

### *Matthew 20:1–16 (CEB)*

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard.

<sup>3</sup> “Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup> He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right.’ <sup>5</sup> And they went.

“Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. <sup>6</sup> Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’

<sup>7</sup> “ ‘Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied.

“He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

<sup>8</sup> “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’ <sup>9</sup> When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. <sup>10</sup> Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> “These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.’

<sup>13</sup> “But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I agree to pay you a denarion? <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?’ <sup>16</sup> So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last.”

### *Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)*

<sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

### *James 2:14–18 (NIV)*

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. <sup>18</sup> But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

*God’s grace pours out on us. Praise be to God.*

In my experience, no one is totally comfortable with grace, God’s or anyone else’s. We want things to be fair, in our own eyes. “That’s not fair,” are usually the first words out of everyone’s mouth these days when they feel aggrieved. Read the above parable and tell me you don’t think the workers who spent all day in the fields were treated unfairly.

The eccentric landowner ends up paying all the workers a full day’s wage, whether they worked ten hours or one. Those who worked the full day get exactly what they were promised, but they envy those who came later in the day. It all just seems so unfair to them, but only because they lack any appreciation of grace. They have rejected the

good life the landowner has given them (a fair day's wage for a fair day's work) and obsess over what the landowner gave someone else. Though Jesus ends the parable there, you wonder what would have happened that evening. Would the envious workers have attacked the late-arrivers, seeking to make things "fair"?

Our salvation lies at the crux of the tension between grace and our efforts, between faith and works. As we'll see in a bit, resolving this tension inevitably leads us to undervalue grace or diminish the importance of our own good efforts. But what is grace, really? Grace is unmerited favor, whether it comes from God or someone else. Here is more on the New Testament understanding of grace:

The NT concept of grace is represented by χάρις (*charis*, "grace") and χαρίζομαι (*charizomai*, "to give graciously") terms that refer to the quality and practical application of a beneficent disposition toward someone. The theme of grace permeates the NT in a variety of ways. The word *charis* conveys the idea of a favorable disposition toward another—Mary is described as finding favor (*charis*) with God (Luke 1:30), Jesus grows up in the favor (*charis*) of both God and humans (Luke 2:52), and the early church finds favor (*charis*) with the people (Acts 2:47) and with God (Acts 4:33; 13:43). Grace (*charis*) can also refer to an act born out of grace, such as healing, the canceling of a debt, the release of a prisoner, or monetary and spiritual gifts. Paul also describes his calling to be a minister of the gospel as the grace of God (e.g., Rom 1:5; 1 Cor 3:10; Eph 3:7–8). Most importantly, grace is associated with the salvation of humanity through the life and death of Jesus, who is understood to embody the grace of God (e.g., John 1:14–16; Acts 15:11; Rom 5:15–17). For this reason, the gospel is described as the good news of God's grace (*charis*; Acts 20:24, 32), and Paul adapts the common Graeco-Roman letter opening from χαίρειν (*chairein*, "greetings") to χάρις (*charis*, "grace") in order to reflect the grace of God manifest through Christ (e.g., Rom 1:7; Col 1:2). In several of his letters, Paul emphasizes the unmerited nature of grace in order to proclaim that, due to the death of Jesus (understood as a free gift), God's redemption and promised salvation is now accessible through faith in Jesus, apart from following the customs of the Jewish law (e.g., Rom 11:5–6; Gal 2:19–21; Eph 2:8–9). In the NT, the salvation that is obtained through faith in Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's grace to all men (Titus 2:11).<sup>1</sup>

*"By grace, through faith" and good works?*

In the current Book of Discipline, the UMC holds that Scripture is "primary," "authoritative," and "decisive." And doesn't Paul write in Ephesians that we are saved by faith, not works? But then doesn't James ask sarcastically, "Can faith save you?" Paul seems to make it all about faith while James, Jesus' half-brother, seems to make it all about works. We wonder, which is it?

But, as in much Christian theology, we don't have to and, indeed, must not choose between them. The Christian faith is built on a series of "ANDs" not "ORs." God is three AND one. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. And so on. We fall into error when we feel like we have to *choose* one or the other. Coming to embrace the ANDs and not feeling forced to choose between false ORs is essential to grasping the biblical message.

So, how much of a part do we play in our own salvation? Are we like a drowning passenger who is tossed a life preserver and must grab the life preserver to be rescued? Or perhaps we merely have to hold out our hand to accept the salvation God offers us by his grace? Others would say that we are like the dead and it is up to God and God alone to bring us to new life. But, then, where does this leave our own free will? Does this mean that God drags people into salvation whether they want it or not?

