

"That's Not Fair!"
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Mt. 20:1-16)

Introduction.

My late wife Lorie and I had the great privilege of raising three sons – Nate, Jason and David. They are amazing young men and I love them to pieces, but I have to say that if had a dollar for every time their mother and I heard one of them say, “That’s not fair!” I could probably retire today! It was a common refrain in our household, and it probably is (or was) in yours, too. Whether it was the fact that one boy got to keep the dog in his room overnight and another one didn’t, or that one boy finished the last grape popsicle in the freezer while the others were stuck with only the dreaded toxic green ones, or one child was sick and got to stay home and watch the Disney Channel while the others had to go to school, my kids would cry out, “That’s not fair!”

There is something in each of us that wants equal justice, especially if it involves us, and we rise up in righteous indignation whenever it doesn’t come our way. We say, “That’s not fair!” The passage before us this morning tells the story of a time when some people got very upset because they felt like life wasn’t fair. But the message of the story is that what we need most in life really isn’t fairness. What we need even more is grace. Let’s take a closer look.

I. The Master Who Looks for Workers.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard" (20:1,2). This parable may sound to us as if it describes a purely imaginary situation, but that’s actually far from the case. Apart from the method of payment, the parable describes the kind of thing that happened often at certain times during the year in ancient Palestine. The grape harvest ripened towards the end of September, and then close on its heels came the rains. If the harvest wasn’t gathered in before the rains broke, it was ruined. So, to get the harvest in was a frantic race against time. Any worker was welcome, even if he could only give an hour to the work.

The pay the landowner offered was very typical. A *denarius* was the normal day's wage for a working person at the time of Christ, and it was equivalent to about \$60 in today's money. The men who were standing in the marketplace weren’t lazy people, idling their time away. Rather, the marketplace was the

equivalent of a labor exchange. A man would go there the first thing in the morning, carrying his tools, and he waited until someone would hire him. The men who stood in the marketplace were waiting for work, and the fact that some of them stayed there until 5 o'clock in the afternoon is proof of just how badly they wanted work.

The hours of the parable were the normal times of the day as the Jews counted them. The Jewish day began at 6 a.m., and the hours were counted from then until 6 p.m. Counting from 6 a.m., the third hour was 9 o'clock, the sixth hour was 12 noon, and the eleventh hour was 5 p.m. This parable gives a vivid picture of the kind of thing that could happen in the marketplace of any Jewish village or town at certain times of the year.

II. Work and Wages in the Kingdom.

In the parable some of the workers clock in at sunrise, some at the morning coffee break, some over the lunch hour, and some just an hour before quitting time. Everybody seemed content until it was time to be paid. That's when the ones who had worked 12 hours under a blazing sun learned that the Johnny-come-latelys who had barely put in an hour would receive exactly the same pay as they did. The landowner's actions contradicted everything known about employee motivation and fair compensation. It was bad economics. What do you think Jesus was trying to say in this story?

Did you ever see the movie *Amadeus*? It's a film that won the Academy Award for Best Picture back in 1984, and it contrasts two composers in the 17th century – Antonio Salieri and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. (The name Amadeus is Latin for "beloved of God.") Salieri, who was a very religious person, had the earnest desire to create beautiful music of praise, and he was an accomplished composer in his own right. However, it infuriated him that God had lavished perhaps the greatest gift of musical genius upon someone who was as impish, immature, and adolescent as Mozart. And Salieri never felt like he ever measured up to Mozart's genius.

Philip Yancey says that the film poses the same question as the book of Job in the Bible does, only in an inverted way. Whereas the book of Job ponders why God would "punish" a righteous person, *Amadeus* contemplates why God would "reward" an undeserving brat. Yancey says the problem of pain meets its match in the scandal of grace.¹

Think about it. Why would God choose Jacob the deceiver over someone who was dutiful like Esau? Why would God give supernatural physical powers on a person like Samson whose head was easily turned by women? Why would God give the gift of wisdom to a person like Solomon, who was the result of a king's

adulterous affair? The scandal of grace and the lack of fairness appears throughout the pages of the Bible.²

Jesus' parable makes no sense at so many levels, and I think that was His intent. He was giving His disciples a parable about grace, which cannot be calculated like a day's wage. Grace isn't about finishing last or first. It's not even about counting. We receive grace as a gift from God, not as something that we work to earn.

The landowner in Jesus' story didn't cheat the full-day workers by paying everyone for one hour's work instead of twelve. No, the full-day workers got what they were promised in the beginning. Their discontent arose from the scandalous mathematics of grace. They couldn't accept that their employer had the right to do whatever he wanted with his money when it meant paying people twelve times what they actually deserved.

I think many of us reading this parable identify with the employees who put in a full day's work, rather than the people who came at the end of the day. We like to think of ourselves as the early risers, as the responsible workers, and the landowner's strange behavior confuses us as much as it did the original hearers. But we risk missing the story's main point: *that God dispenses gifts, not wages, in His kingdom*. None of us gets paid according to our merit, for none of us comes close to satisfying God's requirement to live a perfect life. If we were paid on the basis of fairness and what we actually deserve, we'd all end up in hell!

When all is said and done, in the realm of God's grace, the word "deserve" doesn't even apply. Fredrick Buechner says it well when he writes,

"People are prepared for everything except the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's. They are prepared for a mustard-seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt but not for the great banyan it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian Church but not for the marriage supper of the lamb...."³

It's grace. It's the gift of God. And none of us deserves it.

