

## Faith and Math: When the Numbers Don't Add Up

Part of the With All Your Mind Sermon Series

Matthew 20:1-16

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Let's go ahead and start with what you're all thinking — this story isn't really about math. I know. But, every time scripture seems like it might be about math — when all sorts of numbers and operations get tossed into the stories — well, it's never actually about the math. It's about so much more than that.

Jesus attends a wedding at Cana. In the background of the story we're told "Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding 20 or 30 gallons." It sounds like the beginning of a complex story problem. But, it really ends up being about abundance and celebration and joy.

And if you want to talk about abundance, how about the six different times the gospels tell us that Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish — 5,000 people fed with just seven little handfuls of food.

Of course, Genesis tells us that creation takes place in seven days. Among other things, "seven" in the Bible will always represent fullness and completion. But then we're told that when it comes to forgiveness, we ought to forgive seventy times seven. I think this really means to pay less attention to record-keeping, and more attention to reconciling.

When God was reassuring Abraham and making a promise about the future, God brought him outside and said, "Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. For that is how many descendants you will one day have."

The psalmist, in one of the most comforting portions in all of Scripture, says, "How weighty are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them. I try to count them, and they are more than the sand."

And then Jesus, offering comfort of his own, reminds his followers, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. And even the hairs of your head are all counted — every one of them. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."

When numbers show up in Scripture, it's never actually about the math. But, here's something I never really appreciated until this week — the reason these stories teach us the lessons they do is because numbers carry meaning and specificity. Think about it. Jesus could have said, "You should forgive someone as much as you can. As often as you can." That's still a tall order, but it's nothing compared to hearing, "You should forgive someone seventy times seven times." When "a lot" of forgiveness is quantified, even though it's not intended to be literal, we better understand what kind of life Jesus is inviting us into.

These past four weeks, we've talked about faith as it intersects with science, history, art, and now math. This is about what it means when Jesus tells us to love God with all our mind. There have been lessons for us all along the way. But, if I had to find a connecting thread between all four weeks, it might be this: When we let faith be informed by science, we learn more about the astonishing world we live in. When we let faith be informed by history, we learn more about who we have been, so that we can better determine who we want to become. When we let faith be informed by art and beauty, we learn how to find endurance for that life-long journey. And, when we let faith be informed by math, maybe we learn a little better how we are to face obstacles when they appear.

We learn even more about the astonishing world entrusted to our care. We learn who we have been and who we hope to become. We learn how to keep going, how to find endurance enough for that journey. And we learn how to face obstacles when they appear.

The workers in the vineyard in today's scripture reading are facing the obstacle of an unfair world. He hires workers early in the morning, again at 9, again at noon, again at 3, and yet then again at 5. When evening comes, and they are to be paid, some of them are drenched with the exhaustion of a full day's work, while others, by comparison, have barely broken a sweat. Those who worked the least are paid first, and when they receive a full wage, you can almost see the mental math going on in the heads of those who worked the most. They are already making plans for how they will spend this amazing paycheck before it hits their hands, which is why disappointment hits so hard. "We did more work," they stammer, confused. "We deserve more wages." "Not today," the landowner says.

This is one of those moments when it's easier to like Jesus in the abstract rather than in actual practice. This story is the universal lament of everyone who has ever carried the most weight on a group project. Everyone's contribution level is different; and, some barely register. But, everyone gets the same grade. That frustration is real.

But, isn't it even more so when it's not just about grades? What about the woman who works the hardest, but is skipped over for the promotion? What about the man who never smokes a day in his life, only to be diagnosed with lung cancer? What about the long-planned vacation, or wedding, or reunion, that was waylaid by Covid-19? Life isn't fair. That's an obstacle we all face, sooner or later and more often than not. And, because life is unfair, that's all the more reason why God should be fair, right? But when we

look at this parable, the numbers just don't add up.

David Eugene Smith, in his 1921 presidential address to the Mathematical Association of America, said this: "The laws of the Medes and Persians, unchangeable though they were thought to be, have all perished; the canons that bound Egyptian activities for thousands of years exist only in ancient records preserved in our museums of antiquity; the laws of Rome, which at one time dominated the legal world, have given place to modern codes; and the laws that we make today are certain to be changed tomorrow. But in the midst of all these changes if it has ever been true, it is true today, and it is equally true throughout the universe that  $(a + b)^2 = a^2 + 2ab + b^2$ ..."

"What I learned in chemistry as a boy," he went on, "seemed true at the time, but much of it today is known to be false. When I learned of molecular physics then it seems at this present time like children's stories, interesting but trivial. What we learn in history may be true to some degree, but it is certain to be false in other particulars. So we may run the gamut of learning, and nowhere, save in mathematics alone, do we find that which stands as a tangible symbol of the immortality of law, that which is true 'yesterday, today, and forever.'"

If that last bit sounds familiar to you, that's because it's taken directly from Hebrews, Chapter 13, Verse 8: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." We need not equate math with salvation in order to see a point of connection here.

In his book, "Mathematics For Human Flourishing," which is way more interesting than I was afraid it might be, Francis Su shares authorship with Christopher Jackson. Christopher is 32 years old, and has been incarcerated since he was 19. There is no parole in the federal system, so the earliest he can be released is 2033. In 2018, Congress passed the First Step Act, which reduced sentences for offenses like Chris', but not

retroactively. If it had been, Chris would have been released by now.

There's nothing he can do about that. So he has passed his time by studying math — algebra and geometry and trigonometry and calculus and things that only show up in advanced journals. One reason for this is because math involves invariants. An invariant is something that remains unchanged no matter what operation you perform on it. If you multiple a number by five, that doesn't change whether it is even or odd. Invariants reveal insight about the operation itself. We learn more about it based on what does not change.<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Jackson has very little control over anything in his own life. Mathematics, he says, offers comfort, because he can rely on it. Our obstacles are different from Chris', but surely we understand the longing for something that is the same "yesterday, today, and forever." Perhaps the certain and solid permanence of math can expand our understanding of the immortal, invisible, God-only wise, the one who insists on paying all of the workers in the vineyard the same wage.

Because what is constant, unchanging, unyielding about God is not God's fairness, but God's grace. The numbers in the vineyard equation don't add up and that is what is constant about God. That is the divine invariant: numbers that never add up. And we can give great thanks for that, because that means numbers will never be stacked against us, either.

We do not need a God of fairness. We need a God of grace and generosity. A God who looks at all of God's children and declares that everyone is deserving of the very same and who will not be convinced otherwise. A God who will keep returning and returning and returning, until no one is left waiting,

wondering if there will be a place for them that day.

It isn't fair. It isn't fair at all. It's grace. It is grace without merit, but grace without limit, too. In the end, that is the invariant that matters most in our lives. The fabulous, frustrating, faithful grace of God. It's all grace. That we awoke today, is grace. That we are here together, is grace. That we can understand science, learn from history, marvel at beauty, and depend upon math is grace. That we can love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, and all our mind is grace. And the fact that even when we fail in that love, God still loves us? You guessed it. That, too, is grace.

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<sup>1</sup> As explained by Francis Su in "Mathematics for Human Flourishing."