That's Not Fair!

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Imagine two people working side by side. One has been there since sunrise, sweating through the heat of the day. The other arrives just before quitting time. Then payday comes, and they both receive exactly the same paycheck. How would you react?

Most of us would instinctively say, "That's not fair!" right? That is not fair. At least that is the way it seems to us quite often. Yet that feeling exposes something deeper than our views on wages. It reveals how easily we compare ourselves with others and how quickly gratitude can turn into resentment.

Jesus deliberately told a story that challenges our natural sense of fairness. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is not really about economics or employment. It is about the human heart. It is about envy versus gratitude, merit versus grace, and our tendency to believe God owes us more because of what we have done.

God's Kingdom does not operate according to human calculations. His generosity is greater than our expectations. His grace cannot be earned. And His rewards are given according to His perfect wisdom, not our comparisons. As we examine this remarkable parable, we will see why Jesus concluded with these unforgettable words: "So the last will be first, and the first shall be last."

Those words are just as challenging and just as life-changing today as they were almost 2,000 years ago when they were written.

Please turn with me to Matthew 20. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard occurs only in Matthew, where it serves to illustrate the principle of Matthew 19:30.

> **Matthew 19:30** "Many who are first will be last, and the [many who are] last will be first."

This principle is repeated at the story's close in Matthew 20:16.

> **Matthew 20:16** "So the last will be first, and the first last."

The parable itself is a straightforward story. A landowner needed men to work in his vineyard, so he went out early in the morning and hired all the workers he could find. Jesus illustrates the human tendency to desire more in this parable about some employees who should have been happy with the amount they were paid for their work.

They would have been happy except for one thing: they saw some fellow workers receiving a higher hourly wage than they received. Their gratitude vanished. Dissatisfaction, self-pity, and scowling set in. The employer, representing God in the parable, firmly corrected them for their wrong attitudes. He asked them, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?"

With that introductory summary, let us read the parable itself. In Matthew 20, we are going to read verses 1 through 16 with a comment or two.

> **Matthew 20:1-16** "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. [Notice at this point, this time there was no set wage. First time, a denarius. Second time, no set wage.] Again he went out about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, and did likewise. 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?' 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.' 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.' [That is interesting in itself. He is beginning with the last, moving to the first in their giving out their pay.]
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> And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and likewise received a denarius [which they had agreed to receive in the beginning. By that time they were rubbing their hands together happily, probably supposing that if those who worked less than they had worked were being paid a denarius, they would receive more. Is that not typical human reasoning, logic?] And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, 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.' But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' [So the parable is followed by a statement that is close to the one that ended the previous chapter.] So the last will be first and the first last, for many are called but few are chosen."

So in the parable, God is asking His workers, "Are you envious because I am generous?" Envy develops from comparing ourselves with others.

Please turn to II Corinthians 10, verse 12. Now it is impossible to make an accurate comparison because Christ works with each person in a specific way to develop the character and skills needed for his responsibility in God's Kingdom. Here in II Corinthians 10, we are going to read verses 12, 17, and 18.

> **II Corinthians 10:12** For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

> **II Corinthians 10:17-18** But "he who glories, let him glory in the Lord." For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.

So the parable teaches that service for Christ will be faithfully rewarded and that equal faithfulness to our opportunity will be equally rewarded. However, only God can adequately assess faithfulness and opportunities. Therefore, human judgments are inadequate to address these issues.

Please turn over to James 1, verse 16. Now the result is that human comparisons with others cloud the mind from realizing true blessings. The result is that human comparisons with others cloud the mind from realizing true blessings. All blessings, all good gifts, belong to God and come from Him.

> **James 1:16-17** Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

So who are we to ever question how God chooses to distribute His spiritual gifts, responsibilities, and other blessings? It must really displease God to see someone pouting for lack of a better TV set or a car or a house or standard of living. If that person's mind is so set on physical things that he carries on like a spoiled child for not having more, one of the most harmful things that could happen to that person would be to be blessed with still more material blessings. An increase such as this can become a trap, possibly causing that person to lose out on salvation. And we know that it can be harder for a rich person to be close to God than for a person who has little in the way of this world's things.

