

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As American citizens we take a great deal of pride in our freedoms...freedoms such as the ability to do what we want with what belongs to us. I would add that we can do this as long as it doesn't infringe on others, but that has even changed today in our understanding of fairness. It seems that our attitudes toward fairness these days, *do* infringe on others because of our lack of respect for other's ability to do the very same thing we ourselves are doing. Nonetheless, we live in a country that gives us the right to worship as we please. And so, we gather once again today to give thanks and to worship God. And we understand this God we worship to be a gracious and loving God.

We Christians, followers of this God we worship, understand that this love and grace are made manifest in His only Son Jesus Christ whose life is given for us to free us from the punishment of our sin. God's Son, Jesus Christ, is the promise of grace and a new life that we really do not deserve. God's only Son Jesus Christ is in essence, the extravagance of God's grace, truth, and love that flows from God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and then to us. From the prologue of Gospel of John, we learn that God's Word of grace and mercy is the Son, Jesus Christ:

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁶ From his fullness (*from the fullness of Jesus Christ*) we have *all* received, grace upon grace. (John 1:14, 16)

All the blessings God has to offer through Jesus Christ are given to all, but what we hear is that God's blessings are given to *ME*. In other words, we believe that Jesus Christ is grace upon grace, we believe that God is love...without a doubt we believe this...that is, until someone else gets it, especially someone we feel is undeserving. We view God's love and grace to be given according to our standards and measures. Here is where God becomes the God that loves me and not the God who loves all...and here is what we just hate about this parable that is before us today.

I love parables and I just love this parable because I personally take a great deal of comfort from its concept, rather I take comfort in the theory behind the parable. I believe what makes this parable so good is that it angers those who read it casually and give it little thought. My dad was a staunch blue-collar union man and this type of thing within this parable would never fly in his world or his understanding.

Let's face it, what we despise about this parable is that we understand it to be "unfair". It's just not right! It's not fair, and it's not right for the folks who worked all day to be paid the same as the lazy workers who showed up to work at the end of the day. Those who worked all day should be paid more than those who showed up later. Or, those who showed up at the end of the day should be paid less. This is what sticks in our craw and prohibits us from seeing this parable in a different light or a different context.

Let's for a moment put our anger aside and listen again to the parable, rather, listen to the details within the parable. The parable begins with Jesus saying, "For the kingdom of heaven is like...". Whether we like it or not, here is where the parable goes off the rails for us who are angered by the parable. In other words, we cannot measure this parable with our standards of fairness. Our sense of fairness is shaped by our cultural norms, our values, and our institutional practices. Our measure of fairness is NOT God's measure of fairness and this is what we don't like about this

parable. For the kingdom of heaven is like God's measure of fairness and NOT ours. Jesus has already within this very Gospel established God's system of fairness...remember the Sermon of the Mount?

^{5:1} When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
³ 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
⁴ 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
⁵ 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
⁶ 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
⁷ 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
⁸ 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
⁹ 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
¹⁰ 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
¹¹ 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:1-12)

And if this still seems unfair, listen again to what the landowner or God, who we figure the landowner to be, says in the last few verses of today's Gospel lesson when the workers were grumbling like we grumble when we think about this measure of fairness within this parable:

'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?' ¹⁴
Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵
Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:13b-16)

The last will be first, and the first will be last. The landowner, does the very thing we feel we have the right to do today, he chooses to do what he wants, with what belongs to him. He chooses to pay the workers as he chooses to pay them. What has he done wrong? He has not gone back on his word, he pays the workers what they agreed to, the usual daily wage which was one denarius. Today that would equal about 50 dollars and that would get them about four loaves of bread. If not bread, it would get them a few cups of wine, or about two pounds of butter. One denarius would get them two gallons of grain. One would have to work for four days in order to buy a new tunic.

This "unfairness" that we focus on within this parable is simply NOT true and therefore, it has to be rejected. It is rejected because we know that this theory of "unfairness" no matter how well-ordered it seems must be rejected if it is untrue.¹ The definition of fairness is impartial and just treatment or behavior without favoritism or discrimination. The landowner showed NO favoritism to any of the workers; they were all paid what he told them he would pay and they agreed to the amount. There was NO impartial treatment of any worker all were paid the same. Therefore, our "theory" of unfairness within this parable just doesn't work.

¹ Rawls, John, *A Theory Of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971. Chapter I. Justice and Fairness, beginning on page 3.

So, what is it that we are being told in this parable? What is the theory behind the parable? The parable's primary effect is to illustrate how God's generosity and grace benefits those who need it most. Remember how Jesus announced in his Sermon on the Mount that he's more interested in blessing people who are poor in spirit and meek than he is in awarding extra "pay".² This parable is about God's kingdom. When it comes to extending God's love, God's mercy, and God's grace, God is determined to leave no one out. And what does more love, more mercy, more grace, or more NEW LIFE look like when coming from God?

The landowner kept going out during the day and inviting workers to work in his vineyard. The landowner hires the ones who were not hired at the start of the day. We assume the other workers hired later in the day to be lazy, but when the landowner asks, "Why are you standing idle all day?" they respond "Because no one has hired us." Why were they not hired, were they old, was something wrong with them, or were they physically not able to work? What we see in this is that the landowner "hired" what others rejected and kept going out to find them throughout the course of the day. We will hear Jesus say this a little later in this Gospel:

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?' (Matthew 21:42)

Yes, we say that it is amazing, but when we read this parable, we get a different feeling about this notion or this "theory" or system of "fairness". The landowner is doing no injustice, he is NOT being unfair to the workers, nonetheless, the workers like us are unhappy with the landowner's sense of fairness. However, the landowner simply responds, am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' From the Greek, the landowner literally responds, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" Is our anger really justified or are we evil?

I don't believe we are evil, we are just simply misguided by our sense of fairness that is shaped by our cultural norms, our values, and our institutional practices. And in that understanding we worked hard, we have worked all day long, and we have earned our seat at the table, we feel we deserve more than those who didn't do it like us...we earned our place of privilege. But we have heard how that works when Jesus gets wind of it:

²⁶ It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' (Matthew 20:26-28)

The problem with this parable is we compare ourselves to the others. In other words, we assume we are some of the first workers hired in the vineyard, so, we deserve more. Moreover, when Jesus says the first will be last and the last will be first, we assume as the first hired that we will be last and then passed over or excluded. God comes to us through the waters of our Baptism, and through those waters, God, in a sense, hires us and promises us that we shall be saved and have eternal life, no matter when we come to that font...salvation, grace, and most of all, God's love is

² Skinner, Matthew L., *Matthew, The Gospel of Promised Blessings*. Nashville: Abington Press, 2024, Chapter 1, Promised Blessings, Matthew 20:1-16, (Workers in the Vineyard), page 11.

poured out upon all who have been hired by these waters to work in God's vineyard. We all get the very same wage, eternal life, no more no less.³

This is the Good News within this parable. However, it may still confuse us, make no sense to us, seem unfair, and that is exactly why it is the Good News because it is not human wisdom, it is a loving God whose foolishness is much wiser than all of our combined wisdom. And so we gather this day by God's grace and mercy to worship and celebrate not what we do for God, nor how hard and how long we work for God, we gather to remember and celebrate God and the love and grace God gives us all through Jesus Christ at the end of our day.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ Many of the closing thoughts in this sermon are inspired by the commentary on this parable by my dear seminary professor who instilled in me a love of parables, Frederick H. Borsch, *Many Many Things in Parables, Extravagant Stories of New Community*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002. Chapter 3, Equal Pay pages 31-38.