

August 3-7, 2026 Edition

Following  
The Year<sup>(s)</sup> Of Jesus Part 239  
Jesus & Zacchaeus

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August 2, 2026



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

\*\*\* These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that. If hey help you, great. If not, sorry.

\*\*\*\* Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

\*\*\*\* Also you can also get these devotionals on Riverside's website (EagleRiverside.com) by going to the resource section and choosing "Reflections Download".

\*\*\*\* Also Jesus is awesome.

**Monday Reflection:** This week we're going to focus in on the parable of the workers in the vineyard. It's one of the strangest stories Jesus ever told because it just doesn't sit well with most of us. It goes against our innate sense of fairness but Jesus' stories aren't about what's fair- they're all about grace and the gospel. So let's just read the story to start off this week and then we'll spend the rest of the week trying to understand what all we can learn from this parable:

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<sup>[a]</sup> 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 20:1-16 (NLT)

So what are your initial thoughts about this story? If we took the story out of the gospels and just told it like it was something that happened in our town we would all be thinking the same thing – those guys that came on for the first shift and got paid the same as the guys that came on at 5 o'clock certainly have a grievance. If that's your thought as well then you understand what Jesus was trying to get at.

This story is not to be removed from the gospels. Notice how Jesus began the story? "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." This story is not about economic equity or fair labor practices. It's about how the kingdom of Heaven works. And whether we realize it or not, you and I should be on our knees, thanking God that this is the way that it works. The kingdom of heaven is not about what's fair. The kingdom of heaven is about God's great compassion, mercy, love and faithfulness pouring out to people that don't deserve it like you and me.

We'll spend the rest of this week looking at some lessons that we can draw from this story but for today, maybe spend some time reflecting I'm just how unfair the kingdom of heaven is. Ultimately it's a story about the heart of God — and it's going to mess with your sense of fairness in the best possible way. More on that tomorrow.

Jesus is awesome!

**Tuesday Reflection:** I'm going to just go ahead and warn you right up front that I am going to be utilizing several puns as we go through the lessons that we can learn from this story this week. All of them will revolve around the concept of the vineyard, but I just wanted you to know from the very beginning that I know this is cheesy but let's leave the wine where it belongs- in the bottle.

So let's just get the first pun over with shall we? One of the first lessons that we learned from the story of the workers in the vineyard revolves around grape expectations. I was going to title this lesson grape expectations until the puns just kept on coming, and I realized I could use those puns to help us understand the story a little better. So we'll start today looking at the grape expectations of the guys that got hired first.

If you read the story yesterday, then you know what I'm talking about. The guys who were hired first were told how much they would be paid and they were happy to work all day for that amount. It wasn't until they saw the guys that had just been working for an hour or so get paid the exact amount that they were told that they would receive that they started to develop some grape expectations:

*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.' Matthew 20:9-12 (NLT)*

What exactly were the guys who came on shift first upset about? Was it that they felt like they had been treated unfairly? No. The problem that they had was that the guys who got hired last we're getting treated better than they deserved. And that's not a fairness problem – that's a grace problem. In business, it would be unfortunate but not the biggest deal in the world. But Jesus is saying that that kind of attitude has no place in the kingdom of heaven. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that none of us has earned our place in the kingdom:

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIV)*

Seems pretty cut and dried doesn't it? But it becomes even more so when you look at the first eight verses of Ephesians chapter 2. Do you see that little word "for" that begins Ephesians 2:8? Why would Paul use that conjunction to start verse eight? Well, he's answering the "why" of the first eight verses of Ephesians chapter 2. And what is he telling us in those first eight verses of chapter 2?

Basically that none of us have earned this. But this is all something that God has done out of the goodness of his heart and out of his love for us and that none of us have earned it. Why would he need to stress that in the first eight verses of Ephesians chapter 2? Because his humans we have the tendency to feel like we deserve to be where we are. We want to justify why we have the things we have and that we worked hard to get them so that we don't have

to feel bad. But Paul is making sure that none of us have that completely human reaction to the kingdom of heaven.

And what does the tally sheet show when it comes to us and the kingdom of heaven? That we have been saved by pure grace plus nothing. He just keeps piling on and saying this is not from yourselves, but it is a pure gift so that no one can boast. Now why would boasting be such a big deal? Because it leaves us with grape expectations (pardon the pun). And those expectations usually leave us measuring ourselves against other people. What we've done and the time that we've put in compared to others.