To have the right perspective on blessings requires a total reversal of human reasoning. And that is why we cannot say that is not fair when we do not get something that we feel we should compared to others. We should live by the principle that *happiness is not getting what you want, but appreciating what you have*. And this is a major step toward contentment and having peace of mind.

Remember the disastrous effect wealth had on King Solomon. He had abundant wealth, to say the least. That is an understatement, but it helped to ruin him spiritually because he did not use it properly, and he did not have the right priorities quite often.

Now the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is clear enough, but that does not mean it is without difficulties. The first difficulty is that it presents us with an admittedly strange situation. We have a businessman who pays people who work only one hour the same wage he pays those who work all day. To the carnal mind, that is hard to accept. I think every one of us would be caught up in that if that happened to us, and then we would have to check our attitudes.

According to the landowner, the pay for the full day's work is fair, and it was what they agreed on. That may be true, but what businessman operates that way? No one in the world. He would be thought of as crazy, stupid, or just inadequate to lead a business.

It seems irrational. It produces labor problems. More than that, it seems to be bad business. A person who operated in this manner in this society would probably soon be bankrupt.

But there is a further difficulty. The payment to the workers seems unjust. We may be reluctant to say it, knowing that the owner of the vineyard is God and that God is always just, regardless of what we may think. But still, to human reasoning, the procedure seems unjust.

And what do we do? What do we have today? We have minimum wage. Do not have to work, do not have to do a thing on the job, but you get minimum wage. And so it goes on in the society at all levels.

Why should those who were hired later be paid the same as those who were hired at the start of the day? Why should those who worked longer not be paid more? That is the human nature question.

Many have attempted to interpret the parable to eliminate these difficulties, but their secular interpretations do not work. Some have suggested that those who began early in the day did not work well. They took extended coffee

breaks and talked on the job. They took a long lunch. Those who worked a shorter day worked harder. They accomplished as much in their four or seven hours as the early risers did in their 12 hours.

Keep in mind, these are the excuses that people have come up with to explain this principle: that it was a simple case of equal pay for equal work. Or was it? But nothing in the story indicates that we should interpret it this way, and a lot goes against it. If nothing else, the concluding words stress the generosity of the owner and not his accurate evaluation of the quality or the quantity of the work that had been done. Once again verse 15 says:

> **Matthew 20:15** "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things, or is your eye evil because I am good?"

Now, others have suggested that the coins were different. So this really expresses human reasoning. In one case it was a gold coin denarius, in another silver, and another bronze, and so on. Still others have supposed that the parable teaches there are no rewards in heaven and that ultimately it will not matter how much or how little we do for Jesus. The problem with that view is that other texts teach there will be rewards and our work does matter.

So how do we understand this parable? At the very least, it is a story intended to teach about the grace of God and salvation. Peter wanted to know what he and the others would get for their discipleship, which they considered a major contribution on their part, and we would also consider what they did a major contribution on God's part, from a human perspective.

However, when Jesus responded in this manner, He indicated that while the disciples would be rewarded for their service, everything they received from God, including eternal life, was solely a gift of God's grace. God owes us nothing, not even the opportunity to hear and accept the gospel. All of it is a gift from God.

Most professing Christians today take God's mercy and grace for granted. God's grace has become boring for many people. It is boring because we do not think of ourselves as sinners, at least not very great sinners, and because we think God owes us something anyway. So we think we are kind and generous and forgiving, so why should God not be?

What Jesus must tell us is that God is not like human beings and does not operate in line with our ideas, which is why the last shall be first, and the first will be last. Not in every case, but as a general principle.

So the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is one of a certain class of parables that deal in part with the problems the Jews had when the Gentiles began to believe the gospel. The problem is reflected in the older brother in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. It is seen in the parable about the banquet to which many were invited but refused to come in Matthew 22:1-14, and in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14.

