

It's Just Not Fair  
 Matthew 20:1-16  
 August 29, 2021  
 Farmville Baptist Church  
 Tracy Hartman

This morning we conclude our summer series on the parables. I trust that you have been as challenged and stretched as I have been as we have wrestled with these short stories that pack a powerful punch. Today's parable is no exception, so let's set the stage and dig in one more time.

You will not be surprised to learn that Jesus tells this parable in response to two specific questions. In the previous chapter, the rich young ruler poses the first question. "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus first replies that he must keep the commandments. "Which one?" the man asks, so Jesus lists them. "I have done all of this," the young presses, "what more do I lack?"

"If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give your money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me," Jesus responds. After the young man leaves, and Jesus processes the conversation with his disciples, Peter asks Jesus the second question that sets up today's story, "Look, *we have* left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" \*\*We always want to know what's in it for us don't we? It's just human nature, I think.\*\*

Jesus' answer to Peter surprises us. He doesn't berate him for wondering what's in it for him, or refocus him to thinking about ways he can serve. Jesus says to the disciples, "after the Son of Man is seated on the throne, you who have followed me will also sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left everything to follow me will receive

100 fold and will inherit eternal life. But, many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. (Pause) Then Jesus tells today's story.

This parable starts out innocently enough, doesn't it? This is what the kingdom of heaven is like, Jesus says. A landowner goes out early in the morning to hire workers for the vineyard. After agreeing with the workers on a fair day's wage, he sends them to the vineyard. So far so good. But then the story starts to get a bit odd. The landowner returns at 9, noon and 3 o'clock to hire additional workers.

This begins to raise some questions for us, doesn't it? Why didn't the landowner hire all the workers he needed at 7:00 a.m.? Did he underestimate his need for a workforce that badly? Did an impending storm accelerate his timetable ó did he have to get the grapes harvested before they got ruined? Or were there not enough workers there early?<sup>i</sup>

It's easy for us to judge those who weren't there at the first bell, isn't it? What's the adage? The early bird gets the worm, right? The early bird gets hired for a good day's work. You snooze you lose. But maybe it wasn't that simple. What if some of the workers had children to get off to school (or get set up for virtual learning in our day), what if they are caring for an elderly parent or a sick spouse? What if they had to come from another village where there wasn't work, and they had to wait until it was light enough to travel.

We don't know why the landowner made repeated trips or why there weren't more available laborers. Whatever the reason, he continues to return to find more workers throughout the day. Did you notice that there is no wage agreement with the folks he hires at 9, noon and 3, he just promises them that he will be fair. He makes no such promise to the 5 o'clock hires, he just sends them out to work with the others. And they go. It's a bit odd, but everybody's busy and the work is getting done.

Then the whole scene goes off the rails at quitting time. At 6:00, the landowner meets with his manager. "Gather the laborers," the landowner said, "and let's get everybody paid. I want you to start with the ones that just got here, and work your way back from there. And don't worry about getting out your calculator; we're going to pay them all the same."

Can you imagine what went through the manager's mind at that moment? I think I would have wondered if I'd been out in the sun too long, because surely I didn't hear the boss correctly. Did he just say that he was going to pay the people who worked for one hour the same as those who worked eleven hours? "That can't be right," he must have thought. "The boss will lose all kinds of money that way, that can't be right. And if it is, why in the world do you start with the last ones in? That's just asking for trouble. When everyone sees that you can make a whole day's wage for one hour of work, how many people will be waiting at 6:00 tomorrow morning to put in a full day's work?" (ZERO) You don't need an MBA to know this is a bad idea. But the manager did indeed hear correctly. That was the plan.

