

# God's Gracious 'Unfairness'

## The Parable of the Vineyard Workers

Matthew 20:1-16

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One of the most remarkable gifts that children have is an intuitive sense of fairness. Have you ever noticed that? Somehow children just instinctively know when rules are broken, when someone else isn't playing fair, even when others are being treated unfairly. And most children become quite vocal when this happens. You hear it in words like, "It's my turn," "He hit me first," "She cheated," and the ever-popular two-syllable word, "That's not *FAY-YUR*."

**All in all, a strong sense of fairness is a wonderful gift, which many of us continue to develop into a sense of social justice, especially as it relates to issues of equality and human rights.** That which we consider fair and unfair plays an important role in guiding many of our thoughts, actions, and reactions.

It is out of a violated sense of fairness, for example, that we should be offended by today's parable of the workers in the vineyard. By the end of the parable, those who worked only one hour got paid the same amount as those who worked twelve hours.

This offensiveness was undoubtedly Jesus' intention when he first told this story to a group of Jewish followers. A gut-level sense of unfairness was also Matthew's intention when he included it in his gospel, which was addressed to a Christian community a couple of generations later. And does not our own Protestant work ethic also demand that those who work the longest hours should get paid the most?

Using an example taken directly from our current national financial crisis, is it fair that executives of failing financial institutions get multi-million dollar golden parachutes after running their companies into the ground while faithful and dedicated employees get only a pink slip?

I think most of us are acutely aware of what is fair and what is not. This morning's parable, however, is not a lesson incorporate economics or an example of how employers, even Christian ones, are to treat their employees. For it would be like paying a person who is hired in December the same full yearly salary as someone who is hired in January. I guarantee, if that were true, any company would soon have trouble finding anybody in the office from January through November.

Or, its like a teacher to gives an "A" to not only the student who diligently shows up for every class period and does very well on all the required assignments, but also gives and "A" to a student who doesn't show up until the

last day of class. I guarantee, if that were true, any teacher would soon have trouble finding any student in the classroom from the start of the semester through the next to last day of class. (Something tells me that our own Harold Hill, or any of the several other professors and teachers in this congregation wouldn't do that.)

No, the purpose of this parable is not to provide a practical guide for the management of a vineyard, a business, or a classroom. Biblical commentator and Presbyterian Thomas Long states, "Indeed, **the aim of this parable is to be monumentally impractical**, to fracture so thoroughly our expectations, our customary patterns of impracticality, that we are forced to think new thoughts – new thoughts about ourselves, about other people, and about God."

**So what are some of the ways this parable generates new insights?** First, the parable invites us to see the landowner as a symbol for God, evoking in our imaginations something of the character of God. Notice, for instance, that the focus of the landowner's concern is always on the laborers. The parable never mentions his need for workers, but rather that he is motivated by *their* need for work.

Particularly touching is the exchange with the five o'clock workers, the last crew. When the landowner found them standing around in the market at the eleventh hour of the twelve-hour workday, he asked them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" "Because no one has hired us," they respond. In other words, no one needed them.

In ancient times, day laborers needing work waited around in the town market square for someone to come by and hire them for the day. They were dependant on this happening in order to feed their families and simply survive. The image gets us in touch with the vulnerability of the local people and problem of unemployment.

While living in the inner-city of Dallas for over a decade I often witnessed the same phenomenon. Whether in the parking lot of a nearby Sam's Club or at a small convenience store corner that I used to drive by, groups of men gathered and patiently waited for someone to drive up (usually in a pick-up truck) and hire a few of them to work for the day, or even a couple of hours. They were dependant on this happening in order to feed their families.

It is not an idyllic scene, and it is certainly reminiscent of the scene in this biblical parable. As one biblical commentator points out, "These are among the poor for whom the kingdom of God would bring change. Beside the poverty, the rawness of being at other people's whim is humiliating, being an expendable resource to be exploited."

I can't count the number of times I've heard people reference those who are seemingly standing around all day doing nothing as being unemployed because they are too lazy to seek a job. In my experience, however, this couldn't be further from the truth. The vast majority of people standing in the market square or a corner parking lot are there for the expressed *purpose* of seeking employment.

In ancient Palestine, the amount of money needed for daily subsistence was a coin known as a denarius. That is what each of the laborers in the parable were paid at the end of the day – enough to survive. **The divine landowner in this parable, then, employs even those the world ignores and forgets.** As he surveys these idle folk who stand there like the leftover kids on a ball field who nobody wants on the team, he calls out graciously, **“I can use you. You also go into the vineyard.”**

At the end of the day, the landowner gives all the workers what they need. Everybody gets a denarius, a full day's wage; everybody gets enough to provide for life.

