

Why Them?

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We are taught the rigid math of fairness from a very young age. If you work hard, you get good grades. If you put in the long hours at your job, you get the paycheck at the end of the week. If you follow the rules and treat people right, you earn the respect of your community. We carry this mental ledger with us everywhere we go. We bring it into our marriages, we bring it into our workplaces, and we bring it into the aisles of the local grocery store.

Lately, that mental ledger has been feeling incredibly heavy for many of us. There's a gritty, honest line from the show *Yellowstone* that cuts right to the heart of our frustration: "There's no such thing as fair."

It's a harsh realization, isn't it? We see it in the glass ceilings and the systemic barriers that continue to divide us. Where the colour of your skin, your gender, or the economic class you were born into determines how much weight you're expected to carry. We see the ledger fail when a sudden physical limitation or a hidden mental health struggle strikes without warning, stripping away the ability to "work hard" in the way the world demands.

We realize that the "math" we were taught doesn't account for the uneven ground we stand on. We feel the squeeze of a reality where some start a mile behind the starting line, and others find the finish line moved by circumstances they never chose.

We watch the daily news cycles, which are constantly saturated with stories of a growing wealth divide that feels more like a chasm than a gap. We see warmongers profit immensely from global conflicts while everyday families lose their homes, their peace, their livelihoods and even their lives. We see tech leaders amassing wealth that could fund entire nations, built on the backs of our attention, our habits and our data. We see public servants who enter office with

modest means and somehow leave a few years later with millions of dollars in their investment portfolios.

A question starts to simmer in the back of our minds. It's a dangerous, heavy question that gnaws at our foundational sense of justice. We ask ourselves, why them? Why do they get the break? Why does it feel like the people who care the least about human life or divine law are the ones with the most in their hands? We watch individuals who benefit directly at the expense of someone else, and they seem to face no immediate consequences whatsoever. Life seems to be getting harder for us, while getting infinitely easier for those who exploit the system.

The Vineyard Workers: Offended by Generosity

Jesus actually told a story that attacks this exact mindset, and it still manages to get under our skin 2,000 years later. You can find it in Matthew 20. Jesus paints a picture of a landowner who goes out at the crack of dawn, around 6 a.m., to hire day labourers for his vineyard. They agree on a fair daily wage, and the workers head into the fields to start working.

As the day goes on, the landowner keeps going back to the marketplace. He hires more people at 9 a.m., more at noon, and more at 3 p.m. Then, he does something that completely defies our sense of logic. At 5 p.m., with only one hour of daylight left, he finds a few more people hanging around and sends them into the vineyard as well.

When the sun sets, it's time to hand out the paycheques. The landowner starts with the 5 p.m. crew, the ones who barely got their hands dirty. He hands them a full day's wage. Now, imagine you are one of the workers who has been baking in the scorching heat since 6 a.m. You're standing in the back of the line, doing the math in your head, perhaps thinking, "If the guy who worked just one hour got a full day's pay, I'm about to make a fortune." But then you step up to the front of the line, hold out your hand, and the landowner drops the exact same amount into your palm. One day's wage.

The early workers are outraged, arguing the exact same point we argue when we scroll through our news feeds: it's not fair. We bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat. But the landowner looks at them and says:

"Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

— Matthew 20:13-16

Jesus is showing us that God's economy does not run on our rigid math of fairness. The problem is not that God is shortchanging the hardworking people. The problem is that our sense of justice is offended by his radical generosity toward the latecomers.

Relational Status vs. Moral Record

This same offense over God's radical generosity brings us into Luke 15. The early workers in the parable grumbled about the landowner's money, and in Luke 15, we see the religious leaders grumbling about who gets a seat at the table. They've been watching Jesus very closely. We read in Luke 15:1-2 "all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law believed that if you keep the rules, you get the reward, and if you break the rules, you get excluded. They demand to know why Jesus is spending time with people who have a reputation for breaking the rules. Jesus responds to their grumbling with three specific stories. He tells them about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and two lost sons.

In each of these stories, Jesus shifts the context of how we view other people. He doesn't focus on their moral record. He focuses on their relational status. To the world, whether it's first century tax collectors or twenty-first century grifters, these people are exploiters, sinners and traitors. To Jesus, they're lost children.

When a shepherd loses a sheep, he doesn't stand at the edge of the wilderness and demand that the sheep explain why it wandered into the thicket before he pulls it out. He simply goes after it because it belongs to him. The value of the

sheep is determined by the shepherd, not by the behaviour of the animal. Jesus says in Luke 15:4:

"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

— Luke 15:4

When a woman loses a valuable coin, she doesn't lecture the coin for being lost in the dirt. She turns her home upside down for the sake of restoration. As Luke 15:8 says: "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?"

