

"The Laborers in the Vineyard"
Matt. 20:1-16

--CEFC 1/27/19; 5/2/99

"It's just not fair!"--
Do you ever hear that complaint in your home,
or in your workplace, or at school?
I'm sure you do--
I wouldn't be surprised if you've heard yourself say it recently.

We used to get it all the time in our house--
"It's not fair--
Why do I have to go to bed
when my brother gets to stay up?
It's not fair--
His piece of cake is bigger than mine.
It's not fair--
why does he get to go to the game and I don't?
It's not fair."

It's the thought you immediately get when you see somebody
receiving some benefit that you didn't.

I think such a demand for impartiality in the distribution of goods
is deeply rooted in our American consciousness--
we recognize the wrongness of personal discrimination.
"Equal justice for all," is fundamental to our democracy.

Everybody ought to be treated in exactly the same, we say.
We are deeply egalitarian in that respect—
in principle, if not in practice.

But I dare say,
this desire for fair play goes deeper than our American experience.
It transcends the bounds of time and culture,
and is part of our fundamental moral make-up,
reflecting something of the image of God in us.
By nature, people in Katmandu long for justice
just as much as people in Kansas.

It is rooted in an innate sense of moral accountability--
that each person ought to receive exactly what they deserve--
no more no less.

That's what justice is all about, isn't it?
Isn't that what it means to be fair? //

But when Jesus of Nazareth began his ministry to the Jews of Galilee and Judea
 he challenged our ordinary ways
 of ordering human life.

He talked about a new way of life,
 a new order,
 an order which he called the kingdom of heaven.

In some ways his task in talking about this kingdom
 was as difficult as someone going to Mars
 and trying explain to *Martians* how our American democratic system works.
 Jesus had to resort to illustrations and analogies--
 some of which were designed to shake us up
 and to shatter our own preconceptions.

"The kingdom of heaven is like . . .," he would say in many different ways.

"It's like a mustard seed;

it's like a man finding a precious pearl in a field . . .

it's like weeds growing up in a field of wheat . . . "

He spoke this way so that we might be better able to grasp
 what God's glorious kingdom is all about.

For the values of this kingdom,
 the way things work in this kingdom,
 seem from our perspective to be turned upside down.

"In this kingdom," he says,

"the first shall be last and the last shall be first."

And that's exactly what he's done in our passage this morning.

Jesus tells a story, a parable,

used to illustrate the upside-down way this coming kingdom works.

It's helpful to see that v. 1 of our passage
 actually picks up the last verse of the previous chapter.

(Let me remind you that the original had no chapter divisions.)

In Mt. 19:30 we read those words:

"But many who are first will be last,

and many who are last will be first."

And v. 1 of chapter 20 begins with the word **"for"** (γάρ)—

referring back to what was just said—

"for the kingdom of heaven is like . . ."

This story is given to illustrate one way that this kingdom Jesus came to bring
 is an upside-down world.

Just to underline that point, so we won't miss it,

the story ends by repeating those words in v. 16—

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Jesus' words are meant to be disorienting to our common way of thinking. //

This story is often called the parable of the workers in the vineyard,
 but it is probably more accurately titled,
 the parable of the "Eccentric Employer."¹
 For just look at what the employer in this story does--

Mt. 20:1--"**the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner
 who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.**"

Nothing unusual about this—
 This was typical practice at the time--
 as the day laborers would gather in the village marketplace at dawn
 hoping to be put to work--
 the ancient equivalent of the "temp agency,"
 or of workers gathering around the 7-11.

We know that the typical daily wage
 for soldiers and unskilled manual workers was one denarius,
 and that's just what these first laborers agreed to work for.
 There was nothing unusual about what happens here.

But about three hours later, maybe at 9:00 in the morning,
 the landowner figures he needs more workers,
 so he returns to the marketplace
 and finding some, he sends *them* out into the fields,
 assuring them that they will get a fair wage.

And then at noon, he does the same thing,
 and then at 3:00,
 and then finally at 5:00--the eleventh hour--
 with just an hour of sunlight left,
 he hires still more workers for his vineyard.

But the real jolt in this story comes in the end.
 Instead of pro-rating the denarius-per-day wage
 to account for the various lengths of time the laborers had actually worked,
 the landowner begins with those who had only worked one hour
 and gives them twelve times what they could have expected--
 a full denarius.

This naturally raises the expectations
 of those who had begun so early in the morning
 and had toiled through the long, hot day.
 Surely their pay would be adjusted upward accordingly, they thought.

But when they came to get their paycheck,

¹So F.W. Beare.

they were shocked to discover that they only got one denarius--
 exactly what everybody else got.

They began to grumble against the landowner.
 v. 12-- **'These 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.'
 "That's just not fair," they complained,
 and I would guess that most of us would agree with them.

