

Equal Pay for Unequal Work

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Matthew 20:1-16

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

3 When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same.

6 And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 9 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, ‘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.’

13 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

## THE CHRISTMAS BONUS

Bob Schwartz was the owner of a midsize trucking firm in Chicago. He made the decision to sell the company to a large national corporation while he was still ahead of the game.

He could see that there would no be room for a company like his for long. It was grow and expand, or sell.

Each year at Christmas time, Bob had given his employees and drivers a bonus, which was based on the company's profit and the employees' time on the job.

This final year of operations however had been an especially good year. He decided to give everyone an especially generous Christmas bonus.

Everyone would receive more than they had during the previous few years. And *everyone would receive the same amount*. If you were on the payroll December 20th when the checks were written, you got the bonus!

When the envelopes were first opened there was joy and good cheer all around. Laughter even.

Then slowly, people began to compare checks. "Say Joe what did you get?"

Guess what happened?

You guessed it. Matthew 20 all over again!

Bob said,

"I couldn't believe it. I tried to do something good for everybody and now I get angry phone calls at home from people who got larger bonus checks than they ever got before.

Are people really that greedy?"

Yes, we are Bob.

Yes, we are.

**NOT FAIR TO LABOR!**

When I told Hal, our parish associate that I would be preaching on this passage he replied "Better you than me." I wondered why he was so reluctant to tackle this passage. I asked him why he found this passage so difficult.

Hal said that his emotional reaction to this passage was connected to the last time he taught it at a Bible study. At that study there was a man named Fred. And Fred didn't like what this passage, not one little bit.

Hal tried to explain that the story was a parable and that it we shouldn't take it too literally. But that didn't help Fred. Fred kept repeating throughout the study in a louder and more insistent voice, "It just isn't fair. It just isn't fair."

Fred's objections dominated the study that day. And to be honest about it, Fred did have a point.

The generosity of the landowner isn't fair. When we talk about fairness in the workplace we say that workers should get equal pay for equal work. Well in this case the workers got equal pay for unequal work.

The landowner was generous to one group, the workers that came late. But he was not generous to another group, the workers who had worked in the field all day long.

The landowner gave these workers the agreed upon, usual daily wage but no more.

Thank goodness we can tell Fred and all those other folks that this is a parable. This is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

**AN UNFAIR GOD!**

And what is that heavenly meaning? God is equally gracious to those who work for Him all their lives and to those who come to work for God at the last hour.

Jesus said, "The last will be first and the first will be last."  
Wait a minute. Fred and I are still not happy. We don't like this story any better as a parable.

You mean that I can work for God all my life and be no different from someone who entered the kingdom at the last hour? You mean that some guy can live like the devil, make a deathbed confession, and receive the same salvation that I receive at the last hour?

That doesn't seem fair! And yet that's exactly what this passage seems to be teaching.

And it's not the only Scripture passage that makes this point.

For example, think about the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son asks for his inheritance early. Then he wastes it all on wine, women and song. And finally he comes crawling back home so that daddy can make it all right again.

In the meantime the older brother has worked faithfully for his father all along. He didn't ask for any special favors. He just did his duty.

But, when the prodigal returns home the father kills the fatted calf and has a big party. It didn't seem fair to this older, more responsible brother.

If these parables illustrate what the kingdom of heaven is like, it just doesn't seem fair. Shouldn't God be more generous toward those who work longer and harder? Shouldn't God give *us* more because we deserve more?

### SAVED BY GRACE AND NOT BY WORKS

Many people think that the Bible teaches that the harder you work the more blessings you will receive. "Like the Good Book says God helps those who help themselves." That's not in the Bible of course, but some people refuse to accept that fact.

Someone once told me, "Well, that may not be in the Bible, but it ought to be in the Bible because that's what the Bible teaches." They just couldn't turn loose of this deeply held belief.

But, we must turn loose of this belief before we can make any progress in the life of faith. Before we can understand anything about God's kingdom we have to understand this one thing.

We are saved by grace and not by works.

The Bible tells us that our "righteousness" in the presence of God's glory is like filthy rags.

All of us are like sheep that have wandered off into the wilderness. We have gone astray. We are lost.

I think the landowner in this parable represents God. And the landowner tells the disgruntled employees who worked all day and just got the usual wage,

“Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

According to Jesus the Kingdom of Heaven doesn't work on the merit system but according to the sovereign will of God. God chooses people and rewards according to God's own pay scale.

And God's pay scale is not ours.

At first blush we take offense at this parable because deep down we really believe that God helps those who help themselves.

We think of ourselves as the responsible ones who have worked hard through the heat of the day.

But, suppose that's not true?

#### ELEVENTH HOUR WORKERS

The person we identify with in the story determines how we interpret a parable. If you've worked hard all your life and resent those freeloaders who haven't worked nearly as hard as you, you'll identify with the workers who worked all day and complained about receiving the usual wage.

If you're an older brother (like me), then you might identify with the older brother's complaints about the spoiled, irresponsible younger brother.

