

Grace
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Matthew 20:1-16 (Parable of the Vineyard Workers)

Life is NOT FAIR (just saying in case you haven't noticed.) When do we usually say those words? When do we NOT hear anyone say, "life is not fair."

The fact that life is not fair is mentioned multiple times in scripture. Just read Job, Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, Jeremiah. (References in the footnotes)ⁱ

Humanly speaking we define "fairness" as everyone getting what they deserve based on effort, righteousness, expectation, or entitlement. In today's text Jesus used a parable about workers in a vineyard to teach us to be glad that the Kingdom of Heaven is not "fair" based on that definition of "fairness."

This text is a continuation of where we left off last week in Matthew 19. Jesus declared that it is hard for those who love material things to follow Him. Peter asked, "*What will WE get for following you?*" We could sum up Jesus' reply with: More than you deserve. Then Jesus said, "*In God's Kingdom the greatest will be least; and those who seem least will be great.*" Then He transitioned to a parable (an everyday illustration that reveals a kingdom truth) to make His point.

(NLT) — **1** "For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2** He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work. **3** "At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. **4** So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. **5** So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. **6** "At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?' **7** "They replied, 'Because no one hired us.' "The landowner told them, 'Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.' **8** "That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. **9** When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. **10** When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage. **11** When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, **12** 'Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.' **13** "He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? **14** Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. **15** Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?' **16** "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last."

- Question (be honest): You work 8 hours. Someone else shows up for the last 30 minutes. You both get the same paycheck. What's your immediate reaction?
- What about those "late hires" who got full pay? How do you think they felt?
- Do you relate more to the all day workers or the late hires?
- Ever do a "group project" in school? If you got an "A" why be upset?
- Was the landowner being "unjust"? How would you describe his behavior?
- Look back at verses 13-15:

13 "...I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? **14** Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. **15** Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money?"

- If the first set of workers got what was promised, why were they complaining?
- In verse 15, the landowner basically said, *"I'm not unfair, I'm generous!"*
- This was not just a story about an unusual pay structure at the vineyard.
- In verse one Jesus said, *"The Kingdom of Heaven is like..."* then He ended in verse 16 with, *"those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last."*
- This is about the generosity of God's grace to those who respond to the gospel.
- Think about the mercy and grace God shows to us as sinners. Would you want Him to be fair (give you what you deserve) or generous? Easy answer, right?
- There is a lot of talk about "participation trophies." What is the complaint? Why are they seen as bad for kids?
- To be clear, I believe in the value of good, clean competition, championship teams and trophies for winners. The Apostle Paul wrote a lot about that.
- However, salvation has no "March Madness brackets." Everyone can win!
- When it comes to God's mercy and grace I'm all for "participation awards!"
- Ephesians 2:8-9 says if we had received grace through effort we would (what?)
- We don't earn God's grace by our works; that's a fact. However, when Peter asked, *"What will we receive for following you?"* Jesus described some special places and privileges for the Apostles. So, what is that all about? Are there "performance bonuses" for Christ-followers? What does scripture say?
 - 1 Cor. 3:8 — *"Each will receive his wages according to his labor."*
 - 1 Cor. 3:14–15 — *"If the work... survives, he will receive a reward... though he himself will be saved." [salvation and rewards are separate]*
 - 2 Cor. 5:10 — *"Each...may receive what is due for what he has done..."*
 - Matt. 6:20 — *"Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven..."*
 - Matt. 10:42 — *"He will by no means lose his reward."*
 - Heb. 6:10 — *"God is not unjust so as to overlook your work..."*
 - 2 Tim. 4:8 — *"There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness..."*
 - Jas. 1:12 — *"He will receive the crown of life..."*
- You competitive sports fans will be glad to know there will be rewards in Heaven! Rewards won't get us into Heaven, but God will graciously reward faithfulness in what we've done for Him on earth once we're there.

- Back to the mercy and grace of God. We naturally relate to the group of workers who had been there all day but I would like to send you away today seeing things from the perspective of the workers who were only there for part of the day.
- Our friend Alistair Begg has a brief video from a sermon that went viral. It is called “The Man on the Middle Cross.” Have you seen it? You should. <https://blog.truthforlife.org/the-man-on-the-middle-cross-said-i-can-come>
- In the concluding point of his sermon, Alistair posed the famous question: “If you were to die tonight and stand before God, and He were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into My heaven?’ what would you say?”
- Alistair said, “[If we were to answer] in the first person, we’ve immediately gone wrong. “Because I...” “Because I believed. Because I have faith...the only proper answer is in the third person: “Because He...” “Because He...”
- Then Alistair shifted to imagine what it must have been like when the thief on the cross that Jesus saved arrived in Heaven.
 - Angel: “What are you doing here?”
 - Thief: “I don’t know.”
 - “What do you mean, you don’t know?”
 - “Well, ‘cause I don’t know.”
 - “Excuse me. Let me get my supervisor.”
 - Supervisor angel: “So, we’ve just a few questions for you. First of all, are you clear on the doctrine of justification by faith?”
 - The guy says, “I’ve never heard of it in my life.”
 - “And what about... the doctrine of Scripture?” This guy’s just staring.
 - And eventually, in frustration, he says, “On what basis are you here?”
 - And he said, “The man on the middle cross said I can come.”
- How does it change our attitude if we truly believe that God owes us NOTHING yet Jesus died to give us EVERYTHING?
- We should think like those “late hires” and that thief! We will only gain entry into Heaven because the “Man on the middle cross” said we can come.”

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- We think fairness is everyone getting what we deserve. Praise God, He doesn't give His grace and mercy to sinners based on that criteria!
- God's Grace is not rewarded for performance. God's Mercy is not measured out in equal portions so everyone gets what they deserve.
- I thought of the old hymn, “At Calvary.”

*“Mercy there was great, and grace was free;
Pardon there was multiplied to me;
There my burdened soul found liberty, At Calvary.”ⁱⁱ*
- God’s mercy and grace are full and free and lavished on those who follow Christ. We should be eternally grateful about that because no one deserves the matchless generosity of His mercy and grace!
- This week, as we reflect on God’s mercy and grace. Let’s be as grateful as those “last hired” workers and that thief on the cross. They didn’t get what they earned or deserved, they received what Jesus paid for and so can we. Praise God that His mercy and grace isn’t “fair” it is full and free!

ⁱ Biblical Texts on Life Seeming Unfair: Ecclesiastes 9:11 — race not to the swift; Ecclesiastes 8:14 — righteous receive what the wicked deserve; Psalm 73:2–3 — envied the prosperity of the wicked; Jeremiah 12:1 — why do the wicked prosper?; Job 21:7 — wicked live and grow mighty; John 9:1–3 — neither sinned; Ecclesiastes 4:1 — oppression and tears of the oppressed;

ⁱⁱ <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/342>