

New Testament Math

John 11:47-50; Matthew 20:1-16

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

September 21, 2008

Dr. Brent Beasley

You might think Caiaphas was a priest. But, really, Caiaphas was nothing more than a mathematician. Do you remember Caiaphas?

Caiaphas was the Jewish high priest during the time of Jesus' death. He was appointed in the year 18 by the Roman procurator before Pilate, Valerius Gratus. Caiaphas was named as a replacement for Annas.

There is some confusion in the New Testament about whether Annas or Caiaphas was High Priest at the time of Jesus' death. There is reference to both Annas and Caiaphas as High Priest.

One version of what happened was this. There were actually two High Priests. Annas was the real High Priest, the people's High Priest. But the Roman authorities who were in control of Israel didn't like Annas—he didn't always do what they told him to do.

So Valerius Gratus got rid of him and replaced him with Caiaphas. That tells us something about Caiaphas.

So here was Jesus going around healing people, doing all these miracles, claiming to be the Messiah. And the Jewish leaders were getting a little nervous. They were afraid Jesus was going to get them in trouble with the Romans. They had a precarious peace set up with the Romans, and they didn't want some carpenter's son from out in the country coming along and rocking the boat.

Then Jesus really did it. He raised a man (Lazarus) from the dead. This guy Jesus was dangerous.

So the chief priests and the scribes and the elders got together and said, *What are we going to do? This guy is performing all these miracles. He's already got crowds following him. Pretty soon people are going to start believing he is who he claims to be. He's going to get us in hot water with the Romans. They're going to come in and destroy everything.*

And it's all because of this one man—Jesus.

Caiaphas, as the chief priest, was in charge of the council, and he said that if all that was true then they ought to dump Jesus like a hot potato. His argument was that it's better for one man to get killed for the sake of many than for many to get killed for the sake of one man.

That's why I say Caiaphas was a mathematician. Better to get rid of one and save everybody else than to save one and lose everybody else. This is how Caiaphas put it exactly: *It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.* The numbers weren't on Jesus' side. The numbers were against him.

It was some grim, calculating arithmetic Caiaphas was doing, but it was hard to argue with.

[Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who, "Caiaphas," pp. 20-1]

Jesus' arithmetic, on the other hand, was atrocious.

Remember, Jesus is the one who said that Heaven gets a bigger kick out of one sinner who repents than ninety-nine saints who don't need to. That just really doesn't add up mathematically.

Jesus said the more you give away, the more you have. He wouldn't have made it in second grade math with that kind of reasoning.

And Jesus is the one who said that God pays as much for one hour's work as for one day's. You've heard of the "new math." What we're talking about here this morning is "New Testament Math."

In Matthew 20 Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven is like the owner of a vineyard who went out real early one morning to hire some workers for the day. That's the way they did it then. Like day laborers, at sunup the boss would go out and hire some workers for the day and then pay them at the end of the day.

So the owner agreed with the workers on their usual wage for a day's work, which was a denarius. And he sent them out to work in the vineyard.

Then, at about 9:00, he went back downtown and saw some others standing at the marketplace, and he hired them and just told them he'd pay them what was right.

Then the boss went out again at noon and hired some more workers. And he told them he'd pay them what was right.

At 3:00 in the afternoon he went out and hired some more workers.

At about 5:00, he went to the marketplace again. There were still some workers there standing around like the last ones picked when kids are choosing sides for a team. For whatever reason they hadn't been hired that day. The work day would be over in about an hour.

I'm surprised they hadn't gone home already. I probably would have. Don't you know they hated to go home and tell their wives, *I didn't get hired again today*. But at 5:00 the owner of the vineyard comes up and tells those who are left to hop in the back of his truck. They're hired for the rest of the day.

About an hour later the owner tells the manager to call all the workers in from the field and give them their pay—starting with the last ones hired and going to the first ones.

The ones hired at 5:00 come up and the owner gives them the normal daily wage—a denarius. When the ones at the back of the line saw that they felt pretty good. They did the math and figured if the ones who only worked an hour got a denarius, then this owner must be paying a denarius an hour instead of a denarius a day. They'd hit the jackpot.

But when the first ones hired got to the front of the line to get their pay, they got a denarius too—the same as the others. Well, as you can imagine, they complained about that. They had been working since sunup, and they got the same pay as the ones who only worked one hour.

That's not fair.

But the landowner said: *Look, I gave you what we agreed to—a denarius—a day's wage. I'm not hurting you any just because I chose to give the others*

a denarius too. Are you jealous because I'm so generous?

An interesting story. A strange story. And Jesus began the story with the words: *The Kingdom of Heaven is like this.*

I heard someone say, *I've never been surprised by God's judgment, but I'm still stunned by his grace.*

God's judgment usually seems right.

Lightning strikes Sodom. Fire burns Gomorra. They deserved it.

Egyptians swallowed in the Red Sea. They had it coming.

Forty years of wandering in the wilderness for those stubborn, faithless Israelites. That's right.

You work all day in the vineyard. You get a day's pay. It all adds up. You work one hour. You get... a day's pay. That's just not right. That's not good math. That's not fair.

