Gratitude Killers: *When Grace Feels Unfair* (Matthew 20:1–16)
November 8, 2026 / P. Theresa Rosario
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Introduction

Good Morning, church family! In our previous message, we were reminded that remembering God's grace produces a heart of gratitude—and that gratitude should overflow into extravagant worship. When we remember where God found us, how He forgave us, and what Jesus did to bring us near, worship becomes personal. We're remembering the mercy that met us when we could not rescue ourselves. We're remembering that Jesus gave His life for us.

And when that grace becomes fresh in our hearts, our response to God becomes generous. We bring Him our praise, our attention, our obedience, our entire lives. But here's the question I want us to wrestle with today:

If remembering grace awakens gratitude, what causes us to lose sight of that grace?

How can we worship God with a grateful heart on Sunday and find ourselves keeping score with Him by Tuesday?

With the holidays approaching, let me give you an example. How many of you have ever played the white elephant gift-exchange game? *[Pause for response.]* You know how it goes. Depending on your the rules, you either open a gift or steal the gift somebody else opened up.

And you learn things about people during this game! That quiet person who hasn't said much all evening? Suddenly, they have a strategy. *[Smile.]* Imagine you open your gift, and it's a beautiful mug with a bag of good coffee. You're happy! You're already picturing yourself sitting down the next morning, drinking that coffee. You're thinking, "This is perfect. I actually got something I'll use!"

Then the next person opens their gift. It's a hundred-dollar gift card. And yes, they clearly did not follow the twenty-five-dollar limit.

But suddenly you look down at your mug. Five seconds ago, it was beautiful. Now it's just a cup. The coffee hasn't changed. The mug hasn't

cracked. Nobody has taken anything away from you. But your joy has changed.

Have you ever been perfectly happy with something until you saw what somebody else had?

Perfectly happy with your home; until you visited friends home. How about being grateful for your opportunity; until someone else received a bigger one. Excited about what God was doing in your life; until you heard what He was doing in somebody else's.

Now, the gift-exchange game is meant to be fun. But what happens around that circle can reveal something that happens in our hearts. Sometimes we stop enjoying what we've received because we're studying what somebody else got.Can I get an Amen?!

And if we're not careful, that comparison follows us into our relationship with God. "Lord, I was thankful. But now I have questions." "Why them?" "Why so much?" "What about me?"

Today, we're going to allow Holy Spirt to examine our hearts for two gratitude killers: comparison and entitlement. And we're going to let Jesus show us how they work—and how His goodness breaks us free from them. As we begin, let's resist the temptation to think about who else needs this message. This message is not for your spouse, your kids, your friend.. say this message is FOR ME!

The Setting — What Will We Get

Turn with me to Matthew 20. Before we read the parable, we need to understand the conversation that leads into it. In Matthew 19, a wealthy young man walks away sorrowful after Jesus calls him to surrender his possessions and follow Him. Jesus then speaks to His disciples about wealth and entering the kingdom of God. Peter responds by pointing out that they have left everything to follow Jesus. He asks what they will receive.

Jesus does not dismiss their sacrifice. He promises that following Him matters and that God will reward His people. Then He gives a warning: many who are **first will be last, and the last first**. And that leads directly

into this parable. So Jesus is speaking to disciples who have sacrificed. People who have said yes. People who have been following Him. He is NOT talking to the unbeliever, but the believer! That matters because we can love Jesus, serve faithfully, and still need Him to address the way we think about what we deserve.

The Parable of the Vineyard Workers (Matthew 20: 1-16)

"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" (Matthew 20:1-10 NLT).

Let's walk through what happens. The landowner goes out early in the morning and hires workers for his vineyard. They agree to work for a denarius. He goes out again throughout the day, hiring more workers. He promises the next group that he will pay what is right. Then, very late in the day, he finds another group still standing there. When he asks why they aren't working, they explain that no one has hired them.

Notice: Jesus does not tell us that these workers are lazy. We should not assume or add that to the story. They just haven't been hired. The landowner sends them into the vineyard too. When evening comes, he has the workers paid, beginning with those hired last. And those who worked only a short time receive a full denarius. Now imagine the first workers watching. They see what the last workers received, and they begin calculating.

"If that's what they got, imagine what we're about to get!" But when their turn comes, they receive the amount they agreed to. And they begin to grumble. The landowner has kept his word. Yet they are upset because he has also been generous to somebody else. Here is the question that runs through this message:

Can I celebrate God's goodness toward someone else without questioning His goodness toward me?

1. Comparison Makes Me Forget What I Have Received

Look again at verse 10. The first workers see (comparison) what the last workers receive, and they expect more (entitlement). Their expectation changes when they look at someone else's payment. Earlier that morning, they had agreed to the wage. But by evening, the amount that had been acceptable to them now feels insufficient. What changed? They saw what somebody else received. Church, we may recognize ourselves here in this story. Be honest with yourself, if that happened to you how would you have reacted? Maybe it has happened to you.

You've been grateful that God opened a door for you. Then someone else gets an opportunity you would have loved. You've been thanking God for progress in your family. Then another family shares a testimony, and suddenly your progress feels small.

Here's a good one: You've been serving with joy. Then somebody else gets thanked publicly, and now you're replaying all the times nobody mentioned your name.

The opportunity you were given is still there. The progress is still real. The service still mattered. But comparison has redirected your attention. If we

focus in the wrong direction long enough, it can turn to envy! Proverbs 14:30 warns us,

"A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones" (Proverbs 14:30).

What blessing have I stopped appreciating because I'm looking at somebody else's blessing?

Now, don't get me wrong, there are healthy ways to learn from people. We can admire someone's faithfulness. We can be encouraged by their example. But comparison becomes destructive when their good becomes a reason for my envy, jealousy and resentment.

Instead of resenting what someone else has received, we can thank God for His goodness toward them. You can pray: "Lord, I'm struggling with jealousy. Help me love this person. Help me thank You for what You've done in their life."

That is an honest place to begin. This week, when you feel comparison rising, stop and ask:

What am I overlooking in my own life? And what can I sincerely thank God for in theirs?

Let's continue reading in the story at verse 11,

"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 20:11-12 NLT).

2. Entitlement Turns My Service Into a Bill

Now look at Matthew 20:11–12. The workers begin describing the difference between their labor and the labor of those hired last. They worked longer. They endured the heat. Those differences are real. Jesus does not pretend they all had the same experience. But the landowner has paid them what he promised (a days worth of wages). Their complaint is that his generosity has made the others equal to them in payment.

They believe their greater labor gives them the right to more than the agreed amount. Now this is where comparison does not lead to envy but gives way for the spirit of entitlement.

Comparison says, “Look at what they received.” Entitlement says, “Then you owe me more.” And if we bring that attitude into our relationship with God, our obedience can become a kind of invoice. “Lord, I’ve served.” “I’ve given.” “I’ve stayed faithful.” “I’ve tried to raise my children to know You.” “So why is this happening?”

Let me clarify: asking God “why” is not automatically entitlement. The Bible gives us prayers of lament. God invites us to bring our pain, confusion, and disappointment to Him. A grieving person does not need to be scolded into gratitude. But there is a heart posture we need to examine:

Have I begun to believe that my faithfulness obligates God to give me the life I planned and all that I desire?

Have my years of serving God become a reason I believe He owes me something?

Let me give you a picture. Imagine a grown child brings their mother breakfast on Mother’s Day. They cook. They wash the dishes. They clean the kitchen. The mother is touched. Then, before leaving, the child puts an invoice on the counter. Breakfast preparation: twenty dollars. Dishes: fifteen dollars. Kitchen cleanup: twenty-five dollars. Suddenly, the meaning of the morning changes. We went from unconditional sacrificial love to a transactional love. Trust me brothers and sisters, Christ crucified on the cross was 100% sacrificial love NOT transactional!

Now, paid work deserves fair payment. That is not the issue in this illustration. The issue is what happens when a relationship is governed by hidden charges. And sometimes we discover that we have attached hidden charges to our obedience. “I’ll serve You, Lord—but You need to protect my comfort.” “I’ll give—but I expect You to give me more financially.” “I’ll obey—but I expect You to answer this prayer on my timeline.”

We may never say those words aloud. But disappointment can reveal the agreement we assumed God had signed. Church, God is faithful to His promises. AMEN?

But we need to distinguish His promises from our expectations. Jesus does not promise that obedience will eliminate suffering. He calls His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him. At the same time, He assures us that our Father sees us and that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Your faithfulness matters. Your unseen service matters. The question is whether you can entrust its outcome and reward to Him. Ephesians 2:8–10 helps us put things in their proper order. We are saved by grace through faith. Salvation is God's gift, giving us no basis for boasting. And having been made new in Christ, we are created for good works. Grace comes first. Our obedience grows out of the life He has given us.

The workers' complaint invites us to examine what we are seeking in our relationship with God:

Do I desire the Father Himself, or have I become consumed with what I want Him to give me?

That question brings us back to worship. Because worship shaped by gratitude can say: "Father, I still have requests. I still have questions. But I remember Your mercy. You withheld the punishment I deserved. Therefore, I am not entitled to anything. Instead, I belong to You, and You are worthy of my life."

Let's finish up the story to see what the landowner's response is,

"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'" (Matthew 20:13-15 NLT)?

3. Resentment Questions the Goodness That Gratitude Remembers

In Matthew 20:13–15, the landowner responds. He reminds the worker that he has honored the agreement. He explains that he has chosen to give generously to the last worker.

Then he exposes the heart issues. The worker's envy in response to his generosity. The workers are evaluating the landowner's goodness through

the lens of comparison. Instead of through the lens, HOW GREAT IS OUR GOD! Because he has been good to someone else, they are treating him as though he has wronged them in some way.

Have I mistaken God's generosity toward someone else as neglect towards me?

This can be an especially sensitive topic when we are waiting. Someone shares an answer to prayer while you are still praying. Someone celebrates reconciliation while your relationship remains strained. Someone tells a story of provision while you are trying to figure out how to pay the next bill. Those moments can hurt. You can be sincerely glad for someone and still feel the pain of your own need.

God does not require you to deny that pain. But in that pain, we need His help to resist a conclusive thought: **"Because they have received what I'm asking for, God must care less about me."**

Their testimony cannot tell you everything about God's purposes in your life. We do not know why every answer comes when it does. And this parable does not promise that everyone will receive the same earthly circumstances.

This parable challenges us to trust God's goodness rather than judge it by our comparisons. The landowner has kept his word to the first workers. His generosity toward the last workers has not made him unfaithful to the first.

This parable expose the danger within. We can keep serving while resentment grows in our hearts. Jesus' question in verse 15 exposes that danger: are we envious because God is generous? Let's bring that attitude honestly before Him.

Am I grateful for mercy when I need it, but uncomfortable when God extends it to somebody else?

These questions require us to cry out to the Lord as the Psalmist did in Psalm 139:23-24,

"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting Life"(Psalm 139: 23-24 NLT).

But remember where we began: remembering grace produces gratitude. When I remember my own need for mercy, it changes how I see someone else receiving it.

I did not rescue myself. I did not forgive my own sin. Jesus gave His life for sinners, and I am one of the people who needs that grace. Remember Christ died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8).

That is where we look when our circumstances leave us with unanswered questions. We look to Jesus. We remember the cross. Our gratitude has a foundation deeper than whether today went according to plan.

Therefore our Response should be Remember Release and Rejoice

Let's go back to that gift exchange. Remember the mug? Nothing happened to it when the other person opened the gift card. But your attention moved. And sometimes our hearts need to turn back and see what we have stopped noticing. First, ***REMEMBER*** the grace you have received. 1 Corinthians 4:7 challenges our boasting by making it clear that everything we are and everything we have comes from the Lord.

"For what gives you the right to make such a judgment? what do you have that God hasn't given you? And if everything you have is from God, why boast as though it were not a gift" (1 Corinthians 4:7 NLT)?

Think about the mercy of God toward you. Think about the people He has used to help you. Think about the ways He has sustained your faith. You do not need to invent a testimony or pretend everything is resolved. Remember what is true. Second, ***RELEASE*** the scorecard. Name the expectation you have been holding over God. Name the resentment you have been carrying toward another person.

Bring it honestly to Him. You can still pray for provision. You can still ask for healing. You can still desire reconciliation.

Releasing entitlement means entrusting those requests to the Father without treating your obedience as payment that puts Him in your debt.

Third, ***REJOICE*** in someone else's good. Pray for the person you have been comparing yourself with. Thank God for something specific He has done in their life.

Send the sincere congratulations. And as we approach the holidays, let's pay attention to what we carry into the room. We may gather around tables with people whose lives look very different from ours.

Different opportunities. Different resources. Different circumstances. We can enter those rooms already preparing to compare. Or we can ask God to help us see people to love and gifts to appreciate.

What would change in your home this holiday season if you spent less time measuring and more time giving thanks? (TESTIMONY: COUNTING GIFTS)

Jesus ends the vineyard parable with the reversal of the first and the last. Our calculations do not determine our standing in His kingdom. Today, we need to consider our response. Will we keep rehearsing what we think we are owed? Or will we bring those thoughts to God and receive His correction, contentment, and peace?

Will we keep measuring His love by somebody else's portion? Or will we remember the love He has already shown us in Jesus? That brings us back to extravagant worship. When we remember grace, we have reason to give ourselves freely to God. We can sing with sincerity. We can serve with love. We can obey with trust. We can celebrate His generosity toward others. And even while we wait, we can give thanks for the Savior who has made paid a great price to make us His special possession.

Closing Prayer
Would you bow your heads with me? Before we pray, let these questions sit before the Lord:

What blessing have I stopped noticing?

Where have I turned obedience into a transaction?

Whose blessing have I struggled to celebrate?

Father, thank You for Your patience with us. You see the comparison we hide. You know the disappointments we struggle to explain. You know where gratitude has given way to envy and resentment. We confess the

times we have treated another person's blessing as evidence that You have forgotten us. Forgive us for keeping score with You. Forgive us for believing that our service makes us more deserving of Your grace than someone else.

Help us remember what You have done for us through Jesus. For those who are grieving or waiting, meet them with Your comfort. Help them bring their pain honestly to You and trust Your love in what they do not understand. Teach us to celebrate Your goodness in another person's life. Restore joy to our service and sincerity to our worship.

And for anyone who has been far from You, draw them to repentance and faith in Jesus. Help them receive the salvation they could never earn. Father, make us a grateful people. As we remember Your grace, let our gratitude overflow into generous, wholehearted worship. We give You our attention, our obedience, and our lives. In Jesus' name, amen.

Ohana Group Discussion

1. Have you ever been perfectly happy with something until you saw what somebody else had?

2. What blessing have I stopped appreciating because I'm looking at somebody else's?

3. Have I begun to believe that my faithfulness obligates God to give me the life I planned?

4. Can I celebrate God's goodness toward someone else without questioning His goodness toward me?

5. What would change in your home this holiday season if you spent less time measuring and more time giving thanks?