to continue hiring labourers throughout the day it was very likely harvest time and it was a matter of urgency to harvest the crop. Owning a vineyard is a risky enterprise even today. Imagine the risk in the ancient world. When grapes reach their optimal point of ripening, it's imperative that they be harvested as quickly as possible. To wait one extra day in the sun could diminish the value of the wine that will come from the grapes.

c. The scorching wind of the day probably refers to the wind from the south. At certain times in the summer desert winds bring dusty and dry heat which makes the weather unbearable especially during the afternoon. This season is particularly difficult for agricultural workers who need to work through the whole day to bring in the harvest in time.

d. Having found workers early in the day, as the day goes on the master realises he is going to need more workers. He goes out again at the third hour, then the sixth, then the ninth, each time finding more labourers waiting for work. So throughout the day more labourers join the workforce to ensure the harvest in brought in in time.

e. At the beginning of the day the master has agreed a fair wage for the day. A denarius would be enough to provide food for the labourer and his family for a day. It was not a great amount of money but was considered a fair wage for a day's work. The day labourer was on the bottom of the economic ladder very much like the refugees I saw in Lebanon.

f. However, when it comes to paying all the labourers at the end of the day the conflict in Jesus' story is revealed.

4. The conflict – a fair wage?

a. The conflict in the parable centres on the fair wages paid to all workers in accordance with their agreement. Justness is the foundation of the landowner's action because he pays the same wage to all in spite of the unequal amount of time worked by the various different groups of workers.

b. The first workers received exactly what they bargained for. The conflict is seen when the landowner pays the latecomers the same wage. After they saw the generosity of the landowner the labourers who worked all day obviously thought they would receive a bonus. Instead the last are first and the first are last.

c. The grumblers complain to the landowner that they deserve more because they withstood the heat of the day. They are angry about the money and the generosity of the landowner. Its not fair!

d. From a kingdom perspective these workers should have been happy about the good fortune of their co-workers who, because of the generosity of the landowner, would now have enough provision for their families. But this is not the case. These workers express their

disgust by irately accusing the landowner of injustice. They grumble about their wages and are envious of the others.

5. The resolution – rightful justice.

a. The landowner makes it clear he is doing the workers no wrong. The first group of workers have received what was agreed and it is the landowner's choice if he decides to give the other workers the same wage. He challenges the grumblers on their idea of fairness and asks them, "*Or is your eye evil because I am good?"*

b. This refers to an eye that cannot see the beauty of grace. It cannot see the brightness of generosity. It cannot see unexpected blessing to others as a precious treasure. It is an eye that is blind to what is truly beautiful and bright and precious and God-like. It is a worldly eye. It sees money and material reward as more to be desired than a beautiful display of free, gracious, God-like generosity. It leads to jealousy and a lack of gratitude for what we have.

6. The decision – a good eye

a. This parable taught the disciples not to think of heavenly rewards in terms of justice: getting in proportion to what they deserved. They should think of them in terms of grace: any reward being an act of God's grace. Even those hired early in the day received a reward, and the landowner had been gracious and generous in hiring them at all, and not others.

b. Modern disciples of Jesus should view heavenly rewards in the same way. The only reason Christians will receive any reward is that God has called us to be His workers. We can count on God dealing with us justly, graciously, and generously whether we serve God all our lives, or only a short time, having become His disciples later in life.

c. If we are truly living according the values of the Kingdom of God then we will rejoice with all the redeemed on the day of our salvation no matter whether we entered the Kingdom 50 years ago or 10 minutes ago.

d. Our promise in scripture is:

John 3:16 *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that* ***whoever*** *believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

e. Jesus concludes the parable in verse 16 with two well-known statements. The first one, "*The last will be first, and the first last,"* means here that all receive the same salvation no matter when they are called, early or late. The second one, *"For many are called, but few chosen,"* will require more explanation, which is more clearly seen in the second parable.

f. However, before we go on to our second parable we need to understand that although this parable may appear to teach that there will be no differences in believers' rewards in heaven other parables teach that believers' rewards will vary (e.g., 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27). The point of this parable is that God will deal with all His disciples justly, graciously, and generously. All believers will go to heaven—regardless of their works. Other rewards will be added in the case of some believers but not in the case of others, depending on their works (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

7. The wedding banquet

Matt.22:1-14 *And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying,* ***2*** *"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son,* ***3*** *and sent his servants to call those who*

were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. [4] Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.' [5] But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, [6] while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. [7] The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. [8] Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. [9] Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' [10] And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

[11] "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. [12] And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. [13] Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' [14] For many are called, but few are chosen."

a. So if God is gracious and generous how do we understand this parable. Surely the King in this story seems unduly harsh. Here we seem to see a God who destroys people, burns cities and gets "ticked off" just because someone didn't have the right clothes. Is this the same God?

b. Yes, it is, and this parable helps us to understand how God views the rejection of His grace. This parable is the third instalment in a series of rebukes directed toward the Jewish leaders. In the context, Jesus has been teaching in the temple following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The chief priests and elders, rankled by his popularity with the people, interrupt his discourse and demand that he gives one good reason why he has the right to open his mouth on their turf (Matthew 21:23).

c. In response to their churlishness, Jesus tells the Jewish leaders, "*the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits" (Matthew 21:43).* This prediction is illustrated in our parable as the original invited guests — representing the chief priests and Pharisees — lose their place at the royal buffet.

d. The king then sends his servants to invite anyone who will come. The servants do just that, and Matthew notes that the newly invited guests are a motley crew, made up of "both bad and good" (22:10). This observation creates the tension that we find in verses 11-14 – this is the focal point of the parable.