Zacchaeus was a crook for most of his life. Then he met Jesus, and just like that he's bound for heaven. How fair is that?

The thief on the cross next to Jesus. Right before he dies he makes a plea to Jesus. And now he's in the same place as Mother Theresa. That's just not fair.

You work all day, you get a day's pay. You work one hour, you get a day's pay. That just doesn't sound right. Jesus is not too good with numbers.

Notice, those who worked all day didn't object to the grace the others received until they realized that they weren't going to receive more. It wasn't really what they received that they were upset about. They had agreed to that amount at the beginning of the day.

The problem was when those *undeserving* ones were made equal to them. That's when their sense of fairness was violated. They didn't get anything extra for having worked so hard all day.

I once read something Max Lucado wrote where he said what disturbed him most about Jeffrey Dahmer.

It's not his actions, even though they're disgusting. Dahmer was convicted of seventeen murders. Eleven corpses were found in his apartment. He kept skulls in his refrigerator.

What bothers Lucado the most about Jeffrey Dahmer is not his trial. His trial where Dahmer sat motionless. No sign of remorse. No sign of regret.

What bothers him the most is not Dahmer's punishment—life in prison without parole. What would satisfy justice for a man who killed seventeen people?

Max Lucado said that what bothers him the most about Jeffrey Dahmer is his conversion. A few months before a fellow inmate murdered him, Jeffrey Dahmer became a Christian. Said he repented. Was sorry for what he did. Profoundly sorry. Said he put his faith in Christ. Was baptized. Started life over. Began reading Christian books and attending chapel.

Jeffrey Dahmer's sins washed. Soul cleansed. Past forgiven. How about that? That's not fair, is it?

No way can God let him off that easy. There's no way Jeffrey Dahmer can be in heaven with my grandparents or your wonderful mother or brother or aunt. They served God for years.

Grace is for average sinners like me, not for those really bad people. So we turn to Romans 1. Paul says, *God's anger is shown against...* and then he lists it all: Sexual sin, evil, selfishness, hatred, jealousy, murder. That's right, Paul, let 'em have it. It's about time somebody spoke out against sin. Us decent folk are with you. We worked all day. Those people haven't earned near as much as we have. If they get the same as us, it cheapens what we got, right?

Paul's response—Romans 2:1 (*The Message* translation):

If you think that leaves you on the high ground where you can point your finger at others, think again. Every time you criticize someone, you condemn yourself. It takes one to know one.

Whoops.

Maybe you're the one at the back of the line, watching those people up front get a full day's pay for an hour's work. It's not fair. You ought to get more. But Jesus' math isn't very good at all.

One thing's for sure. When we get to heaven you'll be surprised at some of the folks you see. And some of them will be surprised when they see you.

With New Testament math, things don't always add up to what we might expect. And things almost never add up to what we deserve.

I read a story about a Roman Catholic priest who visited a woman who was dying of AIDS. She was confessing her sins while lamenting tearfully about the mess she had made of her life. She talked about what she would do differently if she could live her life over again. She regretted so many of her choices.

In an attempt to stop her spiraling cycle of despair and self-hatred, the priest noticed the picture of a lovely young girl on her dresser. He said, *Who is looking at you from within that picture frame?*

She said, *Oh Father, that is the love of my life. That is the one good thing I have done. She is my daughter. She is now married and has a wonderful family.*

The priest said, *Would you ever abandon her because of the mistakes she has made?*

She said, *Oh, no. I could never do that.*

Before the priest had his prayer with her, he took hold of her hands, and he said, *I happen to know that God has a picture of you sitting on His dresser.*

His words produced a stream of tears from her eyes and she said, *Really?*

He said, *Yes! God is here now wanting you to know that your mistakes can never damage the depth of his love for you.*

You work all day, you get a day's pay. You work one hour, you get a day's pay. Jesus' calculator doesn't work like ours. But grace that can be calculated is no longer grace.

So what do we do if we can't calculate what we owe?
What do we do if there's no mathematical equation to follow?

Listen to what Paul says in Romans 3:24-25:

All need to be made right with God by his grace, which is a free gift. They need to be made free from sin through Jesus Christ. God gave him as a way to forgive sin through faith in the blood of Jesus.

You know, salvation is not some kind of mathematical formula. I don't fully understand it. It's not a formula. But somehow, through Jesus, all are made right with God by his grace which is a free gift.

And even though you and I would love to give up on certain people, we can't, because we have these stories about a God who doesn't give up on people, who, like this landowner, keeps burning the pavement back and forth downtown, relentlessly determined not to end the work day until everyone has been invited to join in.

Now back to Caiaphas. He was a lot better mathematician than is Jesus. When the authorities got scared that Jesus was going to get them in trouble with the Romans, Caiaphas did some figuring.

And the equation came out real clear. The whole nation has more value than one man. Get rid of the one, and save the many. That's pretty good math.

You know what is very interesting? As Frederick Buechner points out, when it came down to deciding his own fate, Jesus reached the same conclusion as did Caiaphas.

Let the one die, and save the many. It's better for one man to die, and save the many. Caiaphas included. Better for one man to die instead of many.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus reached the same conclusion as did Caiaphas. It was not, however, the laws of mathematics that Jesus was following.