

Matthew 20:1-16

That's Not Fair!

Main idea: God is generous with grace. How does that make you feel?

I want to give out some candy this morning. Who wants some candy? What will you give me for this piece of candy? Sounds like a good trade. Here you go. Who else wants some? What can you do for it? Sounds good. Here you go. Anyone else? Here you go, you can have one. Here you go, you can have two. Here, I'll give you five.

Some of you may be thinking right now, "That's not fair! He got more than me! And I had to work for mine! He didn't have to do anything! That's not fair!"

Isn't it interesting how so many people have different ideas about what's fair and unfair today? We all seem to be so concerned about justice, and fairness, and these kinds of discussions divide us politically, and socially. And yet through all these arguments, I hope we can all see and agree that we all think justice is important. Fairness is important.

However, in our corrupt humanity, I've come to believe that not many people really even know what justice is.¹

Jesus addressed this in Matthew 20. Please turn there with me. Matthew 20:1-6. And please stand with me for the reading of God's word.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. (Matthew 20:1-14a)

The word of God for the people of God. *Thanks be to God.*

I read a true story about a young man named Michael Heiligenstein. It's not an especially exciting story, but it's a story of ambition and hard work. When Michael finished college in 2013, he moved back in with his parents and started looking for a job. He found a job that he liked working for a publishing company, and made \$15 per hour, which is pretty good pay for a single guy living with his parents. But for Michael, it wasn't enough.

¹ Micah 6:8. Doing justice is listed right alongside loving mercy. We often think of these things as opposites, but obviously according to Scripture, they have more in common than we consider.

So Michael decided to take a risk. In early 2015, he moved to New York City on his own, and looked for work there. Within a month, he landed a job in marketing that paid \$45,000 per year. But living in New York, with the high cost of living, it wasn't quite enough. But he worked hard, and within 8 months, he got a 33% raise, so Michael was now making \$60,000 a year at the age of 26, which was enough to pay his bills in New York City and even start saving a little. And I have no doubt that in the years to come, with his ambition and work ethic, he'll make even more.

Some people would hear this story and think, "That's exciting! I want to do that! That's the American dream!" And I'm grateful that in our country, hard work does allow for this kind of story. But is the purpose of life just about making more and more money?

Our Scripture today is a parable that Jesus told. A parable is simply a story that teaches us something. In this parable, the master of a house hired groups of people several times throughout the day. Near the end of the day, he even went out in search of more people, not because it seemed like he needed them, but just because he wanted to, and he found some who appeared to be content to not even work that day. They were just standing around at the eleventh hour of the day, not even actively looking for a job. And the master of the house told them, "Come, work for me, and I'll pay you." And at the end of the day, he gave them all, the ones who had worked all day, and the ones who had barely worked at all, all of them, the same wages.

In fact, the text says that the eleventh hour laborers worked one hour, but really the point is that they didn't earn their pay. I think it's clear from the parable that the wages that they were given was grace.

There's a trend right now to give waitresses insanely large tips. Have you seen this? Maybe you've seen it on the news or on TikTok. Basically, someone goes into a restaurant, orders a water, and then leaves \$1,000 or more as a tip for their waitress before they leave. Now, when the waitress gets that as a tip, will she at all think that she earned that? No, it was grace. And that's what the master of the house in Jesus's parable gave to the laborers. He gave them grace.

Now, the master of the house could have given them different amounts. He could have given some of them one, some of them two, and some of them five denarii. And maybe they would have thought that would have been more fair, because they all worked different amounts. But that's not what the master of the house wanted to do. He wanted to pay them all the same wage, so he did. Was that unfair?

Can you imagine the outrage this would cause if this kind of thing really happened in our culture today? The workers would form unions, and there would be protests and angry facebook posts, and people would tell all their friends about how unjust their boss was saying, "That's not fair!"

Jesus told this parable to teach us something about the kingdom of God. It's certainly not about how we should treat and pay our employees, or even how we ought to go to work when we have God as our Master. It's about God's economy in His kingdom, and how God's kingdom functions entirely different from how we think a kingdom ought to work.

There are basically two ideas in the United States about how our economy ought to function. Republicans typically say that those who work smarter, longer, or harder ought to be paid more. They should be able to earn whatever they're willing to earn. That's called capitalism. And Democrats say that those who make more have the moral responsibility to help those who make less. That's often called socialism. But neither of these systems appear to match up with how Jesus described His economy in the kingdom of God.

The parable that Jesus told begins with the master of a house going out early in the morning to hire laborers. They even agree on a wage: one denarius, which was the standard pay for a day's work. It was the amount of money that everyone agreed was fair, because with a denarius per day, a worker could afford everything that they needed. So when the workers were hired, they agreed to work for a denarius. That sounds a lot like capitalism.