When a father loses a son to rebellion, he doesn't wait for the son to earn back his trust allowing him back into the family home. Luke 15:20 tells us: "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."

Provision and perfection are not God's first concerns. His concern is recovering what he has lost – that is, us. We're not the father, we're the children. We're not the homeowner, we're the treasure. We're not the shepherd, we're the sheep.

Shared Vulnerability: Human Nature Everywhere

Yet, how quickly we forget our place in the story. Instead of recognizing our shared vulnerability as the flock, we try to grab the shepherd's staff and start sorting everyone else out. We look at the people around us and apply our flawed judgement to decide who is worthy of being found.

It's easy for us to "other" people based on their bank accounts, their political affiliations, or their past mistakes. We're subtly taught from a young age that wealth or poverty tells us something fundamental about a person's decision-making abilities. I've spent my life moving through very different worlds, and I've learned firsthand that this ledger we keep is a lie.

I grew up in rural northern Australia. Our family home for the better part of a decade was literally a shed. We used bookshelves and curtains to create makeshift rooms and divide the space. Years later, I moved to New York and experienced a very different kind of life. I was a young musician moving into a former Brooklyn ghetto because the rent was cheap. I rented someone's living room to sleep in for a few months. I heard the sirens blaring every night, and I saw the heavy desperation on the streets and in the subways.

Everywhere I've gone, I've taught guitar lessons to help pay the bills. For many years, I taught in the homes of my students, which gave me a unique, unfiltered window into the lives of others. I've sat in the living rooms of people from every possible socio-economic demographic you can imagine, from the gleaming penthouses and mansion of the ultra-wealthy, to the cramped apartments of immigrants, like myself, who work multiple jobs just to keep the lights on and pay for things like music lessons.

I haven't lived in a war-torn land, but I have born witness to some of the extremes of our society. I've stayed in cattle ranches and caves, and jungles and deserts. I've even stayed in remote parts of northern Australia where non-indigenous people, like me, need entry permits to come and go.

Here's what I found in all those places. Human nature is the same everywhere. The wealthy mother in the Upper East Side mansion was just as human as the mother sharing a 300 square foot apartment with her children in Queens. The locals Dayla and I chatted with during our honeymoon in the heart of the Peruvian amazon jungle are just as human as the people I rub shoulders with here in Grande Prairie every day. We are all flawed, we are all hopeful, and we are all desperately in need of something that money can't buy.

From the grand perspective of heaven, whether it's the most righteous, hardworking person in this room or the most vile, corrupt person in the world, we are all equally in need of a rescue we did not earn. Jesus died so that everyone would have the opportunity to become a child of God, with absolutely no exclusions.

The Scandal of Grace: Including Everyone

To truly grasp the weight of this radical concept, I think we need to get very specific. We need to talk about the names that make our blood boil, because if the gospel is an invitation to everyone, it has to stand up to the most extreme examples we can imagine.

We have to talk about people like Jeffrey Epstein. He was a man who built a dark, twisted kingdom on the exploitation of the innocent. He used his vast wealth and unchecked influence to manipulate, abuse, and destroy lives.

We also have to talk about the political leaders on all sides of the spectrum who sell their souls for influence. We watch them enact policies that hurt the working class while their personal stock portfolios miraculously multiply in value.

We have to consider the titans of the tech industry and the oil industry who continuously prioritize quarterly earnings over human lives, community stability, and environmental care.

We have to acknowledge the powerful families with centuries of generational wealth built on hidden skeletons, historical injustices, and the broken backs of the working class.

These are the people who seem to glide through life completely untouched by the daily struggles that weigh us down.

Our immediate gut reaction as moral people is to say, not them. They don't deserve what they have, and they definitely don't deserve the riches of heaven. We would be absolutely crazy, perhaps even complicit, if we were to offer a clean slate to anyone involved in what Jeffrey Epstein was doing. We demand justice, and rightly so. We demand that the warmongers and the exploiters pay for the damage they've caused. We want to see them held fully accountable in a court of law. We want to balance the ledger.

But here is the hard, scandalous word of the gospel. Jesus died so that even they might become children of God. The invitation is for everyone, without a single exclusion. If you're offended that grace is freely offered to billionaires, you are standing squarely in the shoes of the older brother in the parable of the prodigal

son. Outside the party, arms crossed, saying that your life is worth more because you did not sin like they did.

