

October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Matthew 20:1-16

Grace and peace to you from the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last!

The words come out like a time bomb waiting to explode. I know you've all heard these words, you've probably all said them at one time or another. Something about the words brings so much passion from the one screaming them, and so much irritation to all who hear them. What words am I talking about? **THAT'S NOT FAIR!** We've probably all staked our dignity on those words at one time or another. "That's not fair, he got way more ice-cream than me!" "That's not fair, she didn't have to help with the dishes!" "That's not fair, I should have gotten promoted, I did all the work!"

We always want to hold to the golden standard of fairness that we have so perfectly honed since our childhood. We want things to be at least fair, if not tilted our way, and the workers in the vineyard were no exception. They demanded that things run on their own scale of fairness. What is God's scale of fairness? Not a scale any sinner wants to hold God to. **But thank God he's not fair, he generously gives his grace and he graciously calls us to service!**

Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard ties closely to what was going on in the verses just before. A rich young ruler had come to Jesus and asked, "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus, knowing the man's heart and his wealth said, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor and then come follow me." And the man went away sad because he had great wealth. I'm guessing he was thinking something like, "That's not fair, that's my money!"

When the disciples heard what Jesus had told this rich young man, their ears perked up. They were thinking, "We have left everything to follow you Jesus! So what do we get?" And Jesus replies, "Everyone who has left their family and life to follow me will receive a hundred times more and eternal life." Imagine the disciples giving each other pats on the back, "Yes! We are going to get extra because we are the ones who followed Jesus." Then comes the mystery statement that dampens their mood. "Many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first." You can probably guess what they were thinking at that moment. "That's not fair! We were the first to follow, we should be the first!"

So Jesus tells the parable to explain to them what he meant. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who goes out and hires men at 6 in the morning for a denarius, the normal day's wage. But then he goes out at 9 AM, and hires some more men who were still standing doing nothing. And again at noon and at 3 o'clock and 5 o'clock in the afternoon. By that time the work day is almost over already, only one hour left. For each wave of men that started later, the owner said, "I'll pay you what is right." Well what would be a fair wage, less than a denarius right? Especially for the guys who worked only an hour. Probably a tenth of a denarius for them?

So at the end of the day the owner tells his foreman, "Pay their wages, starting with the last ones first." What do the one hour guys get? A FULL DENARIUS! And on down the line to the 2 hour guys, each receiving a denarius. So the guys who started early in the morning are licking their chops, thinking they are going to get twice the pay, or even 10 times the pay, for

working 10 times as much as the last guys worked. What do they get? One denarius, just as they agreed to.

You can tell their reaction right away, “One lousy denarius, that’s the same as the rest of the guys got! We worked all day through the heat and the sun! Why are you putting these chumps on our level! We worked hardest and longest, we deserve some recognition, we deserve some extra. THAT’S NOT FAIR!” So much passion on the part of the ones saying it, and so much irritation to the one who hears it! The owner’s response hits them right between the eyes, “Are you envious, because I am generous?” “Are your eyes wicked because I am good?”

Remind you of anyone? Sound like any of the thoughts deep down in your heart? “You’re telling me that the thief on the cross gets the same paradise as me? He was being crucified as a criminal and believed in Christ for like two minutes. That’s not fair, I’ve been a Christian my whole life!” You’re telling me that Jeffrey Dahmer the serial killer, rapist, and cannibal, was brought to faith while in prison, and he gets to go to the same heaven as me. I don’t kill people! I go to church every week, I give offerings, I take care of my kids, I try to be a good person. There is no way that is fair!” Our eyes turn wicked as God pours out his grace to others, and in those moments, we think we would rather be given what we deserve.

But if we think clearly about our sins, about the murderous, greedy, and deviant old Adam that lives inside of us, there is no way that any sinner wants to hold God to a standard of fairness. What would truly be fair for us? Eternal death, to be locked out from the presence and love of God forever. To not have one more good thing for the rest of eternity. It would be fair for us to be nailed to a tree in front of mockers and crucified as common criminals. That would be FAIR FOR US! But thank God he doesn’t judge us by our tainted standards of fairness. Thank God he’s not fair.