And here's the dirty little secret, but most of us don't want to admit – we want a fair God. We want God that makes sense to our innate human sense of fairness. Although that's not exactly correct. What we actually want is a god that is fair to other people, but is filled with grace and mercy for us. But the moment you start measuring God's goodness to others against what you think you're owed, you've stopped receiving grace and started auditing it. And God doesn't need anyone auditing his grace. Look at what He says to Moses up on Mount Sinai:

*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. Exodus 33:19 (NIV)*

He doesn't ask for our permission. He just hopes that we will embrace the grace that he extends to others with the same enthusiasm that we embrace the grace that he extends to us. No matter how long we've been at this kingdom of heaven business and no matter how short of time someone else might've been at this kingdom of having business. Would we think about the thief on the cross is our heart filled with warmth and gladness or is there something else there? Something to spend some time today thinking about.

**Wednesday Reflection:** So yesterday we looked at grape expectations that the early crew had when they saw what the guys who had been hired at 5 PM received. They started to think they were going to get a lot more than what they had been promised, but when they received the exact same amount as the guys who have been hired at 5 PM, they started to experience more than just their grape expectations. They started to experience the grapes of wrath. I know, groan. Right? But you'll never forget the literary reference when you think about this parable in the future.

But why do you think they experienced such anger over the way the 5 PM crew was treated? Jesus pinpoints what's going on in His parable:

*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? Are you envious because I'm generous?' Matthew 20:13-15 (NLT)*

Only envy has the poisonous ability to take a good gift and make it feel like a slap in the face. And the funny thing is that if the vineyard owner had not gone out and hired more workers throughout the day, these guys would've been perfectly happy with how much they received

when the day was done. And what I think Jesus is trying to get out here, is how our human hearts ordinarily work. Most of us if we were in the same situation with not walk home, thinking how lucky we were to have made the same amount as the people that had only worked an hour or so. Most of us would be unhappy with the way that things had gone. But Jesus is warning us that this is something that we are going to see in the kingdom of heaven.

Long-term faithfulness, either produces a deep gratitude within us that says, look what God has allowed me to be part of for so long. Or it can give us a sense of quiet entitlement where we start to think that we've done more than other people who aren't as faithful as we are. Ultimately, it all comes down to what's in our heart. That's why comparing ourselves to other people is such a bad idea all around. It either fills us with pride because we think that we stack up better than someone else or it fills us with shame because we think we don't stack up as well as others. But either way comparison is the thief of joy:

*Pay careful attention to your own work, for then you will get the satisfaction of a job well done, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else. For we are each responsible for our own conduct. Galatians 6:4-5 (NLT)*

We are each responsible for our own conduct – not the conduct of others. And certainly we are not responsible for the conduct of God. I read this week that "comparison is the thief that turns a wage you agreed to and we're happy with early in the day into a grievance by sundown. That's what happened to these guys that got hired early in the morning. Jesus wants to make sure that we don't let that happen to us.

Right before he ascended to his throne, Jesus has breakfast with his disciples beside the sea of Galilee. It's the first time that we know of that he spends some quality alone time with Peter after the events of the night that Jesus was arrested. The night that Peter denied Jesus three times. Jesus then gives Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his love for Jesus (three times in case anybody is counting and I'm guessing Peter was) and then Jesus explains to Peter how he's going to die. Peter doesn't seem to have any problem with the thought of his own death, but something interesting happens that I think explains a lot of what Jesus was trying to get across in the parable of the vineyard workers:

*Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow me." Peter turned around and saw behind them the disciple Jesus loved-the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, "Lord, who will betray you?" Peter asked Jesus, "What about him, Lord?" Jesus replied, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me." John 21:19-22 (NLT)*

Why does Peter care what happens to John (when he writes his gospel John uses the literary device of the-disciple-Jesus-loved when he talks about himself)? I'm not sure, but Jesus makes the same point here that he makes in the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Keep your eyes on your own paper. Don't worry what I'm doing or not doing in the lives of other people. You just keep your eyes firmly on Me and everything else will take care of itself.

And if you've read the book of acts, then you know that that is exactly what Peter does. A lesson that you and I would do well to learn. It's not an easy lesson to take to heart, but it is an important one. So let's get rid of our grape expectations because all they will do is lead to grapes of wrath. I know it's a cheesy pun but you know exactly what I mean. And that's what's important.

**Thursday Reflection:** OK, so far this week we've talked about grape expectations and the grapes of wrath. Today, I'd like to talk about grape, grape joy. Now, my guess is that you understand the use of the phrases grape expectations and the grapes of wrath, but you're probably wondering what is all this about grape grape joy?

Well, in 1977 Amy Grant released a song on her first album called grape grape joy. It was just a silly little song, and I will share the lyrics with you here:

*I am a small and lonely grape. Clutching to the vine. Waiting for the day when I'll become my savior's wine. Oh wouldn't French cuisine just yearn it. I've eternity to ferment. Knowing me, I'll end up ripple in a seller of chablis.*

*Are you a small and lonely grape? Clutching to the vine. Waiting for the day when you'll become your savior's wine. Don't give up hope ye heavy laden you don't want to be a raisin. There's a grape grape joy in Jesus in the vineyard of the Lord.*

I get that most of you will have never heard that song (unless you were at church this last weekend and then you were treated to the grape grape joy of having heard that song in church) but it's been running through my mind ever since I started thinking about writing a lesson on the parable of the workers in the vineyard. I know that it's not great literature, like the other two puns were, but if the early crew from the parable experienced grape expectations and the grapes of wrath then who do you think from the story experienced grape grape joy?

The guys who were hired last right? Those guys got paid way beyond what they deserved and their reaction would've been surprised joy:

*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.'*  
Matthew 20:6-7 (NLT)

These guys weren't just being lazy. The reason they weren't working is because no one had chosen them. More than likely, they were either too old or too weak to be thought of as good labor. But the fact that they were still standing there at 5 o'clock says something about their work ethic. But more than anything, this story says something about the heart of the vineyard owner. Look at the rhythm of the story. This guy goes to the marketplace at 6 AM, 9 AM, noon, 3 PM and 5 PM. Why does he do that? Because he doesn't want anybody who wants to be at work in the vineyard to be left out. This tells us something about God that maybe we forget – he never stops calling for more folks to come into his vineyard and he doesn't forget about the people who are still out there. Look at what Jesus says about what happens when someone answers the father's call to come into the vineyard:

There is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away! Luke 15:7 (NLT)

It's just another way of saying the same thing. God cares desperately about those who still have not found their way home. And he wants us to celebrate when he finds them even knowing that their reward will be exactly the same as ours. No matter how long we have been working in God's vineyard. Look at what Jesus says to end this parable:

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

I don't think this is a threat that Jesus is leveling against those of us who struggle with people who come into the kingdom late receiving the same reward as those of us who have spent a lifetime in that kingdom. I think it's Jesus simply explaining the economy of heaven. It doesn't matter where you are in the perceived pecking order. First or last the reward will be the same. I don't know about you, but that's hard for me to wrap my mind around. I just do my best to try to be happy with a lost one finds their way home no matter how long or how hard I perceive myself to have been working compared to them.

What's interesting about this story is what led to Jesus telling it. We looked at the story of the rich young ruler a couple of weeks ago, and this is the next story that Jesus tells right after that interaction. Basically what happens is a young man comes to Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus rattles off the external requirements of the 10 Commandments, and the young man tells Jesus that he's done all of that since he was a boy. Then Jesus tells the kid to go sell everything that he has and give it to the poor and then come back and he can follow Jesus. But the young man goes away sad because he had many possessions. In essence, what Jesus was showing him (and us) was that this young man had broken the Commandments that talked about how we relate to God. He had made something more important than God in his life, and that was preventing him from experiencing the eternal life that he longed for.

As the young man walked away, Jesus turned to his disciples and told them that it's very hard for the rich to enter into the kingdom of God. This shocked the disciples because they thought that the rich were God's favorite people and so they ask Jesus, if that's true then who could possibly enter the kingdom? Jesus tells them that with humans it's impossible, but not with God. Nothing is impossible for God, Jesus tells them. It's at that point that this happens:

Then Peter said to him, "We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get?"  
Matthew 19:27 (NLT)

Jesus tells Peter and the rest of the disciples that they will get back many times more than what they have given up. Then Jesus says this:

But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then. Matthew 19:30 (NLT)

I don't know if you noticed, but that's almost exactly the same thing that Jesus says at the very end of the parable of the workers in the vineyard. What isn't immediately obvious is that Matthew 19:30 is the very last verse of chapter 19, and the very first verse of chapter 20

Jesus begins to talk about the parable of the Vineyard workers. It's easy to miss the connection because of the brakes that we put into the gospels for chapters and verses which make it easy to find and reference particular scriptures, but can sometimes get in the way of us seeing connections that the writers of the gospel intended for us to see.

