

Proper 20A: Matthew 20:1-16  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **God's Generous Unfairness**

“But it’s not fair!” “He got the same as us.”

If you are a parent, no doubt you’ve heard these words, or something very close to them from your children. What provoked the exclamation from my kids this time was the occasion of divvying up trinkets from a “magical treasure chest” I had hidden in the woods behind our house. They had tried unsuccessfully to find the treasure four times before. My son lost interest early on, but was with the other three for the final discovery. So when the chest was found (with my help), the three girls objected to his having an equal share of cheap trinkets, since he hadn’t been with them on all of the previous expeditions. “It’s not fair.”

It seems that from a very early age, we are keenly aware of fairness, and offended by its absence, especially if we perceive the injustice to be against us. Evolutionary psychologists tell us that this goes back to our most primitive societies, where members of the tribe had to work together and cooperate just to survive, and anyone who shirked their duties or claimed more of the resources than others put the whole tribe in danger. Today, fairness is still very important in our society, as evidenced by our political debates, where we disagree about what fairness looks like: for one side, fairness often implies equality, while for the other it means proportionality—people should be rewarded in proportion to what they contribute, even if that means there will be unequal outcomes.

We as a society have a strong belief that workers deserve “equal pay for equal work.” We have inscribed in it our laws. So when we read Jesus’ parable about a vineyard owner who seemingly flouts this understanding, we are set to scratching our heads.

The setting of the parable was quite familiar to first-century Jews. It was the harvest season for the grape crop. The owner of the vineyard got up before dawn and went to the center of the village where day-laborers congregated, hoping to find workers for the full twelve-hour workday. These were the folks who did not have regular jobs or own any property. They were much like the migrant workers of our day. The vineyard owner finds a handful of these guys in the early morning and hires them for the usual daily wage (a denarius). Then a few hours later, he goes out again and finds some more laborers and promises to pay them what is right, and sets them to work. He goes out three more times that day, at noon, three and five, and hires more workers each time. Then, at the end of the day, the landowner has his foreman pay them all, beginning with the newest hires and ending with the earliest crew. To everyone’s surprise, he gives them all a denarius, regardless of when they started. When the early morning crew objects, the owner will have nothing of their bellyaching.

"Look, Pal," he says, "Don't give me any grief. You agreed to the usual wage of a denarius, and you got a denarius. Take it and get out of here before I call the cops. If I want to pay the others

the same, so what? You're telling me I can't do what I want with my own money? All I did was have a fun idea. I decided to put the last first and the first last to show you there are no insiders or outsiders here: when I'm happy, everybody's happy, no matter what they did or didn't do. I'm not asking you to like me, Buster; I'm telling you to enjoy me. If you want to mope, that's your business. But since the only thing it'll get you is an ulcer, why don't you just shut up and go into the tasting room and have yourself a free glass of Chardonnay? The choice is up to you, Friend: drink up, or get out; compliments of the house, or go to hell. Take your pick.”

That seems a little harsh, doesn't it? Because, I'm sure, if we were in the same position as the early morning crew, we wouldn't like it much either. I mean, how can one possibly contend that these people who worked only an hour should receive the same wages as those who put in a whole day, including the brutal heat of midday? This is no way to run a business!

Now, of course, this parable isn't about running a business. It's not a description of how employers should treat workers, either. Nor was Jesus giving us a system of economics. He was trying to instruct his disciples—and you and me—about what God and heaven are like. He introduces his story with the words, “For the kingdom of heaven is like...” His point is that eternal life, the favor of God, and heavenly reward are not things that God measures out to his servants based on their years of service, the trials they have borne, or, in fact, anything that they have done for that matter. With God, *grace* is sovereign.

Now, that may sound heartwarming at first, but let's be honest, there's still a part of us that resists this “economy of grace.” For what shall we say about a God who promises the same heaven to a self-centered scoundrel, who was only saved on his deathbed, as He does to a Mother Teresa, who spent a lifetime in the pursuit of holiness and in service to others? What does it say about a God who accepts the last-minute plea of the tyrant who spent his whole life enjoying the finest things money can buy while exploiting others, welcoming him the same way He welcomes those hurt by him? It's not fair!

