

Your God is too nice: Matthew 20:1-16

by [Gracia Grindal](#) in the [August 28, 2002](#) issue

Jesus understood his listeners well. This parable, with its setting in the vineyard, describes the life of most of the people who were listening to him. Its emotions are primary—wanting a fair wage for a fair day’s work. When I was a kid growing up in the Willamette Valley, teenagers and migrant laborers would go out into the strawberry fields every June to help with the harvest. We would rise at 4:30 a.m., pack lunches, sleepily wait for trucks or old school buses to drive us out to the fields, then spend eight hours gathering quarts of ripe strawberries in the baking sun. We got from 26 to 35 cents a carrier, which was 12 pints.

No matter how big or small the strawberries, I would never pick more than ten carriers, partly because I much preferred talking to picking. When I arrived home with my three dollars, my mother would cry, “How can you be so slow? Becky [my classmate and fellow Luther Leaguer] picked \$12.00 worth!” I was an embarrassment to her at Ladies Aide, where mothers compared the occupational fitness of their children. My mother knew that in the ways of the world, the first would be first and the last would be last, period. While I wouldn’t have minded getting Becky’s pay, she would have hated getting mine. It wouldn’t have been fair!

That is the moral world that Jesus challenges. He uses these assumptions to introduce a new kingdom, one that is drastically different from the kingdom of this world. It is his final question, however, that stumps us: Is not God free? (Matt. 20:15). Abstractly, since we are not the pickers, we might agree that God’s move here is more than fair—God gives us all the same thing, not what we deserve, or what we’ve worked for. God is being merciful, not fair, and this is what mercy looks like. God is truly love, and wills that all may be saved.

But how does God’s freedom work? God’s freedom is part of the hidden nature, or mystery, of God—something that we don’t hear much about today. We’ve domesticated God down to the point of genial predictability, a power that wouldn’t do anything a nice person like me wouldn’t do. When something bad happens, and people actually come to us to hear a word from God, we try valiantly to excuse God from any culpability, assuring our people that God feels bad right along with us.

The Sunday after September 11, 2001, people filled the churches of the country to hear where God was in the tragedy. Most received foreign-policy advice instead. Pastors assured the parishioners that God didn't do any of this and was wringing his hands on the sidelines, and feeling bad for us, like a maiden aunt with the vapors. Then the same pastors suggested that we know what caused the attack and why we deserved it: either we, as a country, had failed to rid the world of poverty or, on the other side of the political ledger, we had tolerated lax moral standards.

I wondered what President Lincoln would have said. His well-known cynicism about preaching would have been a worthy antidote to these palavering attempts to justify the ways of God to humanity. The bland assurance that God's will was the same as the political cause espoused by a preacher did not go down with him. Bring back J. B. Phillips's *Your God Is Too Small*, or maybe a revision: *Your God Is Too Nice*!

Recently, I heard a preacher loudly declaiming Jonathan Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." His intention was to make fun of Edwards and his picture of God as both supremely angry and merciful. But Edwards came off better than the contemporary preacher. There was urgency in Edwards and a grandeur that gave us listeners pause. In Edwards's declaiming, the congregation glimpsed a preacher whom they longed to hear again. Although the language might have seemed strange to them, they didn't laugh. I sat there wishing, as they must have, for Edwards to return.

Over the summer, I've been teaching and reading the prophet Habakkuk, whose wisdom seems to be what Jesus is driving at here. God's ways are not ours. God can use the Chaldeans for his purposes, or not. The tyrants will get their own medicine sooner or later, and the grandeur of God is far beyond us, with dark and light aspects we cannot fathom. God is free to do what is necessary to work out God's will in our lives, in the history of the world. And regardless of what we see and appear to know, we are to wait upon God. And while doing that, we will praise God, in those marvelous words of Habakkuk: "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights."

The parable indicates clearly that God intends to be gracious to all, far more than any of us deserve or can imagine. Jesus shows us that the freedom of God is far

beyond our understanding and reason—it is in that awareness that we bow down and worship this one who is in his holy temple. For once, in the spirit of Habakkuk, let all the earth keep silent and let us stop yammering about what God does or does not intend, except the salvation of the world.