When the all-day laborers grumble about the pay scale, complaining and moaning that the one-hour crew has been made their equals, the landowner merely reminds one of them that he got what he bargained for: “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?”

The last-hour folks, who were well aware of their plight of going hungry if not for the benevolence of the landowner, are given sheer grace: a full day's wage. But the first-hour workers, even though they don't recognize it, are also given grace: a full day's wage, the sustenance of life. But **grace is not their framework.** Their vocabulary is filled with cries of “I deserve,” “where's mine?” and “that's not FAY-YUR.” This is the merit-based economy of the world, which is just as real today as it was back then.

This is when we learn that **God's kingdom, God's economy, doesn't run on the same set of standards as the world's. What Jesus is teaching is that divine grace does not rest on the merit system.** And at some level we must admit that that offends us. We wonder if grace does not undermine the whole reason for being good, or observing standards, or keeping rules, or following the law, or living justly.

Do we not also want to second-guess a God who breaches the system and equalizes the pay like this? **Shouldn't our reward be greater for being better Christians? Don't all these stars in our crown count for something?**

In a Dennis the Menace cartoon, Dennis and his little friend Joey are leaving Mrs. Wilson's house, their hands full of cookies. Joey says, “I wonder what we did to deserve this?” Dennis answers, “Look, Joey. Mrs. Wilson give us cookies not because we're nice, but because she's nice.” I find this to be a great way to define grace.

What Jesus teaches us about the kingdom of God is that **despite our schemes of religious merit and competition, God chooses to be generous.**

Generous to the leper, to the lame, to the Gentile, to the last and the least, to the outcast, to the oppressed, to the last minute worker as well as to the all-day laborer.

Generous to the new church member as well as the life-long church member, to the occasional attender as well as to tireless church leaders, to those who contribute a small amount to the life and ministry of the congregation as well as those who give generously and sacrificially.

The question is, **What do we think of this kind of gracious and merciful God? When it is shown toward us, of course, we like it fine, but the test comes when God shows mercy and grace to people we do not think deserve it.** As Tom Long puts it, "When we look in our pay envelopes and find that we received the same measure of mercy and grace as those who, in our opinion, have arrived too late with too little, then our response is a test of kingdom character."

In our Old Testament lesson, Jonah sat on the edge of the hill outside of Nineveh and pouted when God spared the city. Jonah, who didn't want to act as God's prophet in the first place, certainly thought that God would not spare these Gentiles. Jonah was upset. He thought that God's gracious generosity was unfair.

**So we must face the same question that Jesus brings up at the conclusion of his parable, "Are you envious because I am generous?"** The literal Greek translation is a bit more graphic, "Is your eye evil because I am good."

In this parable comes, ironically, the most challenging and offensive word of all: God is generous. Again, using Long's flair for the poetic, "God's generosity spills over the levees we have built to contain it and surges mercifully over the landscape of human life."

**Divine grace, we learn, is a great equalizer that rips away our presumed privilege, and puts all recipients on an even plain.** That's hard to stomach when we have burdened ourselves with a merit system, and want to see some reward for our labors. That's hard to stomach when we discover that those who are guilty of the wrongs we have long opposed (for example, racism, sexism, heterosexism, nationalism, and the like) are brothers and sisters to whom divine generosity has been shown. Grace no longer seems so sentimental. That's not our definition of amazing grace.

**Yes it's true, God's graciousness, when applied to others, can appear to us as a violation of our sense of fairness. BUT, what if we were to see ourselves as the eleventh-hour workers** – those that only worked one hour but were graciously given an entire day's wage? In that case, instead of feeling like we were treated unfairly, we become the ones who get much more than what we think we deserve. **God's gracious 'unfairness' is then seen for what it truly is: God gracious generosity.**

Here's the bottom line: **In the kingdom of God, the merit system is thrown out.** There are no stars for our crown. **Our service is to be done not for reward, but out of response to God's goodness to us.** In God's kingdom, no one gets less than what is promised.

**When we focus on giving thanks for our own blessings instead of complaining to God about what others get, God's generosity and indiscriminate love still may not always look fair, but it sure looks great!** So this week, spend some time in reflecting upon how has God been graciously fair and generous to you!

Amen.