He **does not** treat us as our sins deserve, he **does not** give us what is right for what we have done. Instead he balanced the scales of justice with His own dear Son. He treats his Son, the perfect Lamb of God, not fairly as he deserves, but unfairly, giving him the punishment that we deserve. The Father puts the fair punishment for sin, not upon the sinners who did it, but upon the sinless one, the one who bore the burden of the law in our place, and did it gladly and willingly. He punishes the righteous one, for the sins of the unrighteous, and he treated his Son as an enemy so that he could treat us as his own dear sons and daughters.

Thank God he’s not fair! Instead he generously gives grace, he offers abundant forgiveness. He gives the gift of heaven, not to those who work for it, but to those who trust in his Son, the perfect Substitute. As the landowner generously paid each worker the same, so the Father bestows his grace upon every believer, no matter what they’ve done. He makes every believer equal in Christ, giving to each the crown of righteousness. What generosity our dear Father shows, as he gives us not what is right, but what he has decided in his great mercy to give us. Thank God, he’s not fair, instead he’s generous!

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**Part 2** Now go back to the parable. This landowner keeps going out and seeking more and more men to work in his vineyard. He keeps finding men who are standing around doing nothing, and he keeps calling them to service. He is generously giving them work to do. We understand well today what a blessing it is to have a job, even though sometimes it might seem like it's the heat of the day all day long. A job gives us purpose, it gives us a way to make a living. These men were all being given this opportunity. They were all being treated generously by the owner, and the owner did not fail to pay them what they had agreed to.

But pride got the best of the first workers, "You have made us equal with these one hour slackers!" They couldn't accept with joy the wages they were given because their attitude was all about getting more than the next guy. Their eyes turned to wicked envy as they received the same as the last workers. They wanted to be treated as the first, and yet their jealousy, their "this for that" attitude, made their wages mean nothing. So they became the last, as if they received nothing, because they were given the same.

This is what Jesus wanted to explain to the disciples. They longed with wide eyes to receive the best because they gave up everything and followed Jesus. "What will there be for us?" But status and recognition are the last thing Jesus wants us to worry about. He wants us to focus not on what we get for what we do, but on what he has done for us. He wants us to be willing to be last for his sake. It's a hard trap to avoid, to keep our eyes focused on God's generosity rather than what our reward should be. It's hard to stay out of the "I'm number 1" mindset.

But remember the grace the Father generously gives to each and every one of us. He goes out over and over, to call more and more workers to work in his kingdom. He finds those with nothing good to do whatsoever, and he gives them a purpose and a role in the kingdom of heaven. Fathers, mothers, teachers, Christian friends...he gives us the privilege to work alongside other Christians and to struggle together through the heat of the day. He gives us the joy of calling other sinners to repentance and sharing in the glory of his kingdom. Though it might seem like at times we are living life in last place here on earth, like the heat of the day will never end, our generous God will bring an end to our labor and he will make us all first by grace. Our heavenly Father will not fail to give us the reward he has promised, a reward that doesn't depend on what's right, but is so much more generous!

Thank God he's not fair, or we would have no chance. He was unfair to his Son so that he could be generous to us. He gives us a reward that we by no means have earned. He calls us all to service in his kingdom, to regularly talk about God's word in our families and to our children, to witness to our coworkers and friends, to come and worship together. To rejoice **with** each other, and **for** each other. So rejoice in your God's generosity. Rejoice for the thief on the cross, rejoice for Jeffrey Dahmer, rejoice for your own blood-bought soul. And consider it a life of humble thanksgiving to give up all you have and follow Jesus. Thank God it ain't fair, because we get to be with Jesus, and that makes us the first by far! Amen.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, ... to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. (Eph 3:20-21)

