




# Hiring labourers for the vineyard and making sense of God's grace at work: An empirical investigation in hermeneutical theory and ordinary theology

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The Matthean parable of the labourers in the vineyard is open to multiple interpretations. For some, the parable may speak of God's unlimited grace and generosity; for others the parable may speak of God's unfairness. The present study is set within the context of an emerging interest in the concept of grace as a topic for empirical enquiry. The study draws on the theoretical framework provided by the notion of ordinary theology and employs the sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking (SIFT) approach to biblical hermeneutics, which is rooted in Jungian psychological type theory. Data were drawn from two one-day workshops with Church of England Readers (lay ministers). On each occasion the participants were divided into three separate groups according to their preferences for thinking or feeling (the two judging functions proposed by psychological type theory) and within these groups they were invited to explore the messages about grace in Matthew 20:1–15 (Jesus' parable of the labourers in the vineyard). The rich data gathered from these workshops generated insights into contemporary theologies of grace and also confirmed the hypothesis that a biblical interpretation of grace is shaped by the reader's psychological type preference for thinking or feeling. While feeling types tended to empathise, thinking types pondered motives and unfairness.

**Contribution:** Situated within the reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics, the SIFT method is concerned with identifying the influence of the psychological type of the reader in shaping the interpretation of sacred text. Employing this method, the present study contributes to three fields of scholarship: to the field of homiletics and hermeneutics, to the field of ordinary theology and to the emerging field concerned with the concept of grace as a topic for empirical enquiry.

**Keywords:** SIFT approach; ordinary theology; grace; empirical theology; psychological type theory.

## Introduction

The present study draws together three emerging initiatives within the field of empirical theology and builds on these initiatives to shape a new empirical investigation of the interpretation of the Matthean parable of the labourers in the vineyard. The first of these three initiatives within empirical theology concerns the sensing, intuition, feeling, thinking (SIFT) approach to biblical hermeneutics (see Francis 2005a; Francis & Village 2008). The SIFT approach is located within the broad field of reader perspective hermeneutical theory. It is distinctive in the sense that the hermeneutical lens of the reader is located within psychological theory. The psychological framework is provided by Carl Jung's model of psychological type (Jung 1971) as developed by measures like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates 1978) and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis 2005b; Francis, Laycock & Brewster 2017a).

Psychological type theory distinguishes between two core psychological processes: the perceiving process and the judging (or evaluating) process and maintains that each process is expressed through two contrasting functions. The perceiving process is expressed through the sensing function and through the intuitive function. The judging process is expressed through the feeling function and the thinking function. The SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics suggests that the

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way in which individual readers interpret scripture is related to their psychological type profile.

The application of the four functions of sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking to biblical hermeneutics was explored from a theoretical perspective by Francis (1997), Francis and Atkins (2000, 2001, 2002) and Francis and Village (2008). Subsequently, the theory has been tested through a sequence of qualitative studies that pay close attention to the ways that readers working in small groups arranged according to psychological type preferences may handle the interpretation of specific biblical passages. Relevant studies in this tradition have been published by Francis (2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2015, 2017), Francis and ap Siôn (2016a, 2016b, 2017), Francis and Jones (2011, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2022), Francis, Jones and Hebden (2019), Francis, Jones and Martinson (2019), Francis, Jones and Ross (2020), Francis, McKenna and Sahin (2018a, 2020), Francis and Ross (2018), Francis and Smith (2012, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018), Francis, Smith and Corio (2018b), Francis, Smith and Evans (2021), Francis, Smith and Francis-Dehqani (2017b, 2018c), Francis, Stevenson and Ross (2021), Francis, Strathie and Ross (2019), Jones and Francis (2019) and Smith and Francis (2016). The cumulative evidence from this series of empirical studies supports the theory that the way in which individual readers interpret scripture is related to their psychological type profile.

