

Matthew 20:1-16 (NKJV)

¹ "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. ⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. ⁶ 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?' ⁷ 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.' ⁸ 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.' ⁹ And when those came who *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. ¹⁰ But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. ¹¹ And when they had received *it*, they complained against the landowner, ¹² 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.' ¹³ But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take *what is* yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man *the same* as to you. ¹⁵ Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

From our last passage in Mark, this is the next thing that happens. As I looked at this passage in Matthew I thought that it was very important that we look at it together. There are two reasons.

The first is that this parable in Matthew gives us the understanding of what Jesus meant when he so often said **"The last will be first and the first will be last"**. And the second reason is that we have got to get our heads around this idea that God is not fair in the way that we think is fair. We absolutely need to understand this or we are going to spend much of our time being irritated and angry at God.

So let's start at the beginning.

¹ "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and said

to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. ⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. ⁶ 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?' ⁷ 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.'

We need to understand this workday. 6AM was the first hour. It was when the day began. Every hour after that was added to the first. The day normally lasted to 6PM. So it was a 12 hour work day.

This helps us get a handle on what was going on. At 6AM the owner hired some people. At 9am he hired some more. At 12 noon he brought in more. At three he brought in more. And at 5 pm, one hour before quitting time, he brought in more.

Typically in this culture men would show up in an appointed area to get hired for this work. They would stay there until they got hired. It would be an unusual person who would stay there all day, but in this story that is what they did.

Now look at this. The first guys had a negotiated rate. They would work for one day for one denarius. They knew that is what they had signed up for. The terms were very clear. They were agreed upon. The contract was negotiated. There was a very clear understanding. Little trust was needed. This man would pay them what he had agreed upon. So it was a very clear deal. All was good. Both parties thought this was fair.

Now what about the rest of the employees? What was their deal?

They took by faith that the land owner would be fair to them. They did not negotiate a deal. The landowner said "**whatever is right I will give you**". They trusted him. They didn't question him. They showed no signs of mistrust. They showed no signs of feeling like they needed to protect themselves. They trusted the honor of the owner and went off to work in the fields. They trusted the landlord's word that he would make it worth their while. He would do what is right by them.

OK So the day ends.

⁸ **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.'**

Now is when the misunderstanding starts. It is payday. It is time to pay the workers. Now it is important to notice that this starts **from the last to the first**. Remember that Jesus often says, the last will be first and the first will be last. This is showing us what He is talking about. We have got to understand that phrase

the way that He uses it. And this is parable is the best example of what it means. He takes the last workers and he pays them first.

⁹ **And when those came who *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.**

Ok. These guys worked an hour. One hour. And what did they get paid? They got paid a days wage. A full days wage.

Do you know what this means? Well quite clearly in this parable, God is the Landlord. God is the Master.

And what we learn is that God is not fair.

God is not fair. He is not equitable. He does not dish out grace proportionately. We have example after example.

Look at **the thief on the cross**. He did whatever he felt like doing in his life. He didn't worry about **not doing the sins** that his countrymen chose not to do. While the disciples were following Christ and sacrificing their comfort for His sake, here is this guy ripping off other people simply because he could. And what is this man going to inherit as a result of his **confession of Christ on the cross**. He is going to inherit the same eternal life as all of the disciples. He is going to inherit the same eternity as the one who obeyed God's law from his youth. Is that fair? No. That is not fair.

Look at **the woman at the well, or Mary Magdalene, or the woman caught in adultery**. These women appear to have done whatever they wanted with their sexuality. While lots of other women were being careful and chaste, these women were spending this commodity like it was nothing. Yet what end will these woman inherit? They will inherit the same eternity that all the chaste believers will receive. They will receive the same eternity as women who have said no to that activity. Is that fair? No it isn't fair.

Look at **the tax collectors**. They had sold out their fellow countrymen for their own profit. And profit they did. They were living high on the hog. They had it made. While their countrymen may have been scrapping for a living, these guys were getting wealthy. But when they came to Christ, what eternity were they going to receive? They were going to receive the same eternity that all of the faithful followers of Christ would receive. Even the ones who had obeyed Christ from their youth. Is that fair? Of course it is not fair.

We could go on and on in scripture. We can find example after example of people who almost seem to be rewarded for doing the same things that we have chosen not to do. Or who have not done those things we have chosen TO do. And it just

doesn't seem fair. They have not paid the same price as us. They have not done the work.