But then the master of the house also gave those who were basically convinced to come late in the day, at the eleventh hour, the same pay, even though they really didn't do much work. And that sounds a lot like socialism. But once again, Jesus wasn't talking about human economies. He was teaching us about the kingdom of God.

Jesus told this parable to His disciples who were concerned about what they would gain by following Jesus. In the previous chapter leading up to this, Peter said, "We've left everything to follow you, Jesus! So what are we going to get?"² So by telling them this parable, Jesus in essence was saying to them, "I'm glad you've come to work in my kingdom, but if you think you deserve something more than the next guy who came later and did less, you've got the wrong idea. Everyone who even shows up receives the same grace."

In our economy, we have a system in which if you work harder, you get paid more. You do more and you get more. And that makes perfect sense in our world. I mean, it's a natural law and way of life. It's what we expect. Like, when you want to lose weight, you have to put in the work. You don't just get a gym membership, go to the gym, and then sit down while everyone else around you is working out, thinking that you'll get the same benefits as them just by being there.

No, if you want positive results, you have to put in the work. That's how it works in our economy.

But God's economy says that everyone who has even a mustard seed of faith in Jesus receives grace. It's not capitalism, and it's not socialism. It's not a redistribution of wealth. In fact, it's not a wage at all, but a gift.³

A lot of people think that Christianity is full of rules, and that God is trying to keep people out of heaven, but the Bible is clear that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.⁴

Jesus made the point of the parable abundantly clear in the last few verses. Look at the end of verse 14. The master said:

I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? So the last will be first, and the first last. (Matthew 20:14b-16)

So who will be first, and who will be last in God's kingdom?

Well, I tried to figure it out. I took just three of us to try to figure out who would be first and who would be last.

² Matthew 19:27

³ Romans 6:23

⁴ Romans 10:13



I put Ed at the top because he's a hard worker! He teaches Sunday School, and he's a trustee, and he's probably the best bowler that's here this morning. So he must be first.

Next I put Tina, because she also teaches Sunday School, and because she has to live with Ronald and Matthew, so that's got to make her a saint. So maybe she should even be first.

Finally, I put myself last. And I really struggled with that, because I'm the pastor, so I thought surely I must be first, but then I thought, "Yeah, but if I want to be first, the Bible says I need to make myself last. So I'm making myself last so I can be first."

Maybe you think you're a pretty moral person, and that you've served God faithfully all your life. If so, then you might think you'd be first, but find out that you're last because of your boastfulness. Or maybe you think you don't even deserve to be in God's kingdom, and you don't feel like you've really even done much at all to serve God. If so, then you might be surprised to find out that even though you thought you were last, you're actually first, because in actuality, you served God without letting your left hand know what your right hand was doing.⁵

But maybe now that you're thinking through all this, the tables have turned. Maybe prior to reading this parable, the one who thought he was first now expects to be last, and therefore will be first because he thought he was last. And maybe the one who thought he was last now expects to be first, and therefore will be last. Or maybe we'll all be last because we're all clamoring to be first, or we'll all be first because we all think that we're last.

Or maybe we're thinking about this all wrong. The point Jesus was making wasn't for us to determine who would be first and who would be last. Rather, he was saying that we're all equal. If we just show up, having faith in the Master of the house, we all receive the same grace.

In fact, we should all see ourselves as eleventh hour laborers, as equally last. None of us should feel like we've earned our wages before God. We're all recipients of His grace.⁶

And God is generous with His grace. Not just grace toward you, but grace toward those that you think really don't deserve it. How does that make you feel?

When the other workers, the ones who had been working all day under the heat of the sun, when they heard that the eleventh hour laborers had received a denarius, they expected to receive more. But how do you receive more than everything you need?

But they wanted more. They responded, "That's not fair. We deserve more! We demand more! So what do we get?!"

⁵ Matthew 6:3

⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9

During our freshman year of college, Abby broke up with her high school boyfriend and casually started dating a few other boys all at the same time. I was one of those boys. True story, sometimes at least at couple of us went to church with her on the same Sunday. I'm sure her church family wondered each Sunday which boys would follow her to church that day!

Well, over the course of time, I won. And on August 10, 2002 we got married. And on August 11, after waking up next to my bride, I said, "OK, now what do I get? I've stuck with you the longest! I beat all those other guys! What do I get?"

Of course, I didn't say that. But if I had, I think she would have responded, "You get me. And aren't I enough?"