The second of these three initiatives within empirical theology concerns Astley's approach to ordinary theology (see Astley 2002, 2003; Astley & Francis 2013). Astley defines ordinary theology as the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers [and unbelievers, cf. Astley 1996:72] who have received no [or, rather, as he later writes, 'little'] scholarly theological education. It is essentially lay, in the sense of non-expert theology: a form of 'reflective God-talk' that is different in degree, but not in kind, from its more conceptual, impersonal and systematic cousin, academic (and often ecclesiastical) theology (Astley 2002:1, 55–58, 64, 2013:1).

The empirical study of ordinary theology has used both qualitative and quantitative methods (cf. Astley 2002: chapter 4). The topics of such studies have included ordinary Christology, concerned with the person of Christ, and soteriology, concerned with the saving work of Christ (Astley & Christie 2007; Christie 2007, 2012, 2013; Christie & Astley 2009), ordinary eschatology, concerned with the end of time (Armstrong 2011, 2013), ordinary hermeneutics, concerned with the interpretation of Scripture (Francis 2013; Rogers 2009, 2013, 2015; Village 2007, 2013), ordinary Pentecostal theology (Cartledge 2010, 2013), ordinary theological ethics (Barton & Muers 2013), ordinary prayer (ap Siôn 2009, 2010, 2013; Brown & Burton 2007), ordinary discipleship and learning (Savage 2013; Watton 2013), congregations and ordinary church life (Thomson 2013; Walker 2013), ordinary worship (Clarke 2020; Nichols 2013) and ordinary theology of visitors to rural churches (Littler & Francis 2005). The cumulative evidence from this series of empirical studies supports the value of listening to and taking seriously the

theological insights of believers who have received little scholarly theological education.

The third and most recent of these three initiatives within empirical theology concerns the invitation advanced by Emmons et al. (2017) to promote empirical investigations of the concept of grace. After reviewing the small number of qualitative studies (Bronte & Wade 2012; Dreyer 1990; Hook & Hook 2010) and quantitative studies (Bassett 2013; Bufford et al. 2015; Bufford, Sisemore & Blackburn 2017; Watson, Morris, & Hood 1988a, 1988b) that have explored grace over the past 30 years, Emmons et al. (2017) identified five fields in which they considered that the empirical science of grace could be further developed, drawing on psychological theories and psychological methods: the connection between grace and psychological health or well-being; the obstacles to accepting and experiencing grace; the connection between religious cognition and thinking about grace; the developmental origins of receptivity to grace and the way in which cultural factors may influence receptivity to grace. The initiative undertaken by Emmons et al. (2017) has been reflected in several new empirical studies concentrating on grace, including work reported by Bassett et al. (2017, 2020), Bufford et al. (2018), Judd, Dyer and Top (2020), Hodge et al. (2020) and Hall and McMinn (2021).

In an initial study designed to draw on the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics to contribute to the empirical science of grace, Francis et al. (2018c) invited a group of 32 Anglican clergy to work in psychological type-alike groups to explore biblical theologies of grace. Dividing into three workshops according to their preferences for *sensing* and *intuition* (the two perceiving functions), the clergy explored the messages about grace in Matthew 6:25–30 (birds and lilies), a passage rich in material to stimulate both sensing and intuition. Dividing into three workshops according to their preferences of *thinking* and *feeling* (the two judging functions), the clergy explored the messages about grace in Matthew 20:1–15 (labourers in the vineyard), a passage rich in material to stimulate both thinking and feeling. The rich data gathered from these workshops generated insight into contemporary theologies of grace and also confirmed the hypothesis that scriptural reading and interpretation may be shaped by the reader's psychological type preference. Francis et al. (2018c) concluded their initial attempt to draw on the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics to contribute to the empirical science of grace by arguing for replication studies that engage other communities of readers (lay and ordained, those familiar and unfamiliar with Christian scripture) and other passages of scripture that are relevant to the development and critique of biblical theologies of grace.

In a second study drawing on the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics to contribute to the empirical science of grace, Francis, Smith and Astley (2022) argue that there would be value in exploring the passages identified by Francis et al. (2018c) among other samples before identifying other relevant passages of scripture. They decided to focus on

Matthew 6:25–30 (the section from the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus invites his listeners to look at the birds of the air and to consider the lilies of the field) among two different groups of Anglican Readers (lay preachers).

