
Matthew 20:1-16. "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³ "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶ About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷ "Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' ⁸ "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' ⁹ "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² '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.' ¹³ "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Our God is generous in mercy.

1. Marvel your master's mercy.
2. Be assured of your gracious reward.
3. Be encouraged in your service to the LORD.

We want football referees to be fair and call a good game. We want judges to be fair and carry out the letter of the law. We want the party host to be fair and give us the same size piece of cake as everybody else. Or do we? If a call or two happen to go our team's way I think we would be fine with that. If the judge has mercy and decides to be a bit lenient in our favor, this time around, we would certainly be grateful. If the party host happens to give you a corner piece, with a little extra frosting to boot, you might be okay with that expression of generosity.

With all that in mind, let us consider this much more important question. Would you rather God be fair or be generous? Let's think about that for a few minutes this morning. If God was completely to the letter-of-the-law fair, if God truly gave us what we deserved, we would all be doomed to eternal hell. Because of our debt of sin, because of all the penalties that we have drawn against God and neighbor, because all the ways we have wronged our Lord and master, we would surely be sentenced to work and toil in this world of sin and pain and trouble and then pass on to something even worse. If God was truly fair he would give us what our sins deserve. He would leave us without purpose, without hope, without forgiveness; he would leave us without eternal life.

But the Bible tells us of God who treats us very differently.

First of all, let's establish this: God *is fair* in that he has promised that in time he will repay the wicked who rejected his gospel and brought harm upon his children (Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:19). God also promises his believers that he will make all things work out for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28). But here's the wonderful point of our lesson for today. God is *not fair*, in the sense that he does not give us what our sins deserve. God is *not fair*, in the sense that through his gift of faith he graciously gives us daily purpose, he gives us the abundant riches of salvation, forgiveness, and peace with God. God assures us that even though we deserve a hopeless life and eternal death, instead in his *unfair love*, he gives everyone who believes in Jesus the sure and certain hope of eternal life. And God is also *not fair*, in this; he gives these wonderful riches to each and every one of us who believe in him. No matter how long an individual has believed in him he gives the same glorious reward. He gave these riches to a man who was a believer for a matter of hours. Who can forget when Jesus announced to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise!" To a faithful Christian who is baptized into his name and the proceeds to live a life of faith and service to God all his or her life and then falls asleep in the LORD at a good old age, he gives the same riches of heaven. God gives the same reward to each, because that's what God wants to do. That who God is. God is merciful. God is generous.

Does that kind of generosity make you do a double take? When the next person in line gets the same 'corner piece and extra frosting' treatment that you did, does that make you feel a little less special. When the man who has worked for an hour stands in the front of the line and gets the same wage promised to the man who has labored all day: does that kind of generosity make you uncomfortable? Maybe this kind of generosity doesn't just make you question your value to God but it makes you question God's overall judgement. And so, you have this little conversation with God, "You are telling me, LORD, that a person who was a criminal and was only a believer for a few hours gets the same reward of paradise that the faithful - never missed a Sunday - church goer gets; really?!" "You are telling me that this master gave the guy who sat around all day and worked just one hour the same amount that the faithful worker who labored in the sun and heat all day received; are you sure about that?!" The proud disciple in us says, "Hey, that can't be right!" That childish spiritually immature part of us pouts and stomps and shouts, "That's not fair!?"

But that's the point isn't it: God is generous in his saving grace, God is in this way wonderfully unfair for he is rich in his mercy. This is not something that we should hold against God as some sort of slight or character flaw, but we ought to praise God that he is so rich in mercy and abundant in his grace. It is one the many examples of how his ways are higher than our ways. He operates on a different level. He is somehow fair and just and yet gracious and merciful in a way that goes beyond our earthly understanding. This is the kind of God that we serve. This is who our God is: He is rich in mercy. He is generous. And so dear servants of the living God:

Marvel in your master's mercy. Be assured of your gracious reward. Be encouraged in your service to the LORD.

Let's consider for a moment why Jesus told this parable? Jesus wasn't saying that this was a good way to do business. To give each worker the same wage regardless of time put in, would not be a wise business model. However, Jesus was telling an earthly story to convey an important heavenly truth. One the one hand, Jesus was sharing this parable with his disciples to keep them humble; and on the other hand, he was teaching his disciples to see that each and every soul was precious to God, to show them that God is rich in mercy and generous with his grace. Jesus was

teaching his disciples to reach out to every single precious soul with the message of salvation, to share the treasures of heaven with all people no matter how young or old, no matter how pure or how checkered their past appeared to be. A beleaguered believer for a day or a committed believer for life would be given the same glorious reward of heaven, given to them by a gracious and merciful God.

Jesus taught this lesson because this kind of generosity is rare in our world, and he also taught this parable to his disciples, because, well let's face it, the disciples often had trouble with the sins of arrogance and pride. More than a few times, these men of God, fought about who would be considered greatest in the kingdom of God. They had the habit of comparing and ranking each other in God's kingdom, and Jesus wanted to make sure that this would not spill over into their ministry. Such arrogant comparisons of themselves or the people that they would serve would do them no good.