8. The conflict

a. The king finds a man at the feast not wearing a wedding garment. The custom in those days was for the one hosting the wedding feast—in this case, the king—to provide garments for the wedding guests. These wedding garments were simple, nondescript robes that all attendees wore. In this way, rank or station was covered, so everyone at the feast could mingle as equals.

b. The king addressed this improperly clothed attendee as a friend. He asked how he had obtained admission without the proper garment. The man was speechless due to embarrassment over his inappropriate condition.

Zeph. 1:7-8 *Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near; the Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests. [8] And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice— "I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire.*

c. It was not because the guests were bad or good, both were in attendance. The issue was the lack of a wedding garment. He did not have on the clothes that had been provided by the king and has no excuse for his extreme disrespect for the king and his son. The wording, "And he was speechless," indicates that he was without excuse. It was not just that he lacked a wedding garment, but that he did not wear one on purpose. He had defiantly refused to put one on.

d. Then the king gave orders to his servants to tie the man, hand and foot, like a prisoner, and to throw him out of the banquet hall. They would throw him into the outer darkness, the place where he would go would be a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

9. The response

a. Jesus completes this parable with the phrase "For many are called but few are chosen." If we consider this in the light of this parable we can see that all were called. The issue wasn't the call but the response.

b. Some rejected the invitation from the king's servants and, as a result, they were dealt with by the king's army. To reject the invitation of God's grace means we then are dealt with according to God's justice. Its not about our nature or our works its about whether we accept the invitation.

c. From this parable we see two things. First, the gates of the kingdom are open wide. Salvation is not based on ethnicity, education, income bracket, popularity, ministry position, personality type, cultural savvy, athletic ability, or attractiveness. For this reason, we should be very careful not to assume that the people most fit for the kingdom are those who look most like us. The kingdom is available to both bad and good.

d. Second, though the gates of the kingdom are open wide, the kingdom still has gates and we must enter through them. The kingdom imposes conditions on us. We must bear its fruits. We have a particular kind of clothing to wear to the feast. In the words of Paul,

Col. 3:12-14 *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,* ***13*** *bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.* ***14*** *And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

e. These are the fruits of the Spirit. We can't put them on from our own strength, or in the imagery of this parable, from our own wardrobe. This is clothing provided by the king and we put on this clothing so we are identified as those who are chosen. At the end of the age it will be those who have put on the wedding garment provided by the king who will be the son's bride.

Rev.19:7-8 *Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready;* ***8*** *it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*

10. Double grace

a. So what is grace. Well I think there are 2 aspects to grace. There is grace which is in the nature of God to invite us in, to incline himself towards us, the undeserved favour of God.

Romans 3:23-24 *For there is no distinction:* ***23*** *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* ***24*** *and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*

b. This is the grace we see displayed through the landowner who gives generously to all his workers and the king who welcomes both good and bad to his son's wedding.

c. But grace is also the power to be who we have been called to be. It is also a free gift which we have to lay hold of like the wedding garments given by the king.

1 Cor. 15:10 *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*

d. Many are called and offered the free gift of grace. However, some only respond to the generosity of the gift and don't lay hold of its power to be transformed into those who wear our garments of righteousness. We don't only need to receive grace we need to put it on.

11. Jew and Gentile

a. It is important to recognise that both these parables can also be applied to God's view of Jews and Gentiles.

   i In the first the Jews were called first and the gentiles later but both will receive the same salvation. Early in the day or late the Lord chooses to pour out the same grace on both.

   ii In the second the Jews were invited into the Kingdom first but many rejected their Messiah. God therefore opened the Kingdom to all who would come in and receive his free gift of grace.

b. The prophets had predicted that Gentiles would participate in the earthly kingdom; this was not new revelation. However the Jews, because of national pride, had come to believe that being a Jew was all the qualification one needed to enter the earthly kingdom. Jesus taught them that receiving God's gracious invitation, and preparing oneself by trusting in Him, was the essential requirement for participation.

c. Paul lays this out clearly in Romans 9-11. It broke Paul's heart that his people had rejected Jesus and were still relying on their good works. However, we need to take note of Paul's words in Romans 11

Romans 11:11-12 *So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.* ***12*** *Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!*

12. Conclusion

a. We are not yet at the day of the wedding feast. The banquet is on the day of Christ's return. The doors are still open and any who are willing to trust in God's grace and lay aside their own works are welcomed in.

b. Let us not only accept the Lord's generous invitation to enter His Kingdom through salvation but let us also take hold of the grace which he has given us that we may be part of that bride clothed in the robes of righteousness and be those prepared for the Wedding Feast of the Lamb.

Phil.3:12 *Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.*