But then, look at us. You and I have sinned. We have sinned knowingly and intentionally. We have seen good that we should do and we have not done it. We have seen evil that we should not do and we have done it. And in contrast, look at Christ. This Christ who has never sinned. He was **tempted just like we are tempted** and He has never sinned. And what happened? Didn't He die in our place? Didn't He take upon himself our sin? Didn't He experience the guilt of the depth of our depravity before they placed Him on a cross? And then didn't He suffer on that cross, taking the insults upon Himself that we fully deserved? Now tell me. Was that fair? Was it fair that **God's grace** extended to us but **God's justice** was extended to God's innocent son? Shouldn't it have been the other way around? Of course that was not fair. That was hideously unfair. But that is how God's grace must be to save people like us.

I would guess that all of us have wrestled from time to time about things that are very unfair. We see lazy people rewarded like they were workers. We see immoral people rewarded like they were pious. We have seen liars rewarded like they were truthful. We have seen cheaters rewarded like they were honest. And there is something that cries out in us and says, that isn't fair. And it isn't. But we need to always come back to who we are before Christ. What did **we** deserve? And what did **we** get? And what did **Christ** deserve? And what did **He** get? God isn't fair. But oh **how gracious** God is. And if we had to pick between the two, really which one would we pick? Do we really want God to be fair? If He were, we would be headed for hell. Because that is what is fair.

No, anyone with any sense would say, I do not want God to be fair to me. I want Him to be gracious to me. I don't want to get what I deserve. I want to get what I wish I could have. I want to get a result that I don't deserve and could never deserve.

That is the Christian life. So there is no sense looking at our brothers and sisters and getting bent out of shape about things they receive that aren't fair. We are just wasting our time. We ought to **want for them** things that aren't fair. Because we **want for ourselves** things that aren't fair. We want Grace. We want God to dish out to us things **way better** than anything we could deserve. And ultimately, we are being very short sighted when we bemoan gifts that brothers and sisters get that they don't deserve. Because, when it is all said and done, we are resting our eternity upon **us receiving things that we will never deserve**. Why get bent out of shape when our brothers and sisters receive grace?

But look at this parable. Doesn't it trick us into seeing ourselves? Doesn't it display the worst of ourselves when we are thinking that we are only being fair? Which party do we relate to? Which party does our heart go out to? Which party are we inclined to say, yeah, what he said....

¹⁰ **But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.** ¹¹ **And when they had received *it*, they complained against the landowner,** ¹² **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.'**

OK. The people who have worked for one hour received a full day's pay. The people who worked all day found out about that. And how did they process that information?

I have been good. I have been faithful. I have worked more hours. I have given my master obedient service all day. I did what he said. I wasn't out enjoying the day doing whatever I felt like doing. I was doing what was in my master's best interest. Therefore, if my Master is to be equitable, He will give me more than the guy that only served the master for a short while.

Doesn't that seem like smart thinking? Doesn't that seem rational? Doesn't that seem fair and godly?

Well, what we are soon to see is that we are very wrong to think all these things. And you know what? It is exceedingly hard to bring ourselves to believe that. Just find someone who has been blessed after not doing all the things that we have done for which we have paid a great price. We all have our places. We all have these points where we show that we would prefer **justice for others** over grace.

Don't we all complain against the landowner? Don't we all complain that others have not done for Him what we have done, yet look at how they are blessed?

Don't we suppose that we should get more? Don't we expect things should be easier? Or better? Or that we should get more credit? Or more praise?

Doesn't it bother us that God dishes out equal blessing to those who have been very faithful and those who have been less faithful?

Even now I am guessing that we are thinking, yes, that **it is only fair** that God would differentiate those things. He **should**. If He is God, He ought to be fair.

But look what Christ says next.

¹³ **But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?'** ¹⁴ **Take *what is yours* and go your way. I**

wish to give to this last man *the same* as to you.¹⁵ Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?'

Wow, this turns our idea of fair upside down. What Jesus says here seems like sheer wickedness to the legalist who thinks his efforts can earn something from God. How about the rich young ruler that Christ has just dealt with? How do you think he would have liked to find out that tax collectors would enter heaven before him? A person with a legalistic mindset is going to hate Christ. This will be so offensive to them they will not be able to recover.

Look at Christ's reasoning.

I am doing you no wrong.

The first thing we need to notice is that the landowner never does anything different than what he has promised. He said he would pay a denarius and he does. He is living by His word. So no one can say they are defrauded or cheated. The same is true of every believer. Every believer is going to be granted eternal life, eternal reward. God will never go back on His promise to award us that which He has said.

God never does any wrong to His children. God never fails to give them what He has promised. God never short changes one of His servants. God never underpays his servants.