The aspect of psychological type theory most relevant to shaping the psychologically informed reader-perspective reflected in the interpretation of Matthew 6:25–30 is the perceiving process. This is the case because the passage is rich in detail to observe and to spark the imagination. In his analysis of the perceiving functions, in order to develop the Francis Psychological Type Scales, Francis (2005b) maintains that *sensing* types focus on the given evidence of the present situation as perceived by the senses. They tend to be concerned with specific details, rather than the overall picture. They are concerned with the actual, the real and the practical. They tend to be down to earth and matter of fact. *Intuitive* types focus on the possibilities of the situation, perceiving meanings and relationships. They tend to concentrate on associations, intuitions and the wider themes that go well beyond the sense perceptions. They tend to focus on the bigger picture and on the future possibilities, rather than on specific facts and details.

## Research problem

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to complement the work of Francis et al. (2022) with a similar study focusing on Matthew 20:1–15 (Jesus' parable of the labourers in the vineyard). The aspect of psychological type theory most relevant to shaping the psychologically informed reader-perspective reflected in Matthew 20:1–15 is the judging process. This is the case because the passage is rich in material to challenge the mind and to stir the heart.

Within psychological type theory, the judging process is concerned with the ways in which information is evaluated, rather than with the ways in which information is perceived. The judging process is reflected in two contrasting functions, styled feeling and thinking. In his analysis of the judging functions, in order to develop the Francis Psychological Type Scales, Francis (2005b) maintains that the feeling function forms evaluation based on subjective personal and interpersonal values. Feeling types emphasise compassion and mercy. They are known for their tactfulness and for their desire for peace. They are more concerned to provide harmony than to adhere to abstract principles. The thinking function forms evaluation based on objective and impersonal logic. Thinking types emphasise integrity and justice. They are known for their truthfulness and their desire for fairness. They consider conforming to principles to be more important than cultivating harmony. Matthew 20:1–15 is rich in content to engage the feeling function and equally to engage the thinking function.

The opportunity to operationalise this research problem was provided by two one-day workshops organised by a Church of England Diocese for the continuing professional development of licensed Readers (lay ministers).

## Method

### Procedure

Each of the two one-day workshops began with offering an overview of theory that distinguishes between the two Jungian judging functions (feeling and thinking). Participants were then invited to complete the judging scale within the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis 2005b; Francis et al. 2017a) and in conversation with each other to select their best fit on the two preferences: choosing between feeling and thinking. Three groups were then formed, distinguishing among those who expressed a preference for feeling, those who expressed a preference for thinking and those who positioned themselves in the middle territory. These three groups were then given a printed copy of Matthew 20:1–15 (the parable of the labourers in the vineyard) and asked to address two questions: What touches your heart in the passage about grace? What stretches your mind in the passage about grace? They were also asked to decide what they would preach on the passage about grace. The groups were asked to begin their workshop by appointing someone to take notes and to report back to the plenary session.

### Participants

Each of the two one-day workshops was attended by 12 participants. For workshop one there were six men and six women. For workshop two there were five men and seven women. All served as licensed Readers in the same Church of England Diocese. The participants were divided into three groups and on each occasion there were four participants in each group.

### Analysis

The data presented in this study were drawn from two groups: those who expressed the strongest preference for feeling and those who expressed the strongest preference for thinking. The third group comprising those who positioned themselves in the middle territory were fully engaged in the process but were not observed by the authors and are not included in the analysis. One of the authors served as a non-participant observer within the group of feeling types and another author served as a non-participant observer within the group of thinking types, in order to take detailed notes of the process and of the discussion. The observers also noted the feedback given by the group to the plenary session. The results section of the article presents a summary of the notes taken in these contexts. Both observers have been professionally trained in Jungian psychological type theory and are practised in identifying and interpreting type-related behaviour as more widely reflected among Christian ministers (see Ross & Francis 2020).

## Results: Workshop one

### Feeling types

The feeling types sat in silence. The first voice broke the silence, wanting to facilitate the group, 'who is going to be

the scribbler then?' The silence continued; so, a second voice tried a different strategy, 'shall I be the scribbler?' Even this kind offer did not release the flow of energy that the facilitator had anticipated. The scribbler then voiced the real issue facing the group, 'these questions are really hard questions'.

