

I. Introduction

- A. Welcome to Neighborhood. Today is worship together weekend, so let's show some love to all our students worshipping with us today.
- B. My talk today is part two of a series.
- C. The series is called MazeRunner: finding your way to peace in the parables of Jesus.
- D. The world is confusing. The philosophies of this age are a maze. They make people crazy. So God has told us how to escape the maze, and get un-crazy.
- E. Jesus told a bunch of mini-stories to show us the way. They're called parables. And all summer long, we're digging in.
- F. Today's parable is called The Parable of the Unjust Steward. A steward is a manager, so the unjust manager.
- G. It is the weirdest parable. It is the hardest parable. It is the coolest parable. Let's read it. It's short.

II. The Parable of the Unjust Steward

- A. *Jesus told this story to his disciples: "A rich man hired a manager to handle his affairs, but soon a rumor went around that the manager was [wasting his possessions]. So his employer called him in and said, 'What's this I hear about your stealing from me? Get your report in order, because you are going to be dismissed.'*
"The manager thought to himself, 'Now what? I'm through here, and I don't have the strength to go out and dig ditches, and I'm too proud to beg. I know just the thing! And then I'll have plenty of friends to take care of me when I leave!' "So he invited each person who owed money to his employer to come and discuss the situation.
He asked the first one, 'How much do you owe him?' The man replied, 'I owe him eight hundred gallons of olive oil.' So the manager told him, 'Tear up that bill and write another one for four hundred gallons.' "And how much do you owe my employer?' he asked the next man. 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' was the reply.
'Here,' the manager said, 'take your bill and replace it with one for only eight hundred bushels.' "The rich man had to admire the [unjust steward] for being so shrewd. And it is true that the citizens of this world are more shrewd than the godly are. (Luke 16:1-8)
- B. I told you it was weird.
- C. So let me give you two definitions and a parable of my own.

III. Definitions

- A. JUSTICE: Justice means getting what you deserve, what you have worked for, what is fair, and you have rights to.
 - 1. If what you deserve is good stuff, it's called remunerative justice — you're getting a paycheck for the work you have done.
 - 2. If what you deserve is bad stuff, it's called retributive justice — you're getting righteously punished for the bad stuff you've done.
- B. GRACE: Grace means getting good stuff you don't deserve and haven't earned, even though you deserve the opposite.
 - 1. And this is where I tell a parable of my own.

IV. The Parable of the Thousand Dollars

- A. Once upon a time there was an average man named Joe. Joe sat in his living room, eating pizza and watching football.
- B. One day, he saw a man come walking down the block. The man turned up his sidewalk, came walking to his front door, and rang the doorbell.
- C. Joe set down his pizza, paused the football game, and answered the door. There stood a man in T-shirt and shorts, flip-flops, sunglasses, and sunhat.
- D. "Can I help you?" said Joe.
- E. "No thanks," said the stranger. "I'm here to help you. I was walking down your block, and I decided to give you one thousand dollars. Here you go."
- F. The man held out a stack of hundred dollar bills, held together by a paper clip.
- G. Joe was cautious. "Why me?" said Joe.
- H. "Just because," said the man.
- I. "Is this drug money?"
- J. "No. Totally legit."
- K. "Did I win something? Inherit something?"
- L. "Nope," said the stranger. "Nothing like that at all. I'm just feeling generous, and want to give you a thousand dollars." He held out the money.
- M. Joe scratched his head, smiled, took it, thanked the stranger. "This is awesome! Can I give you a hug?" Joe gave him a big bear hug.
- N. The stranger walked away, and Joe went called his best friends, told them what happened.
- O. The next day, Joe sits eating his pizza, and watching his football, on his shiny, new ultra-high-def TV.
- P. He sees the same man, come walking down the street, turn up his sidewalk, come to his front door and ring the doorbell.
- Q. Joe sprints to the door and throws it open. He thinks the man is coming to get his money back. So he's mentally preparing a speech about how the money is gone and all that.
- R. The holds out a stack of money, and says, "I've decided to give you another thousand dollars. Here you go."
- S. Joe hand is shaking, his smile goes ear to ear, he takes the money, says thank you, and goes back to his TV.
 - 1. Day three, the same thing happens again. Another thousand dollars.
 - 2. Day four, Joe is already standing at the door, and he gets another thousand dollars.