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan W. Lo, "Grace," ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

Sometimes these different perspectives are expressed as the difference between *Calvinism*, after the teachings of John Calvin, and *Arminianism*, after the teachings of Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch theologian of the Reformation. In Calvinism, the attribute of God that is preserved above all else is God's sovereignty. In Arminianism, the attribute of God that is preserved above all else is God's love. Because love necessarily entails a free and willing heart (who wants to be "loved" by a robot), Arminians tend to emphasize the role of free will in salvation. Yet, how could there be any role for us to play in our own salvation – after all, as Paul wrote, our salvation is by God's grace and not our own efforts. How do we possibly make any real sense of this?

Roger Olson of Baylor Seminary is an Arminian theologian and offers the following illustration, which gets about as close to peering within this mystery as we are going to get. This is from his excellent and provocative book, *Questions to All Your Answers*, which I highly recommend.

Let me try out a homely illustration on you. Imagine that we humans are fallen into a deep pit (sin) with steep and slippery sides. We're helpless to free ourselves but must get free or we'll die. There are three Christian views of how we get out of the pit. The semi-Pelagian says God throws a rope down into the pit and says, "Grab the rope and start pulling yourself up and then I'll pull from up here and together we'll get you out." The Calvinist says God throws a rope down into the pit and comes down on the rope, ties it around some people (the elect), and carries them out without their help or cooperation. Once they get out of the pit he gives them mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and revives them. They do absolutely nothing.

The Arminian says God pours water into the pit and says, "Float!" All people have to do to get out of the pit is allow the water to do its work — lift them out of the pit. That means not resisting it by holding onto things at the bottom of the pit or struggling against the water. If people get out of the pit, the water did all the work. All they had to do is let it lift them up and out by relaxing and floating on it. That "relaxing" is a picture of admitting our need for God to do everything for us because we are helpless sinners. Yes, we have to make a decision. Yes, we have to do the "work" (which is not really work at all) of allowing God to save us. But the initiative and power are all from God.

Well, no doubt the analogy has its limits. All analogies do. But which is a more biblical picture of salvation as both gift and task? Grace is God's gift to us. Faith is our contribution, which is simply receiving and not resisting God's provision. Grace goes before (prevenient) and enables even our faith.

Salvation is both gift and task. Our re-birth into God's family is all about God's grace and his grace alone. We don't contribute to it or assist in any way. AND . . . it is our own willingness to entrust ourselves wholly and completely to our Savior (i.e., faith) that makes our rescue the beginning of a long journey toward true Christlikeness. Further, genuine faith in Christ must result in good works, or, as Paul put it, the "fruit of the Spirit."

Faith AND works. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ by virtue of God's saving grace, we are re-born. But we still have to be made into disciples, for what we do (our "works") is the embodiment of our faith. It isn't so much that the good works are an "ought," but that they are the *inevitable* outworking of genuine faith. Thus, the New Testament writers can speak of salvation as both gift *and* task, as instantaneous *and* as a process.

Jesus spent two and a half years or so with his disciples. Teaching them by way of parables and more. Enacting for them the arrival of God's kingdom. Showing them what it really means to live in God's way. Why? Why so much teaching and doing? Because Jesus was making them into disciples, genuine apprentices learning to be like the Master. They weren't to be just hearers of Jesus' words, but doers of them. And

before Jesus returned to the Father, he told them, in the Great Commission, that they were to go out and make still more disciples (Matthew 28:19). We are re-born into Christ, but we are made into disciples. Salvation encompasses acting like the people that God has already made us into. Gift and task. Faith and works. This is God's way.

## Daily Bible Readings

*More on faith and works*

**Monday, Genesis 12:1-9** God chose Abraham by God's grace.

**Tuesday, Romans 4** Abraham was made right with God by his faith.

**Wednesday, Matthew 26: 31-46** Those who spend eternity with God are those that fed the hungry, clothed the naked, etc.

**Thursday, Philippians 2:1-18** "Work out your own salvation," v. 12

**Friday, Ephesians 2:1-10** From death to life

**Saturday, Galatians 2:15-21** "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God."

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It is a great time to join us!

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Starting this week: *The Apostles' Creed: what we believe and why it matters*

Video of each week's class is posted here: [vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy](https://vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy)