Since football season is over until next fall, I thought I would start with one last football illustration for those who may be going through withdrawal. Tom Brady is the quarterback of the New England Patriots football team. Last month some videos came out called "Tom vs. Time". In the first one Brady says, "If you're going to compete against me, you better be willing to give up your life, because I'm giving up mine." Tom Brady sacrifices all to win football games. Football is first in his life.

God asks every follower of Jesus to sacrifice for Him in this life.

- Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)
- Jesus also said, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." (Luke 9:24)
- The Bible calls us to be a living sacrifice, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." (Romans 12:1)
- Following Jesus is going to bring opposition, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12)
- It also can bring death and hate, "You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me." (Matthew 24:9)
- Another kind of sacrifice in Matthew 5:44, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44)

The common element about sacrifices is that you must give up something you enjoy, like, or prefer for a higher purpose. Sacrifices take ... well sacrifice! Whether that is time, talent or treasure there is ALWAYS a loss of something good when we sacrifice! The problem is that sacrificing for something can become discouraging, overwhelming and frustrating. Today we want to look at how God encourages us when we sacrifice for Jesus. We will actually look at two different parables.

(Mark 8:34; Luke 9:24; Romans 12:1; 2 Timothy 3:12; Matthew 24:9; 5:44)

PROPPOSITION: God is a debtor to no one – He richly repays what is done for Him and also richly showers us with His grace which is far beyond anything we might "deserve".

I. God gives us what we don’t deserve (grace)

The first parable is in Matthew 20:1-16.
A. God always pays what people are due

**READ v 1-2.** The first thing we see in this parable is that God always pays people what they are due. The scene was a common one back in those days. If someone did not have a regular job, they would go to the marketplace early in the morning and offer to work for the day. Employers who needed more help that day would come and hire the ones they wanted. This landowner went to get some extra workers for his vineyard. They would agree on a price – one denarius for the day. This was a very fair wage at that time. In v 10 we find that they were indeed paid the full denarius – no cheating, cutting corners or deception. Normally these workers would be very grateful someone hired them and then paid them a fair wage. Since the landowner represents God – God is always fair and doesn’t cheat anyone.

B. God gives all an opportunity

**Matt 20:3-7**

But then we find that the landowner goes back to the marketplace several more times that day. **READ Matt 20:3-7.** These workers were not hired in the morning. We aren’t told why – maybe they didn’t get up as early, maybe they didn’t look strong, maybe there was prejudice against them or maybe there simply wasn’t enough paid work for all of them. Whatever the case they wanted to work – in fact they even stayed until near closing time hoping for something. **READ v 7.** You can imagine how excited they were to get some work that day – no money, no food back then. So this landowner is being very gracious just giving these later workers a chance to earn something. There is no “negotiating” here for a wage, because they are just glad to get something, instead of nothing! God is giving all of them a chance to work.

C. God regularly gives us what we don’t deserve

**Matt 20:8-9**

It is at this point that the story takes a major turn. **READ v 8-9.** Let’s put this in time perspective. Those who were first hired worked about 12 hours – from 6 am to 6 pm. Those hired at 9 am (**the 3rd hour in some of your translations**) worked 9 hours. Those hired at noon (**the 6th hour**) worked 6 hours and those hired at 3 pm (**the 9th hour**) worked 3 hours – so those who were hired at 5 pm (**the 11th hour**) worked only 1 hour. So when those who had only worked one hour got a denarius - $180 at $15 an hour. You can imagine the shock and delight they felt. This was totally undeserved. God regularly gives us what we do not deserve – that is grace. We love getting free gifts if they are things that help us, save us money or make our lives more enjoyable. Because of our sin, none of us deserve heaven nor can we earn our way to heaven – but it is a gift from God that has been paid for by Jesus’ death on the cross for us. So not only is God fair – giving us the pay due us, but He is also gracious – giving us a chance and He gives us what we don’t deserve.

D. People wrongly think they deserve grace/gifts

**Matt 20:10-15**

So you can imagine what the other workers, who worked longer, are thinking – “**Wow how much am I going to get.**” Then we **READ v 10.** Those who worked 12 hours got the same denarius - $180. At this point, we the listener if we are actually picturing this, will not be on the side of the landowner – but sympathetic with the early workers.
How come those who worked 12 hours didn’t get any more than those who worked one hour? This does not model fair labor laws or a prime rule of economics: the more work, the more pay. In fact this employer seems a bit eccentric and even irrational.

**READ v 11-12.** How is this fair? We did most of the work, but those who only worked one hour got the same amount as we did. Please understand Jesus wants us to feel this tension. Those in the crowd would have definitely sympathized with those who diligently got up early, presented themselves well so they were hired and then worked hard all day. In many ways God’s grace is scandalous. If someone who has done far more sins than you comes to genuine repentance and faith in Jesus alone—how is that fair that they will also be in heaven. I don’t care who you are or how strong a Christian you are—there is some awful person in this world, that if they should turn to Jesus alone for salvation, you will personally struggle with the fairness of them going to heaven.