3. By day five, he's out on the porch, looking down the block, waiting for the man to show up.

- T. Every day, for 30 days, the stranger hands Joe a thousand dollars. And every day, Joe is grateful beyond words, and can't thank the stranger enough for this undeserved blessing,
- U. On day 31, Joe is standing on his porch, he sees the stranger walking down the street, his heart leaps for joy, and he can't believe how something so awesome can be happening to him.
- V. He smiles and waves as the stranger approaches his walk.
- W. "Hi Joe!" The stranger smiles and waves back. Joe sees the pile of money in his hand.
- X. And he keeps on walking. He walks right past Joe's sidewalk. He goes to the next house, and turns up the sidewalk.
- Y. Joe can't believe it. His mind is screaming... that's my money!
- Z. Joe races down the stairs, runs across the lawn, gets in the stranger's way, and shouts in his face! "You crook! Give me my thousand dollars!"

1. The end.

V. The Meaning

- A. So here's the question: given our definitions, was the money an act of justice or of grace?
- B. Grace... because Joe didn't earn it, or do anything to deserve it. It was just a kindness on the part of the stranger. He sacrificed so Joe could be blessed.
- C. Pure grace.
- D. In fact, justice would be NOT giving Joe any money at all, because all he did all day was eat and watch TV.
 - 1. Justice — getting what you deserve.
 - 2. Grace — getting good stuff you don't deserve.
- E. By the way, be careful if you ask for justice. Especially with God. Because you might not want what you have coming.
- F. Now, back to the unjust steward.

VI. The Unjust Steward

- A. Let's go a little deeper by thinking through some questions.
- B. These are the characters in the story:
 - 1. The rich man.
 - 2. The steward (manager)
 - 3. The guys who owed the rich man money.
- C. Questions:
 - 1. Who's the bad guy in the story?
 - 2. Who's the hero of the story?
 - 3. Who loses the most in the story?
- D. I'm messing with you because these are hard questions. Everybody is the bad guy in one sense or another, and the one who loses the most is hard to figure.
- E. You want to know what makes this parable hard?
 - 1. It's only hard because your brain is normal. Most of you at least. 73.5% I figure.
 - 2. Here's what normal means... here's a profile.
 - a) Normal means you take full responsibility for your life.
 - b) Normal means you work hard and do your best.
 - c) Normal means you pay your bills, find a job, earn a living, and don't take anything from anybody without their permission.
 - d) Normal means you do not expect to live by the sweat of another person's brow. Everybody needs help once in a while, but it's not your normal.
 - e) Normal means when you work for a boss, you're honest. You keep honest books.
 - f) And normal means when you're a customer, you don't expect something for nothing. You pay for stuff you get because it's wrong to steal.
 - 3. Here's what I'm saying...
 - a) Normal people in everyday life treat each other with fairness and expect to be treated with fairness and we're mad when life isn't fair.
 - b) JUSTICE is the rule of life.
 - (1) I was waiting in line for a building permit back in my Chicago days. I stood in line for two hours, and somebody cut in line. I'm a good pastor, so what do you think I did? Right. I yelled at him. It's not fair.
 - (a) I can't get away with that in Redding, because I always get busted by somebody from our church.
 - (2) You play by the rules and only get a C. Another kid cheats and get an A. It's not fair. You get mad.
 - (3) You're on a sports team, or in a group at work or school... you do your part, because that's fair. But other people don't do their part, and it's just not right.
 - (a) Normal people look at the world through the lens of justice.
- F. And that is exactly why Jesus crafted this parable the way he did.