But grace is not a reward. Grace is a gift from a father who wants his children back, regardless of how much mud and blood they've dragged into the house. Most people choose to not be reconciled with God, and sadly, even some of those who do are not necessarily good children, though they are still his children.

What is the True Reward?

But if grace is not a reward, what then do we make of Hebrews 11:6, where we read: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

What exactly is the reward? A reward is something to be earned, after all. But we don't see Christians getting better interest rates, larger houses and better jobs than non-Christians. The evidence doesn't point toward Christians being healthier than non-Christians.

I think the easy way out is to say that our rewards will be waiting for us in heaven. The better you are here, the bigger your mansion will be in heaven. But this is a misinterpretation of Matthew 6:19-20, which says "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal."

When we interpret God's word about treasures by what we value as treasures, it's easy for us to miss the point. If we're going to understand what God means when he talks about treasures and rewards, we need to know what it is that He considers to be treasures.

We can find the answer a few verses after the one about rewards. Hebrews 12:2 says, "Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame."

This verse tells us that Jesus endured the cross for the sake of the joy that was set before him. What was that joy? What is it that God considers to be valuable?

Jesus already possessed all the wealth and glory of heaven. He was already God. He already had a close relationship with his Father, so He didn't need to earn His approval. He didn't go to the cross to get more property, or more money, or a bigger mansion in Heaven.

He endured the cross for the one thing he didn't already have: us. His joy was the complete restoration of our relationship with him. Jesus endured torturous agony so that we could be brought back into the family. God views relationships as treasure and reward.

Now, let's apply that understanding of treasure back into Hebrews 11:6, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

Our reward is God. The creator of the universe wants a personal relationship with us. When we truly grasp this, the heavy mental ledger we carry begins to lose its power. If the ultimate reward is a relationship with the Creator, then wealth, power and status are suddenly put into their proper, diminished perspective.

Reframing "Why Them?"

We can start to accept the incredible unfairness of this world. The billionaires, the corrupt politicians and the exploiters may have amassed fortunes that stagger the mind, but without that relationship, they are lacking and are poor in the eyes of God.

That changes how we answer the questions of Why them? Why do they get the break? The truth is that the earthly advantages they possess are fleeting. They're grasping at fading treasures. The ledger of this world is broken, unfair and heavily weighted against the vulnerable, but it's also temporary.

And let's say they do enter into relationship with God. Is it our place to be upset that they received earthly rewards and heavenly rewards? If we find ourselves bristling at that possibility, we have to ask: What do we truly value? If we believe that knowing God is the ultimate prize, then we should be happy when anyone - even those we find most undeserving - gains that treasure. To be upset that they "get both" is to admit that we still view earthly wealth as the superior reward

and the relationship with God as a secondary consolation prize. Their relationship with God, does not diminish yours.

Grace is not a wage to be earned; it is a gift from a Father who simply wants his children home. Are we really going to celebrate the death of someone's child? Should we be happy that people who God loves, choose to never have anything to do with him? If we are God's treasure, then our avoidance of him doesn't just hurt us, it hurts God. He is losing something that he values.

The Party of Grace

Are we angry because the exploiters of this world seem to enjoy greater comforts than us? Or are we satisfied with the treasure that is Jesus? Let's be honest. We live within the confines of our physical reality, and it's natural to want things that ease our suffering or bring us pleasure. Choosing to value a relationship over property requires us to recognize the value in the connection we're building.

Our relationships are the only thing we will take from this life into the next. Everything we own, wear, create and consume will eventually be replaced. But God will remain the same, and we will also have eternity to grow in our relationships with each other. Heaven is not an isolated paradise. Storing up treasures looks entirely different when people are your treasures, and when God is your ultimate reward.

So, given our natural physical desires, should we feel guilty if we struggle to appreciate the value of relationships? Or if we like being on our own, or buying stuff we don't need? It's perfectly fine to ask for provisions. God clothes us and cares for our physical realities. As Matthew 6:32 reminds us: "your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." You also don't have to be best friends with everyone you meet.

Our focus, however, should be set beyond our immediate needs. If you want to see the value in something and develop an appreciation for a concept you don't fully understand, you need to spend time with it. You may not grasp the complete value of relationships right now, but learning to treasure what God treasures is the most significant shift you can make.

If God is our reward, we already possess what is most valuable. If we treasure the people around us, then building up our treasures in heaven means building into those same relationships here on earth. We've been found by the Shepherd. We've been welcomed back by the Father. We don't need to stand outside the party with our arms crossed, grumbling about who else received an invitation, or who pulled up in the fanciest vehicle. We can drop the heavy ledger, step inside the house and join the party.

Let's pray.