If we have been first to serve in life and in God's kingdom it just doesn't seem fair that we would be last when the kingdom comes. And yet that's what the parable teaches.

The last will be first and the first will be last.

But, how would we look at the parable if we saw ourselves as the ones who were hired at the eleventh hour?

Suppose we thought of ourselves as the prodigal son instead of the older, more responsible son?

How would this change our interpretation of the parable?

I would suggest that this interpretation is closer to the truth.

We are the prodigal sons and daughters. We are the eleventh hour workers.

Last week we talked about the pervasiveness of sin. All of us fall well short of the glory of God. We are all sinners without hope except for the grace of God.

So, if that's true, then maybe we're the people who have been out of work all day and get an eleventh hour reprieve to go and work in the field.

Maybe we're the prodigals who have wasted our life and now are totally dependent upon the grace of a loving father who is willing to let us come back home.

The gospel is not about what we have done for God. The gospel is about what God has done for us.

God has given us a gift that is all out of proportion to the work we have done or could ever hope to do.

#### ELEVENTH HOUR SALVATION

The context of this parable is the looming crucifixion and resurrection. We're getting close to the end of Matthew's gospel, and that means Jesus' conflict with the religious and political leaders is coming to a head.

The religious and political leaders will kill Jesus. The disciples will betray and forsake Jesus.

Evil will turn the world dark, and then the truth will be apparent. God sent his son into the world to save the world and what did we do? We killed him.

That really wasn't fair.

But, we know that this is not the end of the story.

At the "eleventh hour" there is a resurrection. God makes redemption possible for those who have proved to be unfaithful servants. God pays us more than we are worth.

God in Christ bears the sins of the world, and the world is given new life. We are given new life. There is a new creation. We are a new creation.

Someone asked me this past week,

“Is suicide the unpardonable sin?”

How would you answer that question?

Some in the church used to think this was true. They reasoned that if a person committed suicide, there would be no opportunity to repent of that last sin.

So, from a logical standpoint we could argue that suicide is the unpardonable sin.

But, I said that suicide is *not* an unpardonable sin because salvation is *not* based on what we do. Salvation is based upon what God does for us.

God does judge us, but the God who judges us is gracious and compassionate in His judgment. God gives us more than we deserve.

God judges our sins with great mercy. We come to the throne of grace at the eleventh hour and receive a full day’s wage.

It’s not fair.

And thank God it’s not fair!

## A DIFFERENT CULTURE

John Westerhoff, a professor at Duke University was called in to help deal with problems being encountered by a school comprised mainly of Native Americans.

The teachers at the school said that they were shocked by the lack of morals among the Native American children. She said,

“They cheat constantly. We can’t make them stop.”

So, John interviewed the children and asked them why they all looked on each other’s papers during the tests. They told him,

“If someone in the tribe knows, he should tell everyone who doesn’t know it. If someone in the tribe does not know, he should ask someone who knows.”

Westerhoff realized that he was in a culture with a very different orientation from his own. What we have been taught to call cheating, they called cooperation.

It all depends on how you look at it.

In the same way this parable reminds us that Christians look at life in a different way. The Christian culture is a counter culture. We think that Truth; God's Truth is often quite different from the ways of the world.

The world tells us that we get what we deserve. Anything less or more is not fair.

But, God in Christ tells us that he has a different pay scale. He gives us not what we deserve but what we need.

He gives us each day our daily bread.  
And it is always more than we expect.

I have always been intrigued by the culture of sharing in the early church. We read about it in the book of Acts. Those early Christians shared what they had with each other, not out of compulsion but out of Christian love.

There was a famine in the land in those days, and many people were on the brink of starvation.

But, instead of hoarding what they had for a rainy day, the more wealthy members of the community sold what they had so that they could take care of the needs of the community.

In the letters of Paul we learn that this generosity was not confined to the church in Jerusalem. All over the ancient world Christians were taking up a collection to care for those in Jerusalem who were in need.

Even those who had their own financial struggles managed to give generously in order to take care of the needs of others.

This radical generosity more than anything else caused the ancient world to take notice of the Christian faith. In this community of radical generosity people saw hope for a different way of life, and this caused the people to look upon the Christian community with favor.

In fact this radical generosity caused many people to convert to the Christian faith.

Generosity is still a mark of the community of faith. We believe that the God we meet in Jesus Christ is a generous God. Therefore, we are called to be a generous people.

It is not a generosity born out of compulsion but a generosity born out of love.

And this generous Spirit sustains us in this life and in the life to come.

The Scottish theologian, James Torrance tells this story. In World War One a terribly wounded soldier was being held in the arms of a chaplain.

The wounded man, in his last moments of life looked up at the chaplain and asked,

“What is God really like?

I know Jesus but is there another God hiding behind Jesus?

What sort of God am I going to meet?”

The chaplain replied,

“No, son. There is no God hiding behind Jesus.

Jesus is the whole truth about God. Jesus is who God really is.

God is love.”

This is our hope in life and in death.

In life and in death we belong to God.

God doesn't give us what we deserve. Instead, out of sheer grace, God gives us what we need.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.