The third voice put her finger on the nub of the problem. What touched her heart were the themes of generosity, benevolence and grace. What stretched her mind was the unfairness of it all. What silenced her was her inability to reconcile the two positions. In the face of two such incompatible values, the feeling types were unable to draw on their thinking function with significant clarity to square the circle.

The fourth voice then wrestled with the fundamental problem. For this voice getting the same wage for less work went against the principles of natural justice. However, leaving that assessment hanging, this voice eased the tension by affirming that it is 'lovely' and 'comforting' to know that 'those of us who came to faith later in life' are treated by God in the same way as those who have worked through the heat of the midday sun.

The scribbler recognised that the fourth voice had dodged the issue and drew on his thinking function to pose a provocative question, 'how do you feel about death bed conversions?' The third voice looked uncomfortable by this attack on the fourth voice and defended the ways of the God of Grace:

This is about grace, not works! I came to faith when I came to church to have my baby baptised, and people spoke to me about this generous God. The story says the generous God treats us all alike. You cannot ask for better than that. You get the same problem with the older son in the story of the Prodigal Son. He was jealous because God had been kind to his brother.

Here the feeling type had clearly fallen in love with the God of Grace.

The scribbler had been listening to this heart-felt response to his provocative question. He felt the need to back pedal, to affirm the third voice's position and to show that he had got the point. 'Grace is neither earned nor deserved. None of us deserve it'. Reflecting a little more, the third voice offered the following analysis: 'those hired at the beginning were not diddled out of anything; they got what they had expected when they signed up'. The facilitator tried to clarify what she was hearing. Here she voiced contrasts between fairness and generosity, between entitlement and grace. 'Entitlement is the complete opposite of grace'.

This group of feeling types then moved away from the intractable problem of reconciling these huge theological concepts and moved onto the more affirming territory of exploring the human characters in the story. The scribbler

said, 'I would want to pose the question, where do people see themselves in the story?' The scribbler saw himself among those still standing idle in the marketplace at five o'clock. At the end of the day they had been offered no work and had no wages to take back to their families. They were given new hope by being called into the vineyard at five o'clock and went without waiting to agree to the wage.

The fourth voice was inspired by this heart-warming story and turned attention back to the generous owner. The owner is always on the look-out, always open to taking on new workers. This is what grace is about. The third voice spotted the implications of this view of the owner for her local church:

As a church, we need to be on guard against being a closed shop. We must always welcome others in to work alongside us. And we must welcome them in on equal terms with ourselves who have been there for ever.

When the conversation lulled, the facilitator returned to the scribbler's question, 'where do people see themselves in the story?' The facilitator wanted to step into the shoes of the owner. Had she been the owner, she would not have wanted to be so provocative by paying those who came last first so that it was all so obvious to those who had been labouring all day long. The provocation was neither generous nor gracious. Why would the God of grace act like that?

The scribbler had been too caught up in his reflections on the experiences of those hired at five o'clock to be deflected by the facilitator's concern with the motivation of the owner. The scribbler took the conversation back to the joy experienced by those who had been rescued from the market place late in the day and to the joy that they would bring back home to their families.

When time ran out, the members of the group of feeling types remained conscious that they had not solved the problem raised by the passage. They were conscious too of feeling somewhat drained by the experience. It may be hard work for feeling types to be so constantly challenged by an agenda that sits more comfortably with thinking types.

## Thinking types

The group that consisted of three thinking types and one lower-scoring feeling type (as there were only three thinking types among this group of 12 participants) went about the task in a logical manner, seeking first a volunteer to feedback in plenary (the feeling person in the group offered herself willingly) and then proceeded to attempt to answer question one: what touches your heart? The first thinking voice to engage with the question suggested that it was the fact of 'the last chap getting the same as the first', while the second thinking voice referred to the generosity of God. This was enough to prompt the third thinking voice to identify God as proclaiming 'why can't I do what I want?' to those who queried his generosity.