What's going on here?
 What is this story all about?
 It's certainly not a model
 of how to maintain good labor relations,
 nor of how to run a profitable business.
 What does Jesus want us to learn about the kingdom of heaven
 from this rather discomfoting story?

The landowner's response to these workers in vv. 13-15
 points us to the message Jesus wants to communicate—
 a message about the ways of God and his kingdom.

I've picked out three observations,
 and then two applications for our attention this morning.

First, look at the landowner's first response to the complaints of the first workers
 that comes in v.13--

"Friend, I am not being unfair to you.
Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?
 [That's just what you got, isn't it?]
Take your pay and go."

This verse refers back to v. 2 and the agreement that had been made;
 but it also echoes v. 4 in which the landowner
 says to the second group of workers,
'You also go and work in my vineyard,
and I will pay you whatever is right.'

The landowner doesn't cheat anybody--
 nobody gets shortchanged--
 what he has done is entirely just; it is right.

And that affirmation of the landowner is surely also an affirmation about God.

1. The first thing that is made very clear in this story
is that **God is just** in all of his dealings.

He always does what is right--
he never cheats anyone or defrauds anyone
or gives anyone any promises that he won't keep.
He is good to his word.

You can be sure that when you deal with God
he will never give you less than what you deserve.
Never.

As Abraham once declared,
“**Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?**” (Gen. 18:25).
He will indeed.

Think about it—
if God is not just, then what does the idea of justice even mean?

But that, of course, is not the real thrust of the story.
This parable not only affirms the justice of the landowner,
but, even more, his generosity.

For the treatment of the first workers
is contrasted with the treatment of the workers
who come at the eleventh hour.

They only work one hour, in the cool air of the late afternoon,
and they get a full day's pay.

The employer's action in taking on additional workers at the end of the day
whose productivity could not possibly match the wage they were paid
was clearly an act of kindness, compassion and beneficence.²

This is not the kind of behavior that anyone would expect
or could expect from any employer.

It went well beyond any reasonable measurement of what was just.
It transcended justice altogether--
it was grace--
an unmerited gift.

The kingdom of heaven, Jesus says,
is like this eccentric employer who breaks all the rules of business
to pour out his blessing on these undeserving workers.

What a wonderful message that is!
What a wonderful kingdom this is!
It's a kingdom full of grace!

²so Jeremias, *Parables*, pp. 37,139.

By what possible logic can you do that?

In the logic of this world,
 everybody has to get just what they deserve--
 and everybody deserves to be treated just the same.
 But that's not the logic of the kingdom of heaven--
 The logic of the kingdom of heaven is based on grace and mercy--
 and no one ever deserves grace or mercy.
 A grace that is deserved is not grace at all.
 No one has a right to be shown mercy--
 You only have a right to justice--
 mercy can only come as a gift.

And the gift of grace and mercy ultimately belongs
 to the sovereign will of God.
"Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?"

Those eleventh-hour workers didn't do anything
 to deserve their extra income.
 They didn't figure out that if they just hid until the end of the day
 they could get full pay with little work.
 No, they were simply there because no one had hired them,
 and the landowner showed them his grace.
 He called them, and they went into his vineyard.

That's what grace is all about--
 it is freely given by the giver,
 and it can never be deserved by the recipient.
 It can only be received.

That's what the kingdom of heaven is about--
 it's a kingdom of grace--
 God freely calling us into a relationship with himself.
 It is a kingdom where we discover our freedom
 by allowing him to be our ruler.
 It is based entirely on his mercy.
 It is a kingdom based on the sovereign grace of God.

This kingdom Jesus came to bring—it's different—
 it turns our way of thinking upside down.
 In this kingdom the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

So what applications can we draw from this story?
 What claim does this teaching make upon our lives?

There are two that I would like to highlight,
 though, in some ways, they both reflect the same reality--

1. First, **Don't begrudge God's grace to others.**

The first workers grumbled because of what the later workers received--
 `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.'

In the context of Jesus' ministry you can imagine religious Jews
 who had all their lives kept kosher
 and fulfilled all the rituals of the law
 complaining about the lawless riff-raff
 that Jesus was now accepting as his followers.
 You can't accept them on the same footing as us—
 It's not fair!

In response he simply asks,
 "**Are you envious because I am generous?**"

Here is the natural human resentment
 that arises when we compare our own situation with that of others.

It's not fair, we say.
 Why did she get a promotion
 while I'm stuck in this dead-end job?
 Why did you heal that guy's cancer,
 but you didn't heal mine?
 Why is he so smart,
 why is she so attractive,
 why are they so **gifted**,
 and I'm just so ordinary?

It's just not fair!

"Are you envious because I am generous?"

You see, when you think like that,
 it shows you haven't quite caught on
 to what the kingdom of heaven is really all about.