Now, I want you to put yourselves in the shoes of the workers who have been there since 7:00 that morning. You are hot and tired, and all of a sudden, you're standing at the back of the line. Really? Nobody likes to be at the end of the line. That goes all the way back to preschool doesn't it? When one of the greatest thrills of the day is to be chosen to be the line leader. But here you are, at the back, waiting, and you just want to get paid and go home. But then, you start to hear the buzz coming down the line. The manager has just paid the 5:00 workers a denarius, a full day's wage, for just an hour's work. Whoot, you think, if he's paying that for an hour, our crowd ought to get 11 denari or over two weeks' pay! Your excitement builds as you begin to think about what you will do with all of that extra cash. Will you pay off some debt? Take the family on a little trip? Upgrade the living room furniture? You are so wrapped up in your own

windfall, you quit paying attention to what's happening in the line in front of you. Until the manager gets to the 7:00 a.m. crowd. Here we go, you think. But wait, he's only handing out one denarius each. That can't be right. But again, it is. And what happens? You begin to grumble. I suspect that's an understatement, isn't it? Matthew probably couldn't print what you and your co-workers are actually thinking and saying, can he?<sup>ii</sup> Matthew gives us the gist of it though, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them EQUAL to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. It's just not fair!!" These workers are starting to sound like the older brother in the prodigals parable, aren't they? They feel slighted, taken for granted, used and abused.

But the landowner isn't having any of it. "Friend, I am doing you no wrong, didn't you agree at 6:00 this morning to work a full day for the customary daily wage? (PAUSE) Besides, am I not allowed to do as I please with what belongs to me? (PAUSE) Or are you envious because I am so generous? So the last will be first and the first will be last."

The vineyard is a private enterprise, and the landowner indeed has the right to do whatever he wants with his money. The early workers have no case. But the landowner's choice of how he chose to dispense the wages does still beg a question, why does he set the early workers up like this? If he'd paid them their denarius first and sent them on their way, they would have been happy for their pay and none the wiser about what the others made. Why ask for trouble? Why indeed? (PAUSE)

At the most basic level, maybe the landowner wanted everyone to make a living wage that day ó whether they were able to work full time or part time. Maybe he was the extraordinary business owner who saw his work as a ministry, and he didn't want anyone to go home hungry. And maybe he wanted all the workers to catch his vision for ministry. Maybe he wanted the

workers to learn to be happy for the good fortune of their co-workers instead of focusing on their own potential gain. Maybe that's why the last were first and the first were last. It goes against our capitalist sensibilities, but Jesus started it all by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like" —

Of course, in addition to this pragmatic interpretation, there are spiritual, allegorical meanings to this parable. Remember, Jesus told the story in response to the rich man's question about gaining eternal life and Peter's query about "What's in it for us?" How would they feel about this story? I suspect they were as surprised as the laborer's, but they shouldn't have been. Jesus has just told Peter, everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. What doesn't Jesus say here? That the longer you've been following the greater your reward will be. The longer you've labored in the vineyard, the more you're going to get paid. Nope, not there.

And that gets under our skin doesn't it? No? Ok then, imagine yourself at the back of the line again, this time at the final judgment. Here we all are, those of us who showed up early in the game those of us who spent not just a long day, but our whole lives working in the vineyard for the Master — serving the church — and we're watching it all unfold. Looking up toward the front of the line you see someone you recognize. It's your neighbor who always made fun of you for being a Christian and spending your time at church. What's he doing there? Oh, you hear coming down the line, he came to Christ on his death bed. Ok, you're glad he had a change of heart, and that he's here, but wait, why is he at the front of the line? Is his reward for eternity is the same mine? How is that fair? We're starting to sound like the older brother and Peter here aren't we? "Look, Jesus, we left everything to follow you, what's in it for us?" How often

are we so consumed by the anticipation of our own rewards that we have a hard time sharing our neighbors good fortune?

Just as the landowner confronts the workers in the vineyard with their own limited understanding of grace, God confronts us with ours today. (PAUSE) Flannery O'Connor wrote, "All human nature vigorously resist grace, because grace changes us, and the change is painful." We all know the saying, "No pain no gain." Friends, it's painful to let go of our ideas of what's fair and our judgmental spirits isn't it? But what do we gain if we do? We gain the view from the front of the line ó God's view. We get to see and give grace to all who come ó whether they come at 7 or 9 or noon or 3 or right at the very end. And we get to rejoice, because it's not about business it's about relationship, it's not about fair, it's about family. You see when we work in the vineyard, it should not be only for our own gain, it should be for the good of all. Friends, may it be so for each or us and all of us. And all God's people said, "Amen."

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<sup>i</sup> Amy Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, p. 209.

<sup>ii</sup> This thought provided by Eugene Lowry in "Who Could Ask for Anything More?" in *How to Preach a Parable*