Pursuing the theme of generosity, the same voice retorted that the point was that it didn't matter how long someone had been a Christian. The feeling voice agreed, suggesting that Matthew, the author of the passage, had become a disciple later than others and might have been feeling at the bottom and had written this to comfort new converts. A thinking voice agreed, remarking that the passage was aimed at Gentiles but he could understand the position of those who might reasonably have been expecting a bonus.

The feeling voice wanted to understand the group of labourers who were late to the vineyard, providing reasons for their being unavailable earlier. A thinking colleague retorted: 'do you mind me saying I don't think that's right, it's not the point'. Another reiterated the master's assertion: this is my decision. The thinking voices hence found themselves wondering whether God might be a thinking type? The feeling voice opined that this clouded the issue: 'we should be considering the feelings of those who had laboured in the heat of the day'.

One thinking voice drew contemporary parallels with those on zero-hour contracts. Another thinking voice, who had largely been silent until now, was encouraged to look beyond the immediate passage. He remembered how, in the Old Testament, the spoils of conquest were shared with those who had remained behind. The feeling voice rejected the idea concerning a share of the pot because the pot (in this instance) is limitless.

Right on cue, halfway through the discussion, the group logically progressed to the question of what stretched their minds. The first offering was that when you come to God, you are treated the same, justice it seemed being paramount. The feeling voice felt that it was about our getting what we need and yet almost immediately a question was prompted: were you touched by the generosity or furious at it? A thinking voice answered, excusing those who had been standing idle all day on the grounds that the manager had failed to pick them. The feeling type recognised how this felt, equating it with sporting events at school when teams were chosen and no one wanted to pick you.

Very practically, one voice was reminded how the labourers would go and stand at the crossroads to offer themselves for work. The feeling voice was not prepared to let go of the generosity of God's grace, which we cannot get anywhere near. She maintained: 'I would stop there with the greatness of the grace of God'. One of the thinking types was unconvinced, remembering that 'the God of the Old Testament didn't care two hoots about the Amorites' and other neighbouring tribes. Another thinking type was still pursuing the logic of the master's actions. He was 'picking the fittest and best labourers first, leaving the dregs until last'.

The feeling type, keen to ensure nothing was missed, invited further ideas from the group. 'What stretches my mind',

someone replied, 'is that those who have been Christians for the shortest period of time will be treated as equals. We, who are readers, will be judged more harshly by God'. Another disagreed: 'there is hope for everybody, especially us'.

Still concerned with process, the question was posed: 'does it count as failure to finish early?' With a feeling type reminding the group of subjective considerations, the group did not fully elucidate the approach of thinking types to scripture, although the clear anger about injustice that resurfaced regularly may be considered a hallmark of this type's behaviour.

## Results: Workshop two

### Feeling types

Immediately, the first voice to speak among the feeling types confessed that it was easier to identify what touched the heart in the passage than what stretched the mind. There was always one left at the end, she continued, as with sports teams being picked in a school setting; always someone who would close the day declaring: no one hired me.

A second voice remarked that at least the labourers hired at the eleventh hour were still there. The first voice responded 'It wasn't their fault that they were left to the end: nobody wanted them'. Already, empathy in this group of feeling types was to the fore.

A third voice suggested that those who were left at the end had nowhere else to go. However, the first voice was reluctant to dilute her sympathy. These were the people, she opined, who had been written off by society, whose families were not going to eat that night. These were the ones on whom grace was being poured out. The second voice wanted to extend empathy to those at church who no one really wants.

Now that permission had been given to extend the application of the passage, a new voice remarked: 'every time I walk by a beggar, I am reminded of this passage'. Another new voice was conscious of the difficulty the passage presents to those who had laboured in the heat of the day and was reminded of the children's complaint: 'It's not fair!' The first voice explained that our system operates in such a way that the longer one works, the more one gets paid. This narrative exemplifies God's great generosity, 'which isn't unfair at all'.

The fourth voice was reminded of the specific task in hand but confessed being unable to make the distinction between what touched the heart and what stretched the mind. The second voice responded with the verdict that the heart registered empathy for those labourers in need of employment, while the mind wanted to protest that it was not fair. The first voice developed this theme: grace is undeserved favour while the mind says it's not fair, disconcerted because it doesn't seem right. 'Grace', the second voice agreed, 'isn't fair'.

