

Scripture Reading:  
Matthew 20:1-16

### **God's not fair**

If you are anything like me you could re-read this parable a few times and come up with a slightly different explanation or angle each time. Like any story we will get something different out of it depending on the word or phrase we focus on. This does not mean that the parable can mean anything we want it to. Rather it means that there is complexity within the story and depending upon who we are and where we are in life this parable like any parable will have certain meaning for us.

For instance if we were to look at this parable from the side of human nature we might notice a glaring flaw in how the Landlord acts.

To help recognize this flaw I invite you to pause for a moment and think back to your childhood. I wonder what one of the most common phrases you remember saying or hearing was. If you can't think back that far think about children in your life. What do they often say?

We would like to reflect that the most common things we hear children say are phrases like "I love you?" or "Can I help?" or "Would you like some?" And although we do hear those things you might also recognize the common phrases "That's not fair" or "He got more than I did?" or "That's mine."

I remember how unfair it was that I had to do my homework, or practice my piano, or walk the dog or.... almost anything before I went to play.  
Or what about those kids who got anything they wanted and my parents never bought me anything - now that certainly wasn't fair was it?<sup>1</sup>

We all recognize those thoughts and words because we are all born with an innate sense of fairness, it's a part of our human nature. Now this isn't a bad thing because when properly developed this becomes the foundation for justice and equality. It's the kind of thing that sparks us to notice injustice. It is this innate sense of fairness that causes us to pause and reflect upon the facts like "It's not fair that some can vote and others can't, that some ride in the front of the bus while others must stay in the back, that some are paid more for the same work, that some go to bed hungry while others fill landfills with their excess."<sup>2</sup> Yes, our innate sense of fairness can lead to a strong and life-giving sense of justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Lose David workingpreacher.org

<sup>2</sup> IBID

Unfortunately however often our innate sense of fairness is rather ego-centric. We tend to assess what is fair for us and often ignore what is fair for others. Fairness is found when our own wants and needs are met. We criticize children for this but let's be honest that most of the injustice we see in the world is about people (including us) getting what we want over what others need.

I think this is exactly Jesus' point in this parable. I used to often hear comments about how it was unfair that folks got to live off of welfare and take a free ride. I think I likely don't hear these often anymore because people know how I will respond. You may think they are getting an easy free ride but I do not know very many people who are living on BC housing assistance that find it easy to find a rental space for \$375 a month. People on the streets are rarely there simply because they are lazy they are usually there because they have a disability or illness of some kind that they cannot get the assistance they need for.

Imagine working in the work force in a time and place where you simply went to the market and begged for a job each day. These are folks with no regular employment hoping that some landowner will come and hire them. Times have not changed completely because there are usually far more laborers than there is labor. Only then there was absolutely no income assistance or social services to fall back on.

“So if you were both healthy and lucky, you'd get chosen and work a twelve-hour day and when you were done receive a day's wage that would provide food for your family for the next day. (This, by the way, sheds some insight into the practical earnestness of Jesus' prayer: "give us this day our daily bread.") If you were unlucky or unhealthy, however, you'd be passed over, possibly waiting all day, only to return empty-handed to face the disappointed looks of those who depended on you.”<sup>3</sup>

Now picture yourself as the one who shows up at home empty handed. Imagine yourself to be the one who had looked for work all day and nothing happened for you. And then you had to go home to hungry children, and an exhausted wife. (We can't even begin to consider what would happen if you were a woman with no husband in that time). In this moment Jesus wants the people sitting before him to notice the kind of grace, hope and assistance God longs for us offer.

For in the parable Jesus tells everyone gets something. Some are chosen early in the morning, some later in the day and some even right before quitting time. Now imagine how these late laborers would have felt when they received a full day's pay. David Lose says “let's keep in mind,...they'd been there just the same as the others -- ready, willing, and eager -- but they had been passed over, time and again, until right near the end. And so I suspect they were delighted to discover they would be able to provide, at least for another day, for their families.”<sup>4</sup>

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This act of generosity however immediately sets up expectations from those who have worked a long day. They assume they are going to be getting more. It makes sense that they think that after all so would we. Imagine working a temp job and someone who only worked a couple of hours gets the same amount as you who worked all day. Let's be honest most of us only want to see people rewarded for what they deserve.

And yet the landowner can choose what he pays his employees. If anything he is being more than fair, he being generous. Why do we begrudge someone's generosity? Because we want what is fair. That is why in a lot of families one person cuts the pie and the other person chooses which piece they want.

And yet don't you agree that the person who comes in the last hour needs the food for their family as much as the one who works all day? Imagine if everyone in our society who applied for a job, or worked to find one got paid. Imagine if you were the person who tried to get a job all day and didn't get hired to the very end. How grateful would you be? How much harder would you work the next time you were offered a job?

If only we could consider the humble, vulnerable, jobless and poor as equal to us. Oh, we do at times but most often we don't in fact we are so opposed to such kind of generosity in our humanity that many believe it was this parable that upset the apple cart so much that it led Jesus to his death.

Karl Jacobson wrote; this parable is about the 9th and 10th commandments "We covet what God chooses to give to others... Here as in every parable we are invited to see ourselves in the story, and then apply it to ourselves. The wages at stake (even at the moment of Jesus' first telling of the parable) are not actual daily wages for vineyard-laborers, but forgiveness, life, and salvation for believers. We need not literally be laborers in a vineyard, as we are all of us co-workers in the kingdom (1 Corinthians 3:9)."<sup>5</sup>

The problem is that we don't like it when others get the same kind of blessings as we do. We think we are more worthy or they are less. Yes we believe all deserve love but we have sat in the pews, and been kind and good for much longer, so perhaps we should get more. We tend to be resentful of what others receive in grace, compassion and love.

That is why so often in communities of faith we start to set standards of who God can and will love. We try to control who should be forgiven or welcomed or offered grace. We get frustrated with grace, not when it applies to us but when it applies to others. It is a scandal to consider the last first and the first last.

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<sup>5</sup> Jacobson, Karl commentary on the gospel [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

In the parable it is interesting to note that the last are literally the first even when they are paid. “And the first, who have labored longest, must also wait the longest to get theirs. But notice as well that the first who are now last do not receive nothing or less, they receive the same, as the laborers themselves say, "you have made them equal to us.... So perhaps it should be said that the last shall be first, and the first shall be the same.”<sup>6</sup>

The scandal of this parable is that we are all equal recipients of God's gifts. The scandal of our faith is that we are often covetous and jealous when God's gifts of forgiveness and life are given to others in equal measure. The grace and thanks we can find in the parable is that those of us who are not as perfect as others will be just as loved, just as welcomed and just as cherished by our God.

*Balancing The Scales - John van de Laar*

*In the times when we give - however generously  
it becomes blatantly clear, O God,  
how ridiculous our attempts are to balance the scales;  
We cannot repay Your abundance of supply  
Your extravagance of grace;  
Nor do You require it.*

*So, why should we expect it of others?  
In truth, we cannot.  
Like You we can only love – by giving, by serving, by praying.*

*And so we ask...  
Free the score-keepers in our world and in our hearts  
Restore the fallen in our world and in our hearts  
Strengthen the merciful in our world and in our hearts  
Heal the broken in our world and in our hearts  
Uplift the lowly in our world and in our hearts  
Bring down the tyrants in our world and in our hearts  
Erase the lines of division in our world and in our hearts  
Create a Christ-guided humanity in our world and in our hearts*

*And use us to make it so.  
In Jesus's Name. Amen*

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<sup>6</sup> IBID