

It's not fair

Matthew 20:1-16

January 27, 2008

And Jesus said: *Those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last ...*

So what do you think of that? It kinda depends on whether you're near the beginning or end of the line, doesn't it?

And Jesus told this parable:

There was a man who went out early in the morning to hire workers to work in his vineyard. He told them he would pay them the usual day's wage -- one silver coin. So they went to work in his vineyard.

And at nine o'clock he went out again to the marketplace and he saw some other men standing there and he said, "Why don't you go work in my vineyard too and I will pay you a fair wage." And so they did.

And again at twelve o'clock and at three o'clock he did the same thing.

And it was almost five o'clock when the landowner went back to the marketplace again and he saw some other folks standing there. He said, "Why are you standing around here all day doing nothing." They said, "No one has hired us." He said, "You go work in my vineyard, too." And so they did.

When evening came the landowner said to his foreman, "Collect the workers now and pay them their wages, starting with the ones who were hired last and ending with the ones who were hired first." So the foreman did that and called those up who started working at five o'clock, and he paid them one silver coin each.

And those who were hired at the beginning of the day got really excited. They said, "He's going to pay us more!" They came up to get their wage and they were given one silver coin each. They took their money and they started complaining ...

Greg (interrupting from congregation): Because it's not fair ...

Tim: What was that?

Greg: Because it's not fair!

Tim: What's not fair?

Greg (walking to front of sanctuary across from Tim): From a strictly practical sense, you've got these people that have worked for one hour and you compare that to these people that have worked for twelve hours and you're giving one person one-twelfth of a silver coin an hour and you're giving the the other person the entire silver coin. I bet those people who worked twelve hours weren't the only ones complaining! It was probably the people who worked the nine hours and the six hours and maybe the three hours, though they wouldn't be complaining as much ...

Tim: But who was treated unfairly? The people who worked -- did they not get what they agreed to be paid? Was that not fair?

Greg: They didn't get anything out of the ordinary. They were given the regular wage. They were given the regular wage, whereas these other people -- their hourly work was respected greater.

Tim: But isn't it true that the people that started at the beginning -- they were treated fairly. They were given what they were told they would be given! The others were treated more than fairly. Who suffered?

Greg: It seems like they're being set up, because you're asking them not to be surprised. If you take the people that worked from five o'clock on, and three o'clock on, and noon, and if you combine those together that's ten hours. The other person has worked twelve hours all by himself! So now you're saying that these three people are worth more than this one person, because their work is being rewarded much more greatly than this other person.

Tim: But were any promises broken?

Greg: No promises were broken, but what we're saying is the reason we have set hourly wages, the reason we have unions in this country, the reason we had the Haymarket riots happen with people fighting for eight-hour days and for fair wages, the reason we don't like to buy Chinese goods where they give them three dollars a day, is because we value a fair work day, and that people are given an hourly wage that fairly compensates their labor.

Tim: You do notice those folks who started at the beginning of the day -- they didn't refuse the money. They took it.

Greg: They did take it.

Tim: They didn't refuse it in protest.

Greg: But the master is going to have trouble tomorrow when he goes out there and says OK ...

Tim: No one's going to want to start at the beginning of the day!

Greg: Right ... At 6:00 am: where were those people that were hired at five? "No one will hire us ..." Well, they were all sleeping! That's what they were doing! And then they showed up later in the day and it's like "Yeah, let's go work, I guess ..." They could work three jobs and still get there. They could find other masters who would give them three times the money and then they could go there and they could be all set and ready to go.

Tim: Maybe he's right ...

Maybe it's not about being fair. Maybe Jesus' parable has nothing to do with fairness. Tell me, would you want God to be fair with you? Would you want God to be entirely fair with you, to give you exactly what you deserve and no more?

Maybe Jesus' parable is not about fairness, but about generosity. The landowner chooses to be generous. God chooses to be generous. Thanks be to God!

Maybe the parable is about generosity and about our jealousy when God chooses to be generous with the wrong people! Notice that the parable focusses on the workers hired first. Jesus gives no details about the reaction of the folks who were paid a whole day's wage, even though they worked only an hour. Jesus describes the reaction of the workers who were hired first, the workers who began complaining when they were paid only the wage to which they agreed!

The parable is aimed at them, and at us. People who consider ourselves worthy of a good reward. People who are worthy of a good reward. People who have worked hard, done well, made sacrifices, taken responsibility, asked for no handouts. People who have received all that we deserve, but get terribly upset when other people get way more than they deserve! We've worked all day in the hot sun, and they just worked one hour in the afternoon shade! They don't deserve to be paid a whole day's wage! It's not fair!

It's not fair! He can't hold on to a job. He doesn't do anything to better himself. He doesn't appreciate or take care of what he has. Why should God be generous with him? Why should God expect me or anyone else to be generous with him? He should have to earn what he gets, just like I have had to earn what I have.

It's not fair! She has thrown her life away, wasting her body and wasting her mind, making bad choice after bad choice. So why does God forgive her? Why does God give her a second chance and a third chance and a fourth? Why should I? Shouldn't she have to make amends first? Shouldn't she have to earn my respect just like I have earned the respect of my peers, not just be handed it on a silver platter?

It's not fair! They've spent their whole lives taking advantage of other people, using other people, hurting other people. And now they go to jail and "get religion?" And God says, "Welcome into the family!" And I'm supposed to say, "Welcome to the family, brother; let me know whatever you need and I'll help you out in anyway I can?"

It's not fair ...

No, it's not. Love is never fair, because love is always given away ... freely. Love is never earned. God chooses to be generous. God chooses to be gracious. God chooses to love, without qualification and without condition.

What will you choose? Will you choose to celebrate the grace of God in all its height and breadth and depth? Or will you be jealous of God's generosity?