The group now began to reference the wider Gospel narrative. The cross wasn't fair to Jesus. Peter wanted to know 'what's

in it for us'. The second voice was attempting a reconciliation of viewpoints: 'grace is there for everybody, but faith without works is useless. You can't overemphasise either of them'. The first voice observed that a response was required, in the sense that the final labourers had to agree to go and work.

The fourth voice referenced the tabloid newspaper that protested against immigrants getting houses. 'But what would Jesus say?' The second voice wondered in response to this, what should be done with rough sleepers. The third voice, still attempting empathy, remarked that you never knew the inside story. The first speaker suggested it was best not to support individuals but rather the organisations supporting them.

A discussion then arose as to how grace might be shown to others; to those who need it; to those who come to church but who others might not want to be there. This prompted the thought that the most powerful words to emerge were 'I choose', which denoted the attitude of the master rather than a direct quotation. The original voice warned that we mustn't read into the passage an invitation for us all to turn up at 5 o'clock.

The first voice was now reminded of those currently most disadvantaged in the labour market – those on zero-hours contracts. How could the story be recounted to them? The first voice responded with the observation that the purpose of the passage was to describe what the Kingdom of God was like: work was an example used to make a point, but the passage was about grace.

The time together concluded with a consensus that God's grace was not fair. What touches us depends on who we identify with in the story, while taking this teaching seriously would lead us to writing off debts every 7 years, as commended by Scripture.

This feeling type group was energised by opportunities to empathise with the labourers in the story and the reminder it provided of those in contemporary society who might be in need of material help, those in church who might feel marginalised, those reduced to begging and those without secure employment. They were inspired by the generosity of God's grace and only incidentally concerned at the lack of fairness in the story.

## Thinking types

The group of thinking types opened the session in a business-like manner. They agreed on who would report back to the plenary session and carefully distinguished between the two questions identified for the workshop. Then the first voice set the ball rolling straight away by offering an answer to the first question: what touches your heart in the passage about grace? what touched this speaker's heart were the men who were still standing in the marketplace at 5 o'clock. They had been waiting all day for the offer of work and at the end of

the day they had neither work nor money. They were thinking they were going back home to hungry families unable to put food on the table. Now at face value this may have sounded like a point made from the heart of compassion. But the first voice went on to explain his position. For him this mattered because it was so unjust, so unfair. He went on to describe the dock labour scheme and its iniquitous unfairness. Men turned up for work and waited to be picked by the foreman; others went home empty handed because they had not been chosen. Zero-hour contracts are today neither less-unjust nor less iniquitous. He has witnessed men leaving the night shelter for the homeless with which he was associated and walking for miles through the snow reporting for work and being sent back without work. 'This is unjust and unfair', he said.

For the second voice this situation put her in mind of her husband who is on the books as a supply teacher. Recently, he was unwell for two weeks and they were without income during that period. The situation reminded the third voice of the Mexican labourers waiting for work in Californian vineyards. Those looking for labourers 'came along and hired the fittest for the day leaving the elderly, the weak and the sick aside. It is unjust and unfair'.

Seeing the direction in which the argument was going, the first voice used his thinking function to differentiate between two levels at which the narrative needs to be read. Grace is a religious concept and needs to be seen in a religious reading of the narrative. Here is a narrative about how God's grace rewards those who were called 'to Christ early in life and those who were called late in life in exactly the same way. This is God's grace at work'. However, a secular reading of the story is not about grace at all, but about injustice. What then puzzled this speaker is how religious people (saved by God's grace) can administer unjust systems.

Responding to this challenge, the fourth voice referred to his recent experience working for the benefits agency where the performance indicators discouraged him from showing leniency or using personal judgement to mitigate discrimination against individuals. The third voice agreed that good Christians can do horrendous things in their secular lives.

Going back to the first voice's analysis that God's grace rewards all who respond to Christ's call equally, the fourth voice questioned whether there may be different levels of reward in heaven. Now for the first speaker the concept of heaven required further clarification. Once again his thinking function distinguished between two different understandings of heaven: 'do we get to heaven now or when we die?'