In other words, the parable of the workers in the vineyard is sandwiched with this idea that the first will be last in the last will be first. And it seems to me like that can either come across to us like a threat or it can come across to us like a gift. I don't know about you, but I thank God that I don't have to be better than anyone else because quite frankly when I look around at what other people are doing compared to me if I'm not careful I'll start feeling guilt and regret. But like Jesus said to Peter (and we looked at this yesterday), don't worry about anybody else – you just follow me.

That I can do LORD. Thank you that I don't have to do more than that. Maybe today you and I can spend some time reflecting on what Jesus met when he said the first will be last and the last will be first. Because I think to the extent that we can understand that we will be able to experience the grape grape joy it is available to us in the vineyard of the Lord. And I promise that is the last of the ridiculous puns for the week.

**Friday Reflection:** Today I want to take everything that we've learned about the parable of the workers in the vineyard and see how all of that worked itself out in the life of a prophet from the Old Testament named Jonah.

In the story, God comes to a prophet named Jonah and tells him to go and preach to the great city of Nineveh to repent or else he's going to destroy them. Jonah doesn't want to do it because he along with all of the other Israelites would have absolutely hated the Ninevites and would not have wanted to give them the opportunity to repent. Jonah is just sure that if the Ninevites do repent than God would relent and not destroy the city.

So Jonah goes down to the docks and books passage on a ship that will take him as far in the opposite direction as he could possibly go. Tarshish was in modern day Spain and if you know anything about geography, you know that from Israel that that's about as far away from Nineveh as you could get.

So God sends a great storm and the sailors have no idea what to do so Jonah lets them know that he is the reason for the storm. He tells them to throw him overboard and the storm will subside and they will be saved. Finally, that's exactly what they do and Jonah is probably hoping that he'll die, but God isn't finished with Jonah yet any more than God is finished with the Ninevites yet. God sends a great fish to swallow Jonah and keep him alive and for three days and three nights Jonah is in the belly of the great fish.

If you've ever read Jonah chapter 2, then you'll see that Jonah seems to repent. He seems to be saying to God, if you give me another chance, I will go and do what you've asked me to do. And so God has the fish vomit Jonah onto the beach. I know that sounds gross, but when you think about it, it's really the lesser of two evils when it comes to how he was getting out of that thing.

At any rate, Jonah goes to Nineveh and he preaches God's message- repent or the city will be destroyed. To Jonah's great dismay, the city repents and God forgives them. Now before we



go any further with how this relates to the story of the workers in the vineyard, we need to take just a minute and marvel that the book of Jonah actually made it into the Old Testament. The Israelites hated the Assyrians and would not have experienced warm fuzzies when God showed them mercy. Add to that the fact that God is showing love and compassion to a gentile nation and the Jewish people would not have enjoyed this book.

The Jews had decided that not only were they God's chosen people, but everybody else they believed to be God's enemies. That was never what God said, but people being who they are. It was what the people of Israel ended up believing. So how did Israel become the chosen people of God?

Well, in Genesis chapter 11, we read about the tower of Babel. When God confused the languages of the people building that tower he effectively separated the people into nations. And when you get to Genesis chapter 12, we see the effects of that. Basically there is no nation on earth who looks to Yahweh as their God. And so God comes to a man named Abraham, and he tells him, I will make you into a great nation. And through you all the nations on earth will be blessed. It was God setting in motion, the prophecy that he had made in Genesis chapter 3 to send a descendent of Eve's who would pay the debt that we humans could never hope to pay.

And eventually from Abraham comes the nation of Israel. But by the time you get to the eighth century, BC Israel had decided that they were gods only people and that God hated everyone else. So the fact that the book of Jonah makes it into the Old Testament is kind of shocking. Do you see the lessons that Jesus was trying to get across in the story of the workers in the vineyard in the history of Israel? Then you'll also see some of those lessons in Jonah's response after God has mercy on Nineveh:

*This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the Lord about it: "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, Lord! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen."*

*Jonah 4:1-3 (NLT)*

So what's the moral of the story? Don't be like Jonah. Be like Jesus instead who saves thieves who were sentenced to die on a cross next to him at the absolute last possible minute. Be like Jesus. And care about the things and the people that Jesus cares about.

Jesus is awesome!