

## Matthew 20:1-19 – “What Is Fair?”

This parable is given in response to, and in the context of, Peter’s question from Matthew 19:27: “...See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?”. In Peter’s question there appeared a wrong motive for service. His thought was that they’ve given up so much, so what will their payout be? This parable provides some answers for us now and explains the right attitude in service.

**20:1-16 - “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, <sup>4</sup> and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup> Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. <sup>6</sup> And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ <sup>7</sup> They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’**

**<sup>8</sup> “So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ <sup>9</sup> And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. <sup>11</sup> And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’ <sup>13</sup> But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. <sup>15</sup> Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’ <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”**

The story itself is easy to follow. A landowner needs some help for his vineyard. He goes out and hires some workers and agrees on the terms of pay. Everyone is happy with the contract – a denarius for a day’s wage. That was quite common and sufficient for a day’s worth of work.

- **Early in the morning** would most likely be the start of the workday which was about 6am. Typically workers would work from 6am-6pm.

But then the landowner goes out to look for more workers. He finds some and hires them at 9am (**the third hour**).

- But this time there's no contract. No guaranteed wages. They are all just going on faith that they're going to get paid and get paid fairly based on what the landowner said: **whatever is right I will give you**.

The landowner repeated this in the sixth and ninth hour, which was at noon and 3 pm. Again, no contract or guaranteed wages.

Then for some reason the landowner went out again near the end of the day (**the eleventh hour**) which was at 5pm. There're really only about an hour worth of work at this point before the sun sets and it becomes too dark for them to accomplish anything.

He finds some workers who have been waiting all day in the marketplace to be hired. They're not lazy, they're not trying to avoid work, they just haven't been hired. But they're desperate for work, evident in the fact they've been faithfully standing and waiting all day to get any kind of work they can for any amount of time they can work.

- Again, the landowner promises he will give them whatever is right.

Though the story is easy to follow, the interpretation or application is a little more difficult. Because none of this makes sense in our modern western world thinking.

You have a businessman (the landowner) who is paying his workers the same amount across the board no matter how long they worked. He paid the workers who worked the full day a fair amount, but he gave everyone that amount even if they only worked an hour or so. This seems quite irrational. It's bad business practice. It's going to cause labour disputes and get the unions fired up. This kind of practice is going to cause the businessman to go bankrupt if he keeps it up.

Some have tried to read more into this parable to make it make sense to them.

- They will reason that the workers hired at the beginning of the day didn't work that hard. They took a lot of coffee breaks, leaned on their shovels and chatted a lot looking more like city workers than vineyard workers. Whereas those that worked fewer hours really put their all into the job, knowing they had less time to make an impression. They did about the same amount of work in fewer hours than those that worked a 12-hour day. So it was equal

pay for equal work. But this interpretation is a stretch and nothing in this parable hints at this being a right way to view this.

- Some have said that the coin used to pay the workers at the end of the day were different. One was a gold denarius, another was a silver denarius, another a bronze one, and so forth. Each having differing value. So each worker was paid accurately based on the amount of time they worked.
- Some have taught through this parable that rewards in heaven are not based at all on what we do here on earth. But the Bible does teach that rewards will be given based on what we do for Christ.

So none of these explanation really hold any weight as far as trying to explain this parable in a way that makes sense.

So what is the application of this parable?

This parable is teaching us the values of the kingdom. Like most parables, it begins with, ***the kingdom of heaven is like***... In other words, we're not trying to explain this based on earthly understanding. Rather we're viewing this in a way that is meant to get us to think differently than how the world operates and functions. Jesus often flipped things around and wanted his disciples to have a completely contrary view to what the world usually does or thinks.

This is why this parable is bookmarked by the phrase, the first will be last and the last first. The world teaches you got to fight to get ahead. You want to be number 1, then sometimes you need to be ruthless and cutthroat (kind of like how my wife plays cards).

Jesus often flipped the script on the world's narrative. Whoever humbles himself will be exalted. You want to be great, be a servant. Somebody strikes you on one cheek, turn the other to them also. This sounded like foolishness to the general public. But in God's economy, these were the ways of Christ, and the values of the kingdom.

The big teaching point in this parable is looking at the great grace of God. God is the landowner who goes out and gathers workers. He provides a generous payment for those that work for Him. But it's not just based on the amount of work put in, it's based on the need. Those workers that were hired later in the day still had need of income. They possibly had children at home that needed food, perhaps there was debt that needed to be paid. Either way, they weren't paid for the work they did, they were paid according to the generosity of the landowner to provide their need.

- Why was the landowner even going out at the eleventh hour to hire workers? He knew by the time they got their instructions and got settled into their task, time would have been up. The whistle would have blown for the workers to come receive their pay. Why bother involving them? Because the landowner was looking for people to show this benevolence and care towards. He was looking to lavish grace.

This is what God does for us in salvation. None of us deserve to be saved. It's all a complete work of grace. There's nobody that deserves a greater place in heaven or better rewards. Everything we have and will receive is all by God's grace.

This is of particular relevance to these disciples who are looking at their position with Jesus and wondering what they're going to receive for giving up all to follow Him. By the world's standards they should get the most prominent positions, the greatest of rewards. But they may be in for a surprise in eternity when they see a guy like Russell Brand come walking in and be showered with God's grace and rewards of eternal life. The disciples may be looking at this thinking, *but we've been around longer. This guy just came in at the eleventh hour. He used to be some new age nut bar and now he's just getting the same blessing as we are?*

Yes! And the lesson is that none of us deserve any of this. That person is in need of saving as much as the next person. And God is not basing this favour on merit but on grace. Even our service done to the Lord is done out of the grace God bestows upon us to serve Him.