In the earliest days of Old Testament history, beginning with the calling of Abraham, and especially Jacob, about 2,000 years before Christ, God began to deal with the Israelites, especially the Jews, in a special way, as you know. And God began to create, redeem, and eventually teach and disciple those to whom Jesus Christ would eventually come. The Jews were proud of that heritage, as we ourselves would be as well, and in the sense as we can be, being in God's church after this long history of God's church from Christ, the apostles, down through today.

But instead of remembering that what they had received was due entirely to God's grace—grace they had often resisted—the Jews began to suppose that the benefits of their position were largely due to themselves. They took credit for it. They thought they had earned their position by centuries of faithful labor to God. They were not always complaining; they were often glad for the privilege.

But when Jesus came, all the benefits they supposed they had earned by centuries of hard labor were now offered freely to the Gentiles, who had done nothing to deserve them, according to the Jews' mindset. So after a while, so many Gentiles were converted that it seemed as if cherished Jewish traditions would be discarded.

As I mentioned, several parables deal with this problem in a variety of ways. The account of the older brother and the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard are similar. In each, the faithful, hardworking people, that is, the

son in the one case, and the workers who were hired and started at the beginning of the day, longer than the others did, resent the father's or the owner's generosity to those they believe deserved less. The son stood outside and refused to go in when his brother came home. So the workers grumbled against the landowner. The root problem was envy of the ones who had been treated kindly.

In the Parable of the Banquet, the diagnosis is somewhat different. In the end, the outcasts enter to enjoy the master's banquet, but the ones who were first invited are not there because they refused the master's invitation.

In the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:11-12, the root problem of the self-righteous Pharisee is pride.

> **Luke 18:11-12** [He was thankful that he was] not like other men—[robbers, evildoers], and adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give tithes of all I [get].

He was proud both of what he was not and what he was.

Pleases turn over to Matthew 23, verse 12. There are different ways of analyzing the same problem, a problem that was evident in Jewish reactions to Gentile blessings, but it is not a uniquely Jewish problem. It is a problem for any who think that because they have served God faithfully for however many years, they deserve something from Him. We never deserve God's favors. If we think we do, we are in danger of losing them entirely.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is a version of one of Jesus' primary themes, appearing also in Matthew 18:4, 23:12; Luke 14:11 and also Luke 18:14. Let us choose one of them. Matthew 23:12 is a bit different but similar. It reads:

> **Matthew 23:12** "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Also in Proverbs 3, verse 34:

> **Proverbs 3:34** Surely He scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble.

Now another lesson in the parable is that *God cares for people more than things*. Why is it that the owner of the vineyard gave those who had labored only one hour the same amount as those who had labored all day? Was it not because he knew they needed the denarius? When we read the story carefully, we notice that not a word of criticism is spoken against those who were not hired in the morning.

When the master came and asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?" they replied, "Because no one has hired us." (You find that in Matthew 20:6-7.) It seems they had been willing to work, were eager to work, and undoubtedly needed to work, but they had not been hired. The owner hired them not for what he could get out of them in just a few hours, but because they needed the work. And he paid them the full denarius for the same reason.

The owner was not thinking of his profit. He was thinking of people, and he was using his abundant means to help them.

How different this is from the older son in the parable of Luke 15. He was angered because his father rejoiced in the return of his younger brother. He should have been rejoicing too, but instead he was thinking only how his brother had wasted his inheritance. The older brother would have been happy if his brother's inheritance had been lost. As it was, the reverse was true. He was displeased.

God is exactly the opposite. He does not love us for what we do for Him. He loves us because we are His children.

So who are we like? Do we serve because we love God, rather than for what we can get Him to do for us? Are we like God in how we estimate others, evaluating them in terms of their worth as beings made in the image of God and for fellowship with God, rather than merely as tools for production? Or are we like the unhappy workers or the disconsolate older brother?

And speaking of the older brother, do you remember that his story appears in a chapter of Luke that contains three parables of something that was lost: a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. In each case, the object remained valuable in the mind of the owner despite its lost condition.

