



Matthew 20:1-16 - "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³ "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶ About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷ " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

⁸ "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' ⁹ "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' ¹³ "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Is God fair?



*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!
(1 John 3:1)*

Growing up with 13 brothers and sisters, I can't remember how many times I said it, much less how many times I thought it. I probably said it when my brother Dave got his license and I was stuck walking. I probably thought it when my brother Nate had a girlfriend, and I didn't. I probably said it when my little sister Charissa didn't have to mow the lawn every week like I did. Likely it rattled around my brain or came flying from my mouth when I saw the brand new mountain bikes that Ben and Julie got, and I was still stuck riding a lousy Huffy. It's the same thing that children throughout the world and across the centuries have protested and proclaimed when big sister get two scoops of ice cream instead of my measly one scoop – are you with me? "It's not fair!" And isn't it fascinating that you don't have to teach that to kids? Watch even some of the littlest ones' eyes light up and then fill with tears when their play-mate gets a special toy and they don't. Watch the toddler lash out at the great injustice of not having the exact same number of fruit snacks as his brother. Watch the middle-schooler seethe with envy because she didn't get invited to the popular girl's sleepover. Watch the high-schooler look with disdain and jealousy at his classmate who *did* get the part in the play or the spot on the team. "*It's not fair!*" Deep down inside each of us – even from the time of childhood, there is an innate sense of what's fair and what isn't – at least according to my standards. Isn't it fascinating that you don't have to teach children to feel that way?

Isn't it also fascinating, or maybe sad, that we never really grow out of that way of thinking? It's not fair that he should have a house, a car, a boat, *and* job satisfaction, while I'm stuck in the salt mines of a career that turned out to be a total dead end. Now it's too late to change. It's not fair that my friend – who's far less talented than I am – is doing so much better than I am. It's not fair that I have to do all the work around here and nobody seems to want to lift a finger to help me. It's not fair that I do all the volunteering, while everyone else is too busy – whatever that means. It's not fair that he has so much free time to volunteer and I don't. Do you see how easily our innate sense of "fairness" can be upended and offended? If that's our default response to the everyday tasks of life and the people around us, have you ever thought about our reaction when God seems to be unfair?

That's what the prophet Jonah was struggling with in our Old Testament lesson – the Ninevites don't deserve anything good from you, Lord! Destroy them, they've got it coming! It's not fair for you to show mercy to them! It's not fair! That's the same problem Paul was addressing with the Romans – the Jewish Christians weren't so sure that those dirty Gentiles, the Romans, deserved God's mercy. It's not fair! And perhaps the boldest of all, the parable Jesus told in our gospel lesson is downright offensive to our natural, innate sense of fairness. People who work a 12 hour day in the hot sun surely deserve more than those who showed up for the final 60 minutes! This is what God is like? He must not know what he's doing! This parable comes on the heels of Jesus' interaction with the rich young man who wanted to earn eternal life. Jesus told him, **Go sell everything you have and give to the poor.** And the young man went away sad, because he had great wealth. He needed to see that his money had become his false god. Not missing the opportunity this teachable moment provided, Peter said to Jesus, "**We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?**" What about us, Jesus? Jesus told his disciples that whatever they left behind for his sake, they would receive 100-fold back to them – in this life and the next. But all of this would be by the gift of God's grace – his underserved love – and by grace alone. This parable is part of Jesus' answer to Peter's question and it shows how things shake out in God's economy – even if it shakes our sense of fairness to the core.



Jesus said, **The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.** Jesus uses a story to tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like – not just eternal life up in the sky, but what Jesus’ ruling activity looks like. Jesus uses a story to teach us, but we struggle with the lesson because it offends our finely honed sense of what’s fair. 6:00 am was the start of the work day and some day laborer’s agreed to work in a vineyard – not very easy work – but they agreed to do so for more than fair compensation. A denarius was a generous payment for a day’s work. So, off they went. So far, so good. The landowner then went out again to hire more workers – still, we’re alright with this. This made sense to Jesus’ disciples as they listened. There was a lot of work to do at harvest time in the vineyard. At 9:00 am, 12:00 noon, 3:00 pm the landowner went out and hired still more workers. And then, in a move that would seem ridiculous to anyone with common sense, the landowner goes out and hires even more workers at 5:00 pm, even though they’d barely be able to work for one hour. The 6:00 whistle blew, marking the end of the work – now it was pay day.

