How can we understand mercy when we have a hard time accepting how God offers mercy? We see mercy, in this parable, wrapped around the concept of when the invitation is accepted. Do we accept the invite to follow Jesus early in life or late in life? Do we accept His invitation like the prodigal son after living our life in pursuit of sinful pleasure or have we remained faithful like the older brother and are angry because the younger son was not punished? Do we understand God or do we want to impose our concept of justice on God?

Jesus tells us it’s God’s desire “that none should perish” (Mt.18:14). Another story that captures this essence of God is Jonah. Jonah was chosen by God to go to Nineveh and call them to repentance or God would destroy them. Jonah fled instead of doing God’s will. Eventually, Jonah ended up on the shore of Nineveh and walked the city crying out repent or God will destroy you. They repented and God relented. Jonah “became angry” (Jon.4:1) because God relented. Jonah’s understanding of justice demanded Nineveh be punished.

God has a different standard of justice than we do. We’ve been brought up to believe wrong must be punished and doing right will be rewarded. Our parents were our first teachers in this concept of justice when they punished us for not following the rules. Along the way they also taught us how to comply with societal norms of right and wrong. Our lives have been ruled by that standard of good being rewarded and bad being punished. The thief on the cross voiced this concept when he acknowledged he deserved to be crucified while asking Jesus to remember him. You know how that conversation ended; the same way Nineveh was spared, the thief went with Jesus to paradise. When we hear this parable of the workers in the field we side with the workers who toiled in the sun all day and got paid the same wage as those who worked less hours. It doesn’t fit with all we’ve been taught about getting what you deserve.

At the core of this justice concept, we believe we deserve more because we’ve done all that’s required of us. Perhaps we’re missing something of what God requires of us because we failed to learn it as we were learning the concept of justice. What this parable is showing us is where compassion fits in with faith. If we’re disciples then we must do what our master did. Jesus told us the night before He died that “we would do the works He did.” Jesus forgave the most horrendous of sin committed in His passion and death. Can we understand the concept of forgiveness and come to understand that God loves those who are evil as much as He loves us? Are we like Jonah and can’t conceive of someone being that compassionate without demanding anything but repentance? The road to discipleship begins with repentance and travels a road of obedience and transformation of our minds and hearts. It’s only the power of the Holy Spirit that can reprogram our minds and hearts to forgive as God forgives. This parable points us in the direction where we ask God to change our hearts so we can forgive those who’ve done as much damage to us as those who brutalized Jesus and crucified Him. The parable reminds us that God is generous in mercy to those who repent, even in the end, and God is always more generous than we deserve.