The first voice was keen to refocus the discussion on the two specified questions. In this story 'my heart says that God's grace is generous; my head says that it is unjust'. For the first voice 'fairness is a mind thing' and treating everybody the same is unfair. Now this observation led the group of

thinking types to explore the idea of universal salvation. This makes us ask 'whether God loves Satan and whether Satan will be in heaven on the last day'. How could the grace of our all loving God exclude anybody? The fourth voice drew on his recollection of the Narnia novels and the image of the door through which some refuse to enter. 'Do not people exclude themselves rather than being excluded by God?'

The narrative of the labourers in the vineyard gave the group of thinking types a great deal to stretch their minds and at the same time also warmed their hearts to fight against injustice and unfairness in the world. In so doing they were striving to extend the reach of God's grace to those most marginalised and most excluded.

## Discussion

This study, located within the developing field concerned with empirical investigation of the concept of grace and rooted within the longer-established research traditions concerned with ordinary theology, applied the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics to the exploration of a passage of scripture identified as relevant to informing a biblically based Christian theology of grace. The SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics is rooted in a reader-perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics that recognises the formative influence of individual reader's psychological type preference in shaping biblical interpretation. The passage of scripture identified for exploration (the Matthean parable of the labourers in the vineyard related in Mt 20:1-15) is a passage that readily engages the evaluating or judging process, being rich in content to engage the feeling function and equally rich in content to engage the thinking function.

Working with two groups of Anglican Readers (lay ministers), each group was structured to design two contrasting hermeneutical communities (one shaped by feeling types and one shaped by thinking types) with a third group of those who positioned themselves in the middle territory. By designing hermeneutical communities that separate participants on the basis of their preferred judging function, feeling types were set free to work with their feeling function unfettered by thinking types, while thinking types were set free to work with their thinking function unfettered by feeling types. In this context feeling types excel at identifying the human values and relationships at the heart of scriptural narrative, while thinking types excel at identifying and scrutinising the theological issues raised by the scriptural narrative. In the present study the feeling types and the thinking types generated different and distinctive perspectives on the Christian theologies of grace.

The accounts of the hermeneutical communities of feeling types gave clear expression to the discomfort that this parable effected in the human heart. While it was impossible to ignore the dominant note of unfairness in the parable, the

feeling types were determined to celebrate the warmth in the passage. For them their attachment to the God of mercy overcame their attachment to the God of justice. In spite of the apparent unfairness of it all, the feeling types found it 'lovely' or 'comforting' to feel that God's grace treated all people alike, not discriminating between those who laboured through the heat of the midday sun and those who entered the vineyard at the eleventh hour. They were persuaded by the view that grace is neither earned nor deserved. Faced with the stark contrasts between fairness and grace, between entitlement and grace, feeling types preferred to step into the shoes of the key characters in the parable and to explore the heart-warming effects of grace in their lives. The owner epitomised what grace is all about. Those who had been standing idle in the marketplace until the eleventh hour, unaffirmed and unfed, experienced the full richness and delight of the undeserved generosity bestowed on them by the owner. Grace was experienced in the joy that those who had been rescued from the marketplace late in the day brought back to their families. Feeling types were comfortable to extrapolate from the labourers left idle in the vineyard until the eleventh hour to those left on the outskirts of contemporary society. Their hearts went out to the unemployed, the beggars, the homeless, the rough sleepers on the city streets and to those on zero-hours contracts. Overall, feeling types tend to be inspired by the boundless generosity of God's grace and only incidentally concerned by the problems of fairness and justice. For feeling types the journey from scripture to celebrating the warmth of God's grace was carried by the heart through the capacity for empathy.