Here’s where the problem starts. When the paychecks were being distributed, those guys who barely worked an hour received a denarius. You better believe those 12 hour laborers, with sore backs and calloused hands, who endured the brutal heat of the Middle Eastern sun, you’d better believe they were doing some math in their heads. *“If the landowner is paying those guys a full day’s wages, even though they only worked an hour, I should be getting twice that much...five times that much...no twelve times that much!”* In their minds, they’d already spent that bonus money. So, you can imagine their shock when the landowner plops the very same one denarius in each of their hands. What?! **‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’** Deep down inside, you want to cry out, *“It’s not fair!”* right alongside those guys who were breaking their back for “the man” all day. Can you relate? Of course you can! It’s infuriating – if not on the outside, then certainly inside – when someone you don’t deem as talented as you, as hard-working as you, as smart as you gets the promotion, the bonus, or the perfect life you’ve toiled for. It hurts. It’s not fair! But Jesus’ parable isn’t meant to teach us about the economics of small-business management or equality in employee payroll. The parable teaches us what **the kingdom of heaven is like**, in other words, how God operates and rules in the hearts and lives of his people. And what do we learn? When it comes to working in God’s vineyard, in his kingdom, it’s not about getting what we deserve. It’s about getting what we don’t deserve.

So, to the original question: is God fair? If anyone should be fair, it should be the Almighty God, right? It only makes sense that the Holy God would be just and reward his people with good things. But what happens when it’s not so many good things that come my way, but bad? Why is it me who has to deal with the diagnosis, the constant struggle, the depression, the lack of resources? Why me? After all, isn’t God supposed to be fair? *What did I do to deserve this? God, give me what I deserve!* Have you ever been tempted to think that way – that somehow God owes you something or you want what you think you deserve? If so, watch out. What do we deserve from God? You know the equation as well as I do, **The wages of sin is death. The soul who sins is the one who will die.** What do we, sinners, *deserve* from a holy God? Only separation, only death, only hell. So what does Jesus’ parable teach us? What are things like in God’s economy? The disciples were tempted to think that they would have more coming their way since they’d given up everything to follow Jesus. Sound familiar? *I’ve been a confessional Lutheran my whole life! I volunteer, I give good offerings that honor the important work of gospel ministry, I certainly do more than those people.* But the parable makes it clear – your place and your status in the kingdom of God don’t depend on how long you’ve been there or how much you could ever do. Your place in the kingdom of God is entirely dependent on God’s undeserved love for you in Christ.



God deals with us on the basis of his grace and mercy, not on the basis of what we think is fair. Thank God for that! When the workers started to complain, look at what the landowner said to them, **Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?** Twice in his answer to the grumbling workers, the landowner says, "I want." I want to pay him this amount. I want to give him what he hasn't worked for. It might seem insignificant, but this is a conscious act of the master's will. No one will impose their personal standard of fairness onto God. He *wants* to act not according to what you think is fair, but according to his mercy and his grace. And what act did that conscious choice of will lead to? God revealed himself as just, but also revealed himself as gracious and merciful. How could God possibly satisfy his justice while also being gracious and merciful? How could he *give us what we deserve* and *not give us what we deserve* at the same time? Only in Christ. On the cross of Calvary is where God's justice, mercy, and grace all meet. The Almighty God sends his sinless Son to carry every one of your sins and mine – every time we want to demand what we think is fair or look down our noses at others who aren't as good as we are or grumble that God shows mercy even to *that* person – every sin was laid upon Jesus. He died to satisfy God's justice. He rose again to make God's grace and mercy your personal possession. God punishes his sinless Son so sinners like us could go free – forgiven. Does that sound fair to you?

Is God fair? No, he's inconceivably gracious to us in Christ! **He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.** Thank God that he's unfair, because it means your eternal salvation. So now you get to be unfair to the people around you. You get to show that same backwards sounding love to the people in your life. Reach out to those who wouldn't reach out to you. Help those who wouldn't lift a finger to assist you. Live for God's glory when nobody's watching and you won't be applauded. Give when there's no promise of reward. Love even when someone is hard to love. Forgive when there's no way they could make it up to you – because in Christ, that's exactly what God has done for you. So, when it comes to our forgiveness, our salvation, our eternity, we can cry out "It's not fair!" And thank God that it isn't!

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen

(Jude 24-25)