- G. Because...
 - 1. When it comes to God, justice is your enemy before justice becomes your friend.
- H. But we don't realize this. We humans are addicted to thinking God is just like us.
- I. So we go to God and expect him to be fair with us.
- J. And by fair, we mean that he should give us a thousand dollars every single day, or we'll get mad at him.
- K. You've been hypnotized by the world... and Jesus came to break the spell.
- L. So, the parable of the Unjust Steward... where Jesus takes your concept of justice, and twists it into a pretzel when it comes to thinking about God.
- M. Let's look at it again.

VII. The Parable

- A. *Jesus told this story to his disciples: "A rich man hired a manager to handle his affairs, but soon a rumor went around that the manager was [wasting his possessions]. (Luke 16:1)*
 - 1. There's something great in this word "wasting." If you back up one parable in the Bible, you'll find the famous parable of the prodigal son. That kid took his father's money, went off into a far country, and do you know what he did?
 - 2. He wasted his father's possession in out of bounds living.
 - 3. Exact same word.
 - 4. And since the theme of the prodigal son was grace, it just might be Luke's way of saying that topic of this parable is going to be grace too.
 - 5. A this guy wastes the goods that belong to his boss. If you're the Justice Police, you write your first ticket here.
 - 6. The boss hears about it.
- B. *So his employer called him in and said, 'What's this I hear about your stealing from me? Get your report in order, because you are going to be dismissed.' (Luke 16:2)*
 - 1. He's stealing from his boss, so there's Ticket number 2.
 - 2. This is justice. The steward gets what's coming to him. You're fired.
 - 3. It makes sense that the parable tells the steward to get his reports in order. There would be the accounting spreadsheets. The bookkeeping. This is what you have. This is what you owe. This is what you deserve.
 - 4. When you see an old movie, and it shows heaven, do you know what you almost always see? Bookkeepers. Sitting at desks. Doing all this math to see if people DESERVE heaven.
 - 5. Get your report in order. Balance the books right down to the penny. More justice here. Justice keeps the books.
 - 6. Justice keeps the books... remember that.
 - 7. And this boss is a boss of justice. Because with God, justice is your enemy before it becomes your friend. You're fired.
- C. *"The manager thought to himself, 'Now what? I'm through here, and I don't have the strength to go out and dig ditches, and I'm too proud to beg. I know just the thing! And then I'll have plenty of friends to take care of me when I leave!' (Luke 16:3, 4)*
 - 1. Ticket number three... this guy has a plan to get other people to take care of him. To get other people to pay his bills.
 - 2. You work, I'll rest. It's the opposite of what normal, healthy, self-respecting people do. It's the opposite of justice.
 - 3. What's his plan?
- D. *"So he invited each person who owed money to his employer to come and discuss the situation. He asked the first one, 'How much do you owe him?' The man replied, 'I owe him eight hundred gallons of olive oil.' So the manager told him, 'Tear up that bill and write another one for four hundred gallons.' "And how much do you owe my employer?' he asked the next man. 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' was the reply. 'Here,' the manager said, 'take your bill and replace it with one for only eight hundred bushels.' (Luke 16:5-7)*
 - 1. There's justice police tickets numbers 4 and 5. You can't just tear up a bill and write a new one. You can't just erase a debt like that. It isn't fair, right, or just.
 - 2. If you're a cop writing tickets for the violation of justice, you just filled your quota.
 - 3. Whatever is guiding this steward, it isn't justice. This isn't fair to his boss. This doesn't pay the debts. This doesn't make his boss whole. All it does is let bad guys get away with not paying their debts.
 - 4. You would expect the owner to be double angry.
 - 5. But that's only because your normal. And when Jesus tells a story, normal gets all twisted around.
- E. *"The rich man had to admire the dishonest rascal for being so shrewd. And it is true that the citizens of this world are more shrewd than the godly are. (Luke 16:8)*
 - 1. Well, you just didn't see that one coming. Not if you're normal.
 - 2. Ticket number six — the boss admires his manager for setting aside justice and forgiving the debt. Reminder, this isn't for normal life. This is for life with God.
 - 3. Ticket number seven — we just have to write one because we have the word unjust, and we want to be thorough.
 - 4. It's crazy right?
 - 5. Actually, it's crazy smart.
 - 6. The punchline blows me away...
- F. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.