The accounts of the hermeneutical communities of thinking types gave clear expression to the challenge that this parable raised in the human mind. The thinking types wanted to challenge the narrative and to interrogate the motives of the key actors. They also wanted to give due weight to the theological and practical motivation of the Gospel writer (Matthew). Here is a Gospel concerned to make sense of the Gentile convert and those who had come late to work in the vineyard. God's true grace was equally available to all. However, what really attracted the thinking types in the parable was not God's magnanimous generosity, but the unfairness of the world. It was unfair that some were left idle until the eleventh hour. It is unfair today that people are offered zero-hours contracts. It is unfair that some employment situations (like supply teaching) offer no support during times of sickness such observations led to an analysis of how Christian employees can be engaged in operating unfair systems. The logic of the situation challenged thinking types to explore the limits of God's grace. If God is generous to all (the deserving and the undeserving), does this not suggest that God is unfair? If God's grace extends to all, does this not imply salvation for all? Will Satan be in heaven on the last day? Or do people exclude themselves from God's grace, rather than themselves being excluded by God? The narrative of the labourers in the vineyard gave the group of thinking types a great deal to stretch their minds

and in so doing warmed their hearts to fight against injustice and unfairness in the world. Their call was to extend the reach of God's grace even to the most marginalised. For thinking types the journey from scripture to celebrating the inclusivity of God's grace was carried by the mind through the power of analysis.

This conclusion is wholly consistent with the original conceptualisation of this construction, which recognised not only that ordinary theology exists in a plurality of forms (as does academic theology, cf. Astley 2002:125–126; Astley & Christie 2007:23) and at various points along a spectrum from academic to ordinary theology (Astley 2002:57–58, 86–88) but also that ordinary theology is always and often intensely, 'personal' to the one who hold to it and lives by it, indeed 'subjective' (Astley 2002:42–44, 134–136, 149–150). There cannot be, therefore, only one ordinary theology of grace. Preachers, pastors and Christian educators need to acknowledge this issue, along with the rich variety of possibilities that it implies and requires for their various ministries.

## Conclusion

The present study was located within the developing field concerned with empirical investigation of the concept of grace and has illustrated the contribution that can be made by the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics to this developing literature, complementing the earlier studies reported by Francis et al. (2018) and by Francis et al. (2022). Here is a research tradition that is worth extending, drawing on other passages of scripture identified as relevant to illuminating Christian theologies of grace and involving other groups of readers.

While these three studies considered together have demonstrated potential within the research method, the present study draws attention to four weaknesses in the research design that need to be taken into account in resourcing future studies. The first weakness concerned the number of participants signing up for the workshop. In line with the general tendency for churches to attract more feeling types than thinking types (Francis, Robbins & Craig 2011), a pool of 12 participants failed to generate more than three thinking types and as a consequence on that occasion one low-scoring feeling type was included in the group alongside the three thinking types. Future studies need to be resourced by a larger group of participants.

The second weakness concerned the number of members of the research team available to participate in the groups and to document the discussions. With only two members of the team present, the third group (the middle group) was undocumented and not included in the analysis. While theory suggests that it is the two more extreme groups that provide the clearest contrast, observation of the middle group is needed to test that theory. Future studies need to be resourced by a larger team of researchers.

The third weakness concerns the reliance on just one observer within each group and thus the failure to provide for cross-checking the observations. Future studies need to explore the option of video recording in order to facilitate independent observation and analysis in a way that allow two or more researchers to compare observation and analysis.

The fourth weakness concerns the way in which the research team are all trained and grounded in Jungian psychological type theory. As psychologists grounded within this interpretative framework there may be a danger of over-interpreting observation in accordance with the theoretical framework. If future studies were to employ video recording and to engage observers naïve in Jungian theory, the observations of those naïve in Jungian theory could also be taken into account.

Generalising from the findings of the three studies that have so far applied the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics within the developing field concerned with empirical investigation of the concept of grace is constrained by the fact that all three studies have been conducted among clergy or lay ministers within the Church of England. Future studies are required to extend this research within other denominational and cultural contexts.

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### Authors' contributions

L.J.F. took responsibility for the overall conceptualisation of the article. L.J.F. and G.S. served as observers in the groups. All three authors analysed the data and shaped the article.

### Ethical considerations

This study received approval from the St Mary's Centre Ethics Committee – SMC17EC0012.

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### Data availability

Data are available from the corresponding author, L.J.F., upon reasonable request.

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