Some of you have heard of a man named Ben Shapiro age 33—he is called the blunt spokesman for a new generation of political conservatives. Politics is not the focus of this illustration. Grace is. Shapiro is an orthodox Jew. After answering why he stayed religious when many of his siblings didn’t, he was asked, *“Christianity believes in similar moral rules. Why Judaism?”* His answer was fascinating and open in a way people usually are not. “I believe all the claims in the Old Testament (our Jewish Bible) are reiterated in the Christian New Testament as opposed to being fundamentally changed. But my own view of Jesus, as is Judaism’s, is that God does not take human form. My business partner is an evangelical pastor, but it makes more sense to me that you take responsibility for your own sins, as opposed to Jesus dying for your sins. In Judaism, you’re constantly atoning for your own sins. I’m works based; Christianity is largely grace-based.” I want to be able to work for it. We don’t struggle with God’s injustice (although that’s what we claim) but we struggle with His generosity.

**READ v 13-15.** There is nothing unfair about grace. They received the agreed upon amount. He calls them “friend” in v 13. When it comes to God, no one receives less than they deserve but some receive far more. God’s generosity transcends human conceptions of fairness.

Notice how much this has to do with actually experiencing encouragement. God gave encouragement to EVERYONE of those workers. They were all glad when they were first given the job. And at pay time, no one was underpaid, which by the way is very common around the world. Our Indian brothers & sisters who are day laborers often face the situation where they are promised 100 rupees to work for the day, but at pay time are only given 80 or 85 rupees. When they say, “But you promised 100 rupees,” they are told, “Do you want work or not—there are 100 other people who are waiting to take your job.” God’s common grace comes to all and His special grace comes to believers—but our own attitude can turn encouragement to discouragement.
E. Letting God’s grace encourage us

So our challenge is: “how can we better let God’s grace – God’s freely given gifts – encourage us? How can we regularly live in the warmth of God’s grace?”

First, it is important to distinguish between what is earned and what is a gift – then NOT expect gifts! Gifts are NEVER earned. Back in the ‘80’s (I know some of you weren’t born yet), a person came up to me all upset about how unfair their employer was. So I asked, “What happened.” They stopped giving us a turkey at Thanksgiving. “Was that something you earned by working extra hours?” No, it was a gift all employees got. “How many years have you gotten it?” 20, can you believe they had the nerve to stop it? “So you don’t want anyone to give you a gift unless they can do it forever. You are not going to get many gifts that way.” Gifts are gifts – they aren’t deserved, but freely given. Wages are deserved. Life gets really frustrating and discouraging when we start thinking we deserve a gift or favor or mercy or grace. My eyes were so opened that day to the faulty logic behind our complaints about gifts, that I was determined never to complain when gifts stopped – to this church, to my family or to God’s work. Don’t think I don’t complain about things, but in this one area I was set free and I have to say it has brought me a lot of encouragement. When a faithful giver to the church moves away, but continues supporting us for a while then writes, “I’m sorry but I am unable to keep giving to you,” I share a most positive note with them about how fortunate we have been these many years to receive those gifts and it was incredibly generous to continue them so long – that cancels out my discouragement about what we will probably not be able to do any longer.

Second, don’t compare yourself to others in terms of what God has gifted them with. When I came out here it seemed that every pastor or pastor’s wife was musically gifted. Neither Leisa nor I can play a musical instrument really well or sing parts simply from written notes. If you have been around me long you know I can think deeply about things, but I can’t remember people’s names. Lord why? Analytically Jesus says to me, “So Neal you expected to be good at everything anyone else is good at. That would be God. All humans are good at some things and weak in many others. Why do you think you should be the exception?” Because it would make my life easier! When you are discouraged, check to see if there is any comparison with others that is a part of it. Then confess that you are really mad about the generosity of God to others. Then you can be grateful for God choosing you, giving you opportunities to work, providing blessings in your life and giving you far more than you have earned or deserved. Live in gratefulness rather than grumbling!

II. God gives us more than we deserve (rewards)

But if everyone is going to get the same whether they work one hour or twelve hours for Jesus, why shouldn’t I just enjoy myself now and just do a little. “Why should I sacrifice and work hard for the Lord when I’ll get the same by sleeping in & occasionally helping out.” Turn to our second parable in Matthew 25 – because you won’t get the same.
A. Each Christian given different giftedness  
**READ v 14-15.** So here we see the way God works today is compared to an owner who entrusts His assets to his employees while he is gone. Notice each one is given different amounts. This refers to our *God-given giftedness – natural gifts, spiritual gifts and situations in life.* Natural abilities are given to us at conception – like being artistic, crafty, or athletic (*I didn’t get any of those*). Spiritual gifts are where God empowers us spiritually in an area beyond our natural abilities (like faith, serving and giving). Situations in life are things each of us go through that brings positives into our lives which we didn’t do anything for – like being born in America or having loving parents. These are all gifts because they are not earned – although we have to use our efforts to enhance and use them. Each of us is gifted differently. We are not suppose to have the same as everyone else. We can look at our problems or lacks in life OR we can use our giftedness.