We can imagine an owner of sheep who might write off the loss of one sheep lightly. After all, he might say, "What's one sheep when I still have 99? The loss is only one percent." A businessman has to expect a certain percentage of loss if he wants to run a business. What was his focus? His focus would be the profit, the money, the success of the company, and not the person.

The woman might have said, "I'm just not going to bother about one lost coin. It is one of ten, and I still have nine. I'll be happy with them." And the Father might have decided, "Well, my younger son is gone. It's sad, but things happen. I'll focus my attention on the son I still have."

All of those are human reasoning. That is not what the owners or the father did. The father longed after his unwise younger son, and in the first two parables, the owners diligently searched until the lost object was recovered.

What is the explanation for their behavior? The object had value to its owner even though it was lost, and the owner was determined to recover it again. He would not give up, and neither will God give up on one of us.

In all these parables, including the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, God values what is lost and seeks it. In the story of the workers, it is God Himself who goes out to hire them early in the day, throughout the day, and until the very end.

Please turn to Matthew 19, verse 30. You have been called and are not lost. You may be utterly worthless in your own sight, seeing only the ruin you have made, but you should know that you are valuable to God because, unlike yourself, He is able to see what you were created to be and what He can make of you.

There is one last point. It is suggested by the wording in the most important verse that both introduces the story and ends it.

> **Matthew 19:30** "But many who are first will be last, and the last first."
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> **Matthew 20:16** "So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few are chosen."

Now the important word here is "many," because the teaching is not that every person who begins early with God and works for Him throughout a lifetime will inevitably be last, or that everyone who begins late will inevitably be first. That will be true for many people, but it will not be true for all.

Many who begin early may lose their reward or not even come to faith in Christ because they approach God in a false, covetous spirit based on their merit and not on the basis of God's grace. Many who enter last will be first because although they begin late, they nevertheless recognize that their status is due to God's grace, and praise God for it. But neither of those cases is true for everyone. God will independently judge each and every one.

Please turn over to Luke 17, verse 10. It is not necessary either to start early or finish last, or start last and finish first. The truly desirable thing is to start early and work with all the might that you have, not for reward, but out of genuine love for our Savior Jesus Christ and His Father, as shown by faithfulness, obedience, and repentance.

When you have finished, still to say what we find in,

> **Luke 17:10** "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what is our duty to do.'"

But we must go above and beyond that to be profitable servants of our Creator. It is people such as this whom God delights to honor.

You are very familiar with Ecclesiastes 9:10, which says:

> **Ecclesiastes 9:10** Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.

Now as we close, remember that this parable is not really about wages. It is about grace. It reminds us that none of us deserves God's calling, His mercy, and the promise of eternal life. Every blessing we have is a gift from our Father. Yes, it is a promise, but it is a gift, something that is impossible for us to earn, in one sense.

So let us never measure God's goodness by comparing ourselves with someone else. Comparison breeds envy, and gratitude produces joy. Instead of asking, "Why did they receive that blessing?" ask, "How can I be more faithful with the blessings God has already given me?"

Whether God called you early in life or later in life, whether your opportunities have been many or few, His invitation is the same: Come into My vineyard. Serve Me with all your heart.

God is not looking for servants who keep score. He is looking for sons and daughters who serve because they love Him and His children. He delights in humble hearts that rejoice in His grace, not only toward themselves but toward others as well.

One day we will all stand before Jesus Christ. On that day, our greatest joy will not be the reward we receive, but the privilege of hearing our Savior say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Nothing this world offers can compare with those words.

So let us leave here determined to work faithfully in God's vineyard, not for recognition, not out of obligation, not because we believe God owes us anything, but because He has already given us everything through His grace. May we never forget that our calling is a gift, our service is a privilege, and our reward is in the hands of a perfectly just, infinitely wise, and abundantly generous God.

Let us serve Him with grateful hearts. Encourage one another. Rejoice whenever God blesses others. Continue faithfully until the day our King returns. Then, by His grace, we will discover that every sacrifice was worthwhile, every act of faithful service mattered, and every moment spent in His vineyard has prepared us for an eternity in His glorious Kingdom.