Even without worrying about extreme examples like those, what about regular Christians like us? *We* resist the urge to skip church and sleep in on Sunday morning. *We* spend our hard-earned money and resources to support the work and ministry of our congregation. *We* spend time in prayer and the study of Scripture when we could be golfing or some other recreation. So how is it that others get God's grace when they don't even show up or participate? *We*'re the ones, after all, who've done most of the work, we tell ourselves. It's not fair! It's not right!

Taking that attitude, we sound like Charlie Brown's little sister, Sally, in the classic “Charlie Brown Christmas Special.” You may recall that at one point Sally is writing a letter to Santa Claus and in the process generates an enormous list of toys she wants. Then at the conclusion of her letter she writes, “But if that is too much to carry, just send cash.” When Charlie Brown sees this and despairs over his own sister's greed, Sally indignantly responds, “All I want is my fair share. All I want is what I have coming to me.” Apparently that's all that most of us want, including long after we become much older than Sally Brown. We want our fair share. We've got rights and the number one right we have in life is the right to have our rights met.

The first time I read this parable, I must admit it struck me as being rampantly unfair too. I found myself saying, “But that is not just!” But then after some reflection, it dawned on me that I was starting at the wrong place. If you and I had earned our way into this world or had received our salvation as some sort of reward for good work, then there might be validity to such a complaint. But the center of this parable is *grace*, not entitlement. We were called out of nothing into being in an astonishing act of generosity for which we can claim no right. As C.S. Lewis once observed, we are not living in a luxury hotel with every right to demand great service but rather trapped in a prison where every kindness is a gift.

Once that *gift* becomes our central focus, it changes how we interpret things. If entitlement is our vantage point, we evaluate the particulars of our lives from that perspective, that is, by comparing ourselves to others, which never goes well, no matter whether we pride ourselves for being on top or whether we just wished we were. On the other hand, if grace is our starting place, everything begins to appear in a very different light.

Notice, for instance, that even the workers hired early in the morning, the ones who later complain about the owner's fairness, had started the day *un*-employed. But the owner finds them and *gives* them work. I imagine, when he found them, they were, no less than the five o'clock hires, “standing idle in the marketplace.” Whatever they were doing, it wasn't working. There was no real livelihood prior to the owner seeking them out. But by the end of the day they seem to have forgotten this. Or maybe they never really understood. What is clear is that, come payment time, they are thinking only in terms of just reward. Pay must be commensurate with the hours worked—as if the work itself was a “reward” in itself.

But Jesus' parable is not about workers receiving their just “reward” so much as it is about the graciousness, the generosity, of the landowner. The landowner is not fair or just, at least not by our usual reckoning. Rather, he is more than just; he is gracious, good. And that is how God is.

In fact, if we put ourselves in the place of the laborers who started at sunrise or midmorning or even early afternoon, we have missed the point of the parable. To begin with, we gentile believers, we non-Jewish Christians—it is important for us to remember—are the last-minute, eleventh-hour hires. We are the late-comers, according to the Bible, and therefore have no room to boast.

More to the point, though, it's not us, but Jesus who is the one who works from sunup to sundown. Jesus, the “landowner,” is the one who has borne the burden of the day and heat, running back to forth to town, seeking out the idle and purposeless. Only Jesus has earned salvation for us. It's the fruit of his vine that we enjoy. The grace is that God still calls us to Himself and gives us the “full wage,” eternal life, not because we have worked hard enough or long enough, but precisely because God wills it. Just as the laborers in the vineyard all received a full day's pay regardless of the hours they worked., we have all been given salvation, irrespective of what we've done, or the sins we've been living under.

That's how it is in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says, when things are the way God intends them to be. People don't get what they *deserve*, what they've *earned*. But depending on where you are in line, that can sound like powerful good news. Because if we don't get what we deserve, if God

is not “fair,” then there is a chance we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will be called up even though we are last in line.

As this parable suggests, God is good, and when we begrudge that goodness, God’s graciousness, it is only because we have forgotten where we are in line. For, from where we stand, at the end of the line, we can see the actions of the landowner for what they are—as a reflection of his goodness, his graciousness, that extends not just to those like us at the end of the line, but to all those who started before us, who, though worthier than us, nevertheless did not deserve what they received—a place in God’s kingdom, a seat at the table of the Vineyard Owner who wants *everyone* to share in his joy and his goodness. No, God is not fair; but God *is* good. Thanks be to God!