Jesus did however, want to assure his disciples of their eternal reward. He recognized that these were ordinary men, who had given up everything to follow him, and so in order to strengthen them in the faith and encourage them in their service he assured them that would be given a glorious reward. In an incredible picture of encouragement Jesus tells them in Matthew chapter 19 that they would reign with him on 12 golden thrones in the glories of eternal kingdom. ***29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first (Matthew 19:28-30).*** The disciples would have to suffer much on this side of heaven. Many would see these disciples, treat these disciples, as the least, the last; but in God's kingdom they would be acknowledged as great. God would value these men and their service greatly. However, to keep these men from thinking too much of themselves Jesus presents a counterbalance to the promise given in Matthew 19 by means of this parable in Matthew chapter 20. And in doing so he reminds them that the riches of salvation weren't so much a matter of pride or faithful service, it was all a matter of God's gracious mercy.

Let's face it, we too have the same kind of issues with the sins of pride and arrogance. There is a temptation for each of us to make God's grace hinge on our efforts and so we compare ourselves to others. There is that temptation to compare ourselves to others and assume that we are more deserving than the next guy. In our minds we may even compile the pew hours that we have logged over the years, or we might make a mental list of all the ways that we have served the Lord, the different ways that we have sacrificed or suffered, the sins we avoided, the offerings that we have given, and as we stand in line waiting for our reward we may assume a little extra is coming our way - *as if somehow forgiveness and heaven isn't enough!* Or maybe we just cringe when we are told each will receive the same reward as everyone else? As we sit at the funeral of a person who had not darkened the doorstep of church in a long while do we on some level assume that they barely got in or they received a lesser prize. Standing next to a guest with a troubled past or sitting nearby a rarely here member we can't help but think we deserve a little thicker slice of heaven. Well, God tells us *that's not how it works.* God tells us not to not even think that way at all. This has a negative effect on the way that we deal with others. That has a negative effect on the way that we view our God. Our God is gracious, merciful, and generous in his grace and mercy to all!

Now, that certainly does not mean that he wants us to mill around in the marketplace of life until the last moment. This does not mean that God doesn't care either way if we serve him with a lifetime of faithful service or not. The LORD desires that we all would serve him in his kingdom and dwell with him forever in heaven. And so instead of trying to take advantage of his mercy, let us simply consider the grace and mercy that God has shown to you. Fellow servants of the Most High, let us serve our LORD and master each day with a thankful heart, and a grateful soul. Consider the grace and mercy of God. He went out *early* and he found you. He made it happen that you were brought to the font, that you were brought up in the instruction of the Lord, that you were brought into his vineyard, into his kingdom, and now he has called you to work while it is day. He has promised you, an ordinary sinful person, an eternal and glorious reward. He is patient with us forgiving us for our many mistakes and sins, and he promises that he will still give us the reward that he has planned. Dear friends, we get to live our life in service to this generous LORD, this merciful God. And knowing that this is who our master is, that this is the merciful LORD we serve and work for, we are strengthened and enabled to serve our God and our neighbor. We are strengthened and enabled to reach out and deal with people with mercy and grace as our LORD has treated us.

Yes, as those called to be in his vineyard, there will be work to do. Yes, there are challenges of being a Christian in our world. There are certain daily pressures and difficulties; sacrifices that you make in service to God as you labor in the heat of the day. But this is work worth doing, this is work that is satisfying. As Christians, we know who our master is. He is a master who is worth serving with every ounce of our being. He is our master who is generous with his grace and rich in mercy. He is our Lord who is compassionate and just, perfect and holy, he is abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Our Lord and master came and served us with a perfect life. He gave his life so that we would not get what our sins deserve, rather by his grace we are spared punishment and we are shown the richness of his mercy. On the cross Jesus suffered hell in our place, and now he assures us through his word that he saves us and spares us. He assures us that not only does he give us eternal life but he gives us a daily life of meaning and purpose, a life of strength and confidence, a life of hope and joy. And now this master of ours, who has called us and brought us into his kingdom, he is so rich in mercy that he keeps going out and he searches through the day and into the night as he looks for more and more precious souls to be added to his kingdom. He wants to give his generous wage to all. His search will continue until the final day, the final hour.

Dear fellow servants of the LORD, this is who our God is: He is rich in mercy! He does not give us sinners what we deserve. In this he is wonderfully *unfair*. In his unfair, undeserved love for us he searched us out and he found us. In his goodness he gives us a spot in his kingdom and he blesses us with his gracious rewards. Marvel in your master's mercy. Be assured of your eternal reward. Be encouraged in your daily service. And as we wait in line for the final reward he has appointed for us, instead of comparing ourselves with one another let us encourage each other in our lives of faith and service. And may we also find ways to assist our master in his search for souls as we direct him to others and direct others to him, who are not yet in line for his eternal reward. Our Lord and Master is generous and He has mercy enough for all. Praise be to our God: He is generous! He is rich in mercy! Amen.