B. Each Christian to use their giftedness for God  
**Matt 25:16-18.** So what are we to do with this giftedness? **READ v 16-18.** We are to use our giftedness to advance God’s work in this world – just like the employees are using their gifts to increase the boss’s work. We are to take what God has given us and make the best use we can of what we have been given.

- That means, it is not other peoples’ job to create something so I can feel like I’m using my gifts more & feel better about myself. Gifts are abilities or resources God has given us to do HIS WORK.
- It is not God’s job to give us different gifts but to use the ones we have. Therefore complaining, grumbling or wishing we had different gifts or situations in life will never lead to encouragement.
- Finally it is a disaster if we compare our gifts to others because we will either feel bad for what we don’t have or superior because of what we do have. Both undermine God’s work.

C. Each Christian will receive rewards for their efforts  
**Matt 25:19-23; Lk 19:15-19**

Notice the encouragement Jesus gives us here. **READ v 19-23.** The sacrifices we make here on earth are considered small compared to the rewards we will get in the future after Jesus returns. Rewards are over and above grace and reflect the time, treasure and talent we gave for Jesus. I included Luke 19:15-19 because it tells us a bit more about these rewards. There it is not speaking about our giftedness that is different from each other but those things that God has equally given every Christian like 24 hours in a day which we can use for God’s glory. Rewards and grace go together. There will be aspects of the millennium and new heavens and new earth that will be the same for all and there will aspects that will be very different. There is nothing you sacrifice now for God’s work – little or big – that God is not going to reward in the future. As you can see these rewards are far beyond anything “we earn”.

D. Serving Jesus is just as important as coming to Him.

**Matt 25:24-30**
On the flip side, not using our giftedness for God's work is a huge waste in life. Using all our time, effort and finances for ourselves & our family is the wrong way to live a worthwhile life. Don't let fear keep you from serving Jesus, giving to Jesus or publicly standing for Jesus. In fact, when v 30 talks about throwing the worthless servant out into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth is telling us that serving the Lord is just as important to God as coming to initial faith in Him for forgiveness.

E. Letting future rewards encourage us

So let Jesus' picture of future rewards encourage you in your daily life. Were you frustrated with having to clean the house for the 4th time in a day, but then worked heartily for the Lord rather than people – you not only honored God & were more encouraged but God is going to reward that in heaven. Do you regularly sacrifice your Sunday mornings for the Lord? That will result in more in the millennium. God is a debtor to no one. Rewards are very real for believers in the future. True faithfulness serves something for God with what we were entrusted with. God doesn’t expect you to evangelize like Billy Graham because you were not gifted as Billy Graham. To whom much is given, much is required. Your simple witness at work is just as valuable as thousands coming forward at the old Billy Graham crusades. Your encouraging another person spiritually is just as valuable as the results of the book of a gifted Christian writer. The one given 2 bags of gold was not expected to get as much as the one entrusted with 5 bags of gold. Rejoice that you aren’t famous or have a long list of accomplishments IF you are simply diligently serving & witnessing for Jesus where you are. I’m going to give you a bigger picture of one way we will experience God’s rewards next week when we look at the millennium. But let me leave you with this final illustration.

In the 1980s & 90s a debate raged in the American evangelical church in what was called the “Lordship Controversy.” One side said that salvation is by grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone, so a mere verbal profession of faith at some point in one’s life was enough to assure salvation. [Kind of like the Catholics saying a person is going to heaven because they were baptized as a baby when they grew up to be antagonistic against God]. The other side (the lordship side, which is my side by the way) held to the traditional Protestant position that salvation is indeed by grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone, but such faith is never alone—true faith ALWAYS produces fruit. Faith loves. Faith works. Faith obeys. So if no fruit comes out of a person’s life there is no assurance of salvation. Jesus must be both Lord and Savior.

Well in seminaries and Bible schools the lordship side won the debate – it simply is more Biblical. However, outside of Christian academia – in common books and statements – the lordship side temporarily lost. So many Americans were given a “cheap grace” version of the gospel. As long as you said a prayer, raised your hand, came forward at a meeting, the deal was sealed regardless of what you did or didn’t do in the future. That is no different than the Jews of Jesus’ day saying your circumcision
as a baby was enough to guarantee salvation. And the younger generation looked at that and said, “If that is Christianity, I’m not interested in doing church any more”. They didn’t see real transformation happening in people – but simply a quest to be happy which they found other things bringing them more happiness. They didn’t see God do what only God could do – but simply a call to try a little harder in life. They didn’t see a courageous, bold witness – but simply a vague call to be nice. God’s grace – that is His freely given gifts – can always lead to encouragement and greater sacrifice for the Lord’s service IF we don’t compare ourselves to others OR think we deserve those gifts because of our service. BUT we do want to see our sacrificial service as something that will be rewarded in the future. This is built on grace and gives us far more than we could earn. Jesus was the one who most encouraged us about rewards so we dare not ignore them. Rewards naturally encourage us – let God’s promised rewards also encourage you personally in your service, work and sacrifices for the Lord. Let’s keep overcoming in the power of Jesus.