You see, I think all the other workers in the vineyard in the parable weren't really working for the master of the house. They were working for themselves. They didn't care about the master's harvest, or about what the master cared about, or about the eleventh hour workers. All they really cared about was themselves, and so in their hearts, they asked the question, "What do I get?"

In the next chapter of Matthew, Jesus told another parable about another vineyard,⁷ or maybe it's the same vineyard, and in that parable, the master of the house hired workers to manage his vineyard while he went away on business. And in the parable, the workers in the vineyard showed what they really wanted. They wanted the vineyard. They wanted to be the master of the house. And they even went so far as to kill the master's son in order to try to claim the vineyard as their own.

Maybe you want to accuse God and say, "That's not fair!" Maybe you want to be like the disciples, and say, "What's in it for me?" But in doing so, what you're really doing is clamoring to be first, so that you might sit on the throne of your own life, taking the place of God.

Or let me put it this way. If you're thankful for God's grace, but think that someone else shouldn't get it because they haven't earned it, then are you really thankful for God's grace? Or would you rather have what's fair?

So what is fair?

Well, it would be fair of God for Him to let us all experience His wrath in hell.⁸ We've all sinned against Him, and He doesn't owe us anything. It would be an act of justice for all sinners to be sentenced to our punishment of hell, because we've all disobeyed God's commands. To allow us to go to hell would be fair and just of God.

It's interesting that what we often call "justice," people getting what they deserve, is exactly what our enemy, the devil, wants. Satan wants all people to justly experience God's wrath toward sin in hell forever.⁹

But that's not what God decided to do. And it's not really what God wanted.¹⁰ Instead, to satisfy His justice, God the Father allowed His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins.¹¹ Being God in the flesh, Jesus never sinned,

⁷ Matthew 21:33-44

⁸ Romans 3:23

⁹ John 10:10

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 2:4

¹¹ Romans 5:8

so when He died on the cross, it was as our substitute.¹² He died in our place. He took the punishment that we deserved upon Himself.

Isaiah 53 says it like this:

He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

And this, God declares, is justice. According to the Bible, justice is not us getting what we want or think we deserve, or other people getting what we think they deserve. Instead, justice is God getting what He wants and deserves.

God says it this way in Isaiah 46:9-10.

I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.' (Isaiah 46:9b-10)

That's justice. Justice is God getting what He wants and deserves.

Here's the thing. God is fair. He's just.¹³ In fact, He's the justifier of all who believe.¹⁴ In God's fairness, He gives mercy to those who don't deserve it, who didn't earn it, because Jesus earned it for them.

I like the way the King James Version translates 1 Peter 3:18. It says:

Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God. (1 Peter 3:18)

Listen, we might have notions of what we think is just and unjust, and many of them are right and good, but God says it's right and good for Jesus, the just One, to die for us, the unjust ones. If this wasn't right, God wouldn't have done it, because God only does what's right and good.

At the cross, both God's love and justice are clearly shown. If anyone in all of history had the right to say, "That's not fair," it would have been Jesus. Jesus never sinned, yet suffered and died for our sins.¹⁵ In a sense, that was the greatest injustice in all of history!

But rather than crying, "That's not fair," Jesus willingly went to the cross,¹⁶ to fulfill God's justice and love.

So, who will you be? Will you be grateful for God's grace, or will you grumble that God shows His grace to sinners, people who don't really deserve it? Well, that really comes down to whether you think you've earned it in some way, or if you see it as truly grace.

¹² Mark 10:45

¹³ Deuteronomy 32:4

¹⁴ Romans 3:26

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:21

¹⁶ John 10:18

If you receive His grace, then you'll want grace for your neighbor.¹⁷ You'll want grace for your enemy.¹⁸ You'll want grace for everyone you've ever thought didn't deserve grace, because you know that you didn't deserve it, and that's the only way that grace will truly be grace.

And if God's grace is great enough to save them, then it's surely great enough to save you, too. Or do you begrudge His generosity?

You see, I think when most Christians think about this parable, we rightly think about how God saved us by grace, because we know we don't deserve it. But I'm not sure how often we think about being people who also rejoice that that grace is shown to others who don't deserve it.

We love grace for us, but we secretly hope that others will get what they deserve. And what I'm telling you is that if you think like that, then you don't yet understand grace. Grace is only grace if it's given to people who don't deserve it.

Dorothy Day once said, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least." And I think that might be true of all of us.

Jesus said that if you don't forgive people their sins, neither will my Father in heaven forgive you.¹⁹

So, do you think that you've earned your place with God? Or do you see that Jesus died to give grace to even you?

¹⁷ Matthew 22:36-39

¹⁸ Matthew 5:44

¹⁹ Matthew 6:15