1. I grew up religious. When I was young my mom and dad didn't go to church. I was brought to church by my Aunt, sweet Auntie Jean. She brought me to a little church called Grace Gospel Church.
 2. Fifty people maybe. We had a small building and met in the basement. Tile floors, green and gray squares. Metal folding chairs. Brick walls painted white. There was a stage. Everything smelled musty.
 3. Upstairs, we had one Sunday school room. We divided it with metal dividers holding fabric curtains.
 4. I learned about God, Jesus, the Bible. Most of what I needed to know, I learned when I was little.
 5. But I also had a lot of unlearning to do. I'm the one who saw God as a bookkeeper. I'm the one who couldn't get justice out of my mind. I'm the one who defined God as a scorekeeper, and I had to do enough good works so I could win heaven.
 6. I was a son of light — meaning a good religious person. And that is exactly who doesn't get this parable and never will.
 7. Because you have to shed all that.
 8. Do you know who gets Jesus best? People from the mission. People from rough backgrounds.
 9. Jesus was talking to religious people who couldn't get it through their thick skulls that God operates by grace not by justice.
 10. So when he said that last verse, you could interpret it this way:
 - a) When they finally get the gospel, Hell's Angels get it better than all you legalistic Sunday school kids.
 11. Religious people hate this parable.
 - a) That's why Jesus told it.
 - (1) That's what makes it fun.
- G. Let me bring it home.
1. The Owner represents the Father.
 - a) He starts with justice — you're fired... but delights in grace — he praises the unjust steward.
 - b) And notice, that there is justice in the end. The debts were written down... yes. But who paid the price for that? Who carried the cost?
 - c) The Owner did.
 - d) Justice never goes on vacation, and it never will. The price gets paid, but not by the one who ought to pay it. The price gets paid by the One who owns it all. It was a willing sacrifice, and thank God he doesn't just forgive our debts... they are paid in full.
 2. The Steward represents Jesus.
 - a) He basically dies — condemned by his Father, and punished by him.
 - b) He forgives those in debt.
 - c) Jesus hung out with crooks and sinners. He broke the sabbath traditions. He was not respected by polite society. He refused to cave in to religious demands. And he died a criminals death.
 - d) If I were giving this character a title, it wouldn't be the unjust steward, it would be the non-just steward. Because justice isn't ignored — the cost is accepted by the Father and paid by the Son on behalf of the debtors. So there is a balancing of the scales. Do you get that? There is justice in the end.
 - e) But the justice is surrounded by grace, and the justice makes the grace legitimate and real.
 - (1) God's justice is your enemy before it becomes your friend... and it only becomes your friend because of Jesus, crucified and risen again.
 - f) All life long, God has been calling you to switch...
 - (1) from legalism to grace,
 - (2) from thinking God owes you something good to confessing the only thing he owes you is condemnation.
 - (a) You can't treat God like you treat everyone else. He's in a different class. Fair doesn't apply.
 - (b) If you said, God, give me what's fair... and he did... we'd all be falling into the bottomless pit right now.
 3. The Debtors represent you.
 - a) You owe a debt you cannot pay.
 - b) Some of you will one day be far away from this town and our church. You will not hear me preach years from now.
 - (1) If there is one truth I can get across to you is this:
 - (a) God always treats you on a principle of grace, but it's grace with justice at its core.
 - i) *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)*

VIII. Call to Action

- A. JUSTICE: If you're on a team (sports, family, work, school), work hard and pull your weight, because that's what normal people do.
- B. GRACE: Instead of dwelling on how others have it better, tell God thank you for whatever grace you have received.
 1. Instead of You crook, where's my thousand dollars...
 2. Thank you so much for the 30 days of grace... or however you measure it. It's always more than you deserve.
 3. Let's all be thankful we don't have to deal with a JUST steward.