Again, the idea in this parable is that God's way of compensating for service may differ from what we expect. God's sense of "fairness" is not the typical self-serving human perspective. He does not compare us to one another but to our fulfillment of our own stewardship.

"To one and all this parable presents a firm rebuttal. One's standing in the kingdom of God does not depend on human merit in any way whatsoever. Matthew is as clear on this as ever Paul was. It depends on the sheer unmerited favour of the only one who is ultimately good (19:17) and who accepts those who could never be good, in order that this free grace may produce in them genuinely good works. These good works are not meritorious deeds for life: they are

responsive, grateful behaviour springing from the life that God in his generosity has given them.”<sup>1</sup>

If our service to God is about trying to get something out of it, then we’ve missed it. God will not be a debtor to anyone. He’s the One that has showered such grace upon us. He’s the giver and we are the responders. It’s His grace that saves, His grace that enables us to live for Him, His grace that supplies the ability to serve Him and others. We do these things because He has saved us by His grace.

So our focus is not to be on what we’ll be paid, our focus is on the One who paid it all for us. Our delight is not on what we’ll get, but on what we have already received. We have been given eternal life! It’s what everyone who answers His call receives by grace. That’s the greatest reward.

If these 12-hour workers didn’t see what the 1-hour workers received, they would have taken their denarius and been happy with it because that’s what they agreed upon. It’s only when comparison sets in and we look at things through the world’s standards instead of God’s criteria that we get upset or offended.

- And notice in this parable God doesn’t even specify what His criteria is for rewards. He just does what He chooses. The issue is not about being unfair to those who worked longer, but on His benevolence and grace upon those who didn’t work long. To that we should rejoice at our Heavenly Father’s goodness.

Here's some more lessons we learn from this parable:

### 1. God Is Fair

When the workers who worked all day got paid, they cried out: *Unfair!* But they received exactly what they agreed to.

God will never act unfairly to us. He will always be just and righteous. In His grace He will never be less than fair, but at times will be more than fair with others.

- We tend to think from our system of law of getting what you deserve. But the system of grace is so foreign to us. God deals with us based on who He is and what He’s done, not by what we’ve done or who we are.

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<sup>1</sup> Green, M. (2001). *The message of Matthew: the kingdom of heaven* (pp. 212–213). InterVarsity Press.

- So the Lord showed grace and blessing to those that were hired near the end of the day. And He paid those that worked all day exactly what He said He would. Was this unfair? Nope.

God will always be fair with you.

## 2. God Rewards Faithfulness

God is not looking for everyone to be on the front lines or for everyone to be in a prominent place. He's not rewarding people based on how much they've done, but more so in how they've done it.

We think of guys like Billy Graham and we think, that guy no doubt is going to receive a huge reward in heaven. But what about that lady who's raising her son in anonymity who's teaching him in the ways of the Lord. What about those that spend time on their knees interceding for the various ministries and ministers who are taking the gospel around the world. They are being faithful in what the Lord has called them to do. I think they are going to be brought to the front of the line as rewards are given out. And many of us will be thinking, who's that? I never heard of them before? Exactly! The first shall be last and the last first. The ground is level at the cross.

- And it's so important for us to see and know what the Lord has called us to do. What does the Lord have for you? We need to be faithful to serve in that capacity.

## 3. God Wants us Focussed on Him

Everything was fine with these guys who worked the whole day until they began to look at what happened with others. They were quite happy with earning a day's wage until they saw what others received. When we look to compare ourselves with others, we begin to function more in the flesh than in the spirit. It's easy to get caught up in envy when we're looking at others (*is your eye evil*) and wonder why we're not getting the same breaks or blessings. When we're focused on others it's easy to get discouraged (eg. The prodigal son's brother). This shows us that as citizens of His kingdom, we must adopt an entirely new kind of thinking. We must abandon our greedy, competitive spirit, and think like the Lord

We're to be focused on Jesus. He's the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2).

And I believe it's no accident that following this parable we have the third formal prediction by Jesus of His death and resurrection (Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23).

This is important for a couple reasons:

- First, since He is our example to follow, we must remain focused on Him. He sets a very great example for us in the life He lived here on earth.
- Secondly, though we may feel like we've been treated unjustly, we must never think God is unjust.

These next few verses show us that clearly...

**20:17-19 - *Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, <sup>18</sup> "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, <sup>19</sup> and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again."***

If ever we think we're being dealt an unfair hand, we only need to look at what God did to save us and give us the ultimate gift of eternal life. He sent His Son to bear the penalty for our sins. He was tortured at the hands of the Romans, suffering a humiliating and painful death by crucifixion. That's the only right comparison to make. We can't look at how other people are blessed and wonder why not me? We need to look at Jesus and recognize the incredible grace lavished upon us that we didn't have to suffer what He did. That we can be forgiven, saved, and brought into an eternal existence with God! Hallelujah for that.

***And the third day He will rise again.*** Praise the Lord there is hope when we put our faith in Jesus. We're not left to wonder if we get into heaven. If there is even a heaven or everlasting life. We're not left to wonder if we're going to be compensated for our faithfulness. The resurrection is our great hope and assurance that all things end in glory when we have received Jesus. We won't be disappointed, we won't be left wanting, we'll be so full of joy simply for His salvation through grace.

**Psalm 16:11, *"You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore."***

**1 Peter 1:3–4, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,"***