It's all about grace--
 it's appreciating that we all that have is grace--everything.

I know that Bart Simpson prays before his meal--
 "Dear God, we bought all this food with our own money,
 so thanks for nothing."

But we know that that's not true--

the money we have is a gift from God--
 the ability and talent to make money is a gift from God,
 the health to make money is a gift from God,
 the fact that we live in a country of such abundance is a gift of God,
 even the mouths we have to eat and even to breathe
 are a gift from God.

It's all a gift from God.

Those first workers didn't get that—
 They lived in the values of this world—
 you get what you deserve.
 They hadn't appreciate the values of the kingdom of heaven—
 it's all a gift.

So if you ever start saying to yourself—
 I've tried to do the right thing all my life—
 I've been a good church member,
 I've faithfully tithed my income—before taxes, mind you.
 I've even served overtime in the church nursery.

So why does this person just off the street,
 who's never done a thing for God—
 why should he be accepted on the same level as me?

If you think like that, you've forgotten that it's all a gift.

Why do you even exist rather than not at all?--
 it is a gift from God.

That's the truth of the kingdom of God--
 it's all a gift from God--
 so don't complain when God pours out his grace on someone
 and gives someone else
 a gift you don't have--
 thank him for the gifts you do have--
 and you have lots to thank him for,
 if you just think for a moment.

1. First, **Don't begrudge God's grace to others.**
No—rejoice that God is gracious!

2. Second, related to that,
Don't demand God's justice for yourself.

So you think he's not being fair with you?
 Think for a moment about what is fair--
 God created you--

he gave you life and breath.
 He is the rightful ruler of this universe,
 and he has put us all into this world
 to reflect his beauty and goodness
 by living in obedience to his will.

We owe him our very lives,
 but we turn our backs on him--everyone of us.
 We live for ourselves,
 and we reject his rule, we disobey his commands--
 and justice says,
 the one who sins shall die.

Is that the justice you demand?
 What else does God owe you, but the sentence of death?

We live in an age of entitlement--
 we feel we are entitled to food and clothing,
 to a decent wage,
 to adequate housing,
 to quality education,
 to the best health care available, and so much more.

But we need to get it out of our heads that before God
 we are entitled to anything--

It's not true.
 He doesn't owe us health, or wealth, or happiness.
 He doesn't owe us anything at all.

"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"

Paul asks in Rom. 11--

"For from him and through him and to him are all things.
 (Rom. 11:35)

We have forfeited any claim we may have upon God--
 and in the kingdom of heaven everyone will recognize that.
 In that place, no one will have cause to boast.

The only way into that kingdom is by God's grace in the gospel—
 the good news that God has poured out his love
 by sending his Son to die for our sin.
 And he rose again in triumph over sin and death,
 and calls everyone everywhere to turn from going their own way
 and put their faith in him as their Savior and Lord.

We can't demand fairness from God--
 those who **do** don't know what they're asking for.

to go to church.

I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar,
 and eventually became a judge.
 Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me
 to admit that I was sinner on a level with that burglar.
 It took much more grace to forgive me for my pride and self-righteousness,
 to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God
 than the convict whom I had sent to prison." /

In God's kingdom, the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

That's because in that kingdom,
 it's not about what you deserve---
 it's all of grace.

Let's pray.

1. Acknowledge that God is a righteous Judge--
 he would be fair if he condemned you to hell.

 2. Rejoice that God is generous--
 in his grace he has made a provision for our sin--
 the death of his Son--
 Receive that generosity.

 3. Recognize that God is sovereign--
 he can bestow his generosity however he wills—
 so don't begrudge the way he disperses his gracious gifts—
 Thank him for his grace toward you.
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Baptism—

**Stories with a Purpose:
Parables of Jesus, #2**

**"The Laborers in the Vineyard"
Matt. 20:1-16**

"It's just not fair!" That's a common complaint whether at home or in the workplace. We all have a conception of what that means. But in our passage this morning Jesus challenges our conception of fairness as it relates to the kingdom of heaven.

I. Three Observations:

A. God Is Fair

B. God Is Generous

C. God Is Sovereign

II. Two Applications:

A. Don't begrudge God's Grace to Others--

B. Don't Demand God's Justice for Yourself--

Sermon Response:

""The Laborers in the Vineyard""
Matt. 20:1-16

- When was the last time you felt you weren't treated fairly? What does being treated "fairly" mean to you?
- Can you sympathize with the workers who worked the whole day in this story?
- Have you ever felt that God has not dealt fairly with you? Do you believe that God is always right in the way he deals with you?
- How have you experienced the generosity of God? Have you ever been jealous because of his generosity to other people?
- Reflect on God's grace in your life. What aspects of his grace make the greatest impression on your heart?
- What do you think Jesus means when he says that in the kingdom of heaven "many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first"? How should that impact the way you live your life?