But does he overpay some? Yes. Without a doubt He does. In fact, there is a sense that anything we get is an overpayment, it is more than we deserve. And when He does overpay, who has the right to complain? Do you? Do I? If the truth be told, we would find out that He has overpaid every one of His servants. Have you deserved God's grace? That would be impossible. The definition of grace is unmerited favor. How can unmerited be merited? It cannot be.

So I think the issue that is being brought up by Christ in this parable is really, who do those who **are doing the judging** really think they are? Who are the workers who got to work all day serving the master, who are they to think they can judge the master on how he treats his other servants? It is really, in the most ultimate of senses, none of their business.

Keep looking at the mindset here. Christ says this:

I wish to give to this last man *the same* as to you.¹⁵ Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?'

What Christ is saying here is that the landowner can waste His resources on undeserving people. There is nothing in the law that would prohibit such generosity. And whose resources are these? Do they not belong to the landowner? Do they not belong to God? It isn't like He is taking **your resources**

and giving them to someone else. No. They are His to give and His to take away. It is really none of our business.

Then notice what He says next. **Or is your eye evil because I am good?**

We naturally think that when we think about what is fair, we are being good. But Christ is showing us here that this thinking is wrong. When we criticize the grace of God being displayed to God's children as God sees fit, what we are exhibiting is evil. Our eye, our way of seeing, our way of evaluating and processing the information is evil. And why is it evil? Because it evaluates and criticizes that which God does. And what God does **is good** because **God is good**.

God can distribute His resources however He sees fit. And it has not been given **to us** to evaluate how that Grace should be displayed. When we think we have that right and privilege, we are wrong and show our perspectives to be evil.

MacArthur captures the essence here when he says that **the problem was not injustice on the part of the landowner but jealousy on the part of the worker**.

He goes on to say **that jealousy and envy are not based on reason but on selfishness. The charge of unfairness was not grounded in a love for justice but in the selfish assumption that the extra pay they wanted was pay they deserved. In reality of course, what the latter-day workers were paid had absolutely no bearing on what the all-day workers were paid. They had, as it were, entirely separate contracts with the owner.**

MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Matthew 16-23.

I remember a few years ago I was approached by an employee under my authority. She complained very loudly and discontentedly that a fellow employee was hired after her and was paid more than we were paying to this employee who had been loyal to us for years. This woman had missed this point. Every employee signs a contract with their employer. It is not a group contract for everyone. If the boss wants to pay someone more, that is the boss's business. What we need to ask is are the conditions we are experiencing under our employer or master favorable to us. To compare it with someone else's conditions is none of our business.

MacArthur goes on to say this:

To understand the parable's spiritual meaning it is necessary to understand who and what are represented in it. Jesus explicitly said the parable is about "the kingdom of heaven" ([v. 1](#)). The vineyard is therefore the kingdom itself, the landowner is God the Father, and the foreman is the Son, Jesus Christ. The laborers are believers, and the denarius is eternal life, which all received equally

for trusting in Christ. The work day is the believer's lifetime of service to his Lord and the evening is eternity.

God's sovereign principle for salvation is that every person who comes in faith to His Son, Jesus Christ, receives the same gracious salvation prepared by the Father and given by the Son. There are no exceptions or variations. Whether a person comes to God as a small child and lives a long life of faithful, obedient service, or whether he comes to Him on his deathbed, all come into the kingdom on the same basis and receive the same glorious, eternal blessings. The penitent thief who turned to Jesus on the cross with his last breath received the same salvation and heavenly glory as the apostles. He died justly as a criminal, whereas most of them died unjustly because of their faithfulness to Christ. He did not have even one hour to serve Christ, whereas some of them served Him far into old age. He knew just enough about Christ to be saved, and his service was limited to a brief time of praise and thankfulness, whereas the disciples were privileged to live intimately with Him for three years and were given unique divine revelation from and about Him. Yet all of them were received equally by their divine Savior and King and stand equally before Him in heaven.

MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Matthew 16-23.

Now this is not to say that Christians will not receive their individual rewards. That is really not the topic here. What this is discussing is the equality of salvation, not the difference of specific rewards for service.

And notice that in the parable, the steward keeps going back and inviting workers to come. How refreshing that is. If you are not a follower of Christ this morning, it is not too late. Even those who are old have an opportunity to turn to Christ. If you are willing, now is the right time to come to Christ. Even if you know that you have lived in an unworthy fashion, now is the perfect time to come to Christ. You can have the same salvation as everyone who has come before you.

Now we come to the last verse.

¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

Notice what this parable was about. It was not about how the last were made superior to the first. It just shows that the last and the first experienced the same Grace from the same loving God. The last received the first's rewards. And the first received the last's rewards. They all ended up coming in at the same status. They all shared in the eternal reward equally.

And what is the reception of this grace based upon? What is it that all these people shared in common? What was it that was so special about these people? It was not the length of time that they worked. It was not even the quality of their work. The most significant thing about them was that they were chosen. While many had the opportunity to work. They were called. These were the ones who responded to the call. And they were rewarded by an enormous unfathomable grace.

That is where we all are brothers and sisters. That is where we sit this morning. While it is very important what we think of God, it is even more important what He thinks of us.

I say over and over again that we are all in this together. And here we see it again this morning. We all share a common salvation. And the last and the first will share it alike. There is no difference in the eternal state we will be in. That is the point of this parable.

So will we follow a natural evil bent and conclude then that, since everyone who enters the kingdom will share the same reality, we would be smart to try to make it into this kingdom by the skin of our teeth, by being saved in the last moment out of a faithless life?

No. There is other scripture that deals with those ideas.

Psalm 37:1-8

¹ Do not fret because of evildoers, Nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. ² For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, And wither as the green herb.

There is no future in wanting what the wicked have. And in reality, they only have it for a short time. No it is much better to do what verse 3 says.

³ Trust in the LORD, and do good; Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. ⁴ Delight yourself also in the LORD, And He shall give you the desires of your heart. ⁵ Commit your way to the LORD, Trust also in Him, And He shall bring *it* to pass. ⁶ He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, And your justice as the noonday. ⁷ Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, Because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass. ⁸ Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Do not fret--*it* only *causes* harm.

Virtue is its own reward. Living for God is a glorious opportunity. We need to always keep that in mind, even when it looks like those who live wickedly experience a better life. God promises to make it worth our while. And we will have been found to have had years to serve our Lord, which in the end, we will never be sorry for.

16-40

¹⁶ A little that a righteous man has *is* better than the riches of many wicked. ¹⁷ For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, But the LORD upholds the righteous. ¹⁸ The LORD knows the days of the upright, And their inheritance shall be forever. ¹⁹ They shall not be ashamed in the evil time, And in the days of famine they shall be satisfied. ²⁰ But the wicked shall perish; And the enemies of the LORD, Like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish. Into smoke they shall vanish away. ²¹ The wicked borrows and does not repay, But the righteous shows mercy and gives. ²² For *those* blessed by Him shall inherit the earth, But *those* cursed by Him shall be cut off. ²³ The steps of a *good* man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way. ²⁴ Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; For the LORD upholds *him with* His hand. ²⁵ I have been young, and *now* am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread. ²⁶ *He is* ever merciful, and lends; And his descendants *are* blessed. ²⁷ Depart from evil, and do good; And dwell forevermore. ²⁸ For the LORD loves justice, And does not forsake His saints; They are preserved forever, But the descendants of the wicked shall be cut off. ²⁹ The righteous shall inherit the land, And dwell in it forever. ³⁰ The mouth of the righteous speaks wisdom, And his tongue talks of justice. ³¹ The law of his God *is* in his heart; None of his steps shall slide. ³² The wicked watches the righteous, And seeks to slay him. ³³ The LORD will not leave him in his hand, Nor condemn him when he is judged. ³⁴ Wait on the LORD, And keep His way, And He shall exalt you to inherit the land; When the wicked are cut off, you shall see *it*. ³⁵ I have seen the wicked in great power, And spreading himself like a native green tree. ³⁶ Yet he passed away, and behold, he *was* no *more*; Indeed I sought him, but he could not be found. ³⁷ Mark the blameless *man*, and observe the upright; For the future of *that* man *is* peace. ³⁸ But the transgressors shall be destroyed together; The future of the wicked shall be cut off. ³⁹ But the salvation of the righteous *is* from the LORD; *He is* their strength in the time of trouble. ⁴⁰ And the LORD shall help them and deliver them; He shall deliver them from the wicked, And save them, Because they trust in Him.

My point from all of this is that we have the glorious luxury now of living for the Lord. It doesn't matter that others may be able to get away with things that we can't get away with. And it doesn't matter that some people will seem to slide into heaven by the skin of their teeth. And this will happen. That is what grace is like.

What this passage tells us is that the person who is living for God, who is dedicated to God in this life, is the wisest person and the most blessed person, no matter how it might be appearing to work out in the short run. So serving Christ in the here and now will be richly blessed. It is guaranteed.

This week we would do well to look at our lives and ask, where do we begrudge grace to our brothers and sisters? Where do we wish they would face justice? Where do we wish they would face the full consequences of their actions? And we should think long and hard about where that comes from. It usually does not represent Kingdom thinking. And we would do well to learn to see through the eyes of Grace.