III. The Gift of Grace.

In her book *The Seeds of Heaven* Barbara Brown Taylor writes that the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is a little like cod liver oil – you know that Jesus is right, you know it must be good for you, but that doesn't make it easier to swallow. Like the parable of the Prodigal Son, this parable is one of those stories of grace that is so radical that it tends to offend us. It's because it seems to reward

those who have done the least while it sends those who have worked the hardest to the end of the line.⁴

The last shall be first and the first shall be last challenges all the assumptions by which most of us live our lives – that the way to win God’s approval is to be the best person you can possibly be, to be the hardest worker, the one who is first in the vineyard in the morning and the last to leave at night. But according to this parable, those at the end of the line will not only be paid the same as those in the front, but they’ll be paid first! It’s just not fair!

However, I want you to notice where this story appears in the gospel of Matthew. Just before Jesus tells this parable, Peter says, “*We have left everything to follow you, Jesus. What will we receive when we get to heaven?*” (Mt. 19:27). And after Jesus tells this story the mother of James and John, Mrs. Zebedee, asks Jesus to give her sons the seats of honor when He comes into His kingdom. The context of this parable is everyone is jockeying for position. They want to be first in line.

Have you ever been like that? Have you ever tried to elbow your way to the front, tried to get on top, tried to be the first in line? We all have. We all want to be #1. And Jesus is trying to confront our addiction to self-interest, and He invites us to look at the world differently and to live our lives in a different way. It’s not about being first, and it’s not about being fair. It’s about God’s grace which none of us can earn and which none of us ever deserves. Can we learn to rest in the gift of God’s grace and live in the light of His love?

Have you ever noticed how we want life to be fair...until we’re pulled over for a traffic violation, or we want to turn in a paper late to a professor, or we missed the deadline for filing our taxes? On those occasions we don’t want fair. We want grace, don’t we? “Can’t you just give me a warning, officer? I promise I’ll slow down in the future.” “My week has been crazy, professor. I’ll get the paper to you first thing on Monday.” “I’ve been waiting on a W-2 form to come in. I just need a little more time to file my tax return.”

This whole fairness thing is a little complicated, isn’t it? Do we really want life to be fair? Or is grace what we need more? At the end of the day, what we all really need is grace. And grace has the ability to change our lives more than fairness ever could.

IV. A Story of Grace.

Years ago, I saw a film entitled “Babette’s Feast.” It’s the story of an old pastor, a widower, and his two daughters. They led a poor and austere Lutheran sect of Christians and lived in a fishing village on the coast of Norway. They were a lifeless group of people who always wore black, and they renounced the

pleasures of this world. Life on earth was to be tolerated as a means of getting to heaven.

One night the sisters heard a heavy thump at the door. When they opened it, a woman collapsed in a swoon. She spoke only French, and she handed them a letter of introduction. Her name was Babette, and she had lost her husband and son during the civil war in France. Her life was in danger, so she had to flee. The writer of the letter hoped that the people of the village might show her mercy. The letter read, "Babette can cook."

For the next twelve years Babette worked for the sisters, and she helped out with the Sunday services. Then one-day Babette received her first letter. She read it and announced that a wonderful thing had happened to her. Each year a friend in Paris had renewed Babette's number in the French lottery, and this year, her ticket had won – 10,000 francs! The sisters shook Babette's hand in congratulations, but inwardly their hearts sank because they figured that now with all this money soon Babette would be leaving them.

However, as it happened, Babette's winning the lottery coincided with the very time the sisters were discussing the celebration to honor the 100th anniversary of their father's birth. Babette came to them with a request. She wanted to prepare a real French dinner for the anniversary service. Unknown to everyone else, Babette used all the money from her lottery winnings and prepared the finest meal possible the likes of which these austere Lutherans had never tasted – turtle soup, fresh vegetables, truffles, champagne, Blinis Demidoff, and baby quail prepared *en Sarcophage*. Heady with wine and warm with the fellowship over such delicious food, sins were confessed, relationships were restored, and the little band of believers enjoyed a rare experience together unlike anything they had ever known.

The story ends with two scenes. Outside, the old-timers join hands around the fountain and lustily sing the old hymns of their faith. It's a communion scene – Babette's feast opened the gate and grace came in. The final scene takes place inside, in the wreck of a kitchen piled high with unwashed dishes, greasy pots, and empty bottles. The two sisters tell Babette what a wonderful meal it was and that they will remember this evening after she has gone back to Paris. Babette tells them that she will not be going back to Paris. All her friends and relatives there have been killed or imprisoned, and it would be too expensive to return to Paris. The sisters ask, "But what about the 10,000 francs?" Then Babette drops the bombshell. She had spent all of her winnings, every last franc on the feast they had just eaten.

Twelve years before, Babette had landed among a group of graceless people. They heard sermons on grace nearly every Sunday, and the rest of the week they tried to earn God's favor with their pious and austere lives. But grace came to them in the form of a feast, Babette's feast, the meal of a lifetime lavished on those

who had in no way earned it. Grace came to that little village as it always comes – free of charge, no strings attached, on the house...even when you show up at the eleventh hour in the vineyard.⁵

Conclusion.

Sometimes life isn't fair. And when it comes to the grace of God, that's a good thing. Let this parable speak to you about the way in which we all need to be channels of God's grace to others, like Babette, extending His love and forgiveness to a needy world. Sure, it's not fair. It doesn't always add up. But that's the nature of grace, isn't it? Thanks be to God that it really is! Amen.

¹Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* pp. 60-62. Much of the material in this section was adapted from Philip's book.

²*Ibid.*, p. 61.

³Fredrick Buechner in *Telling the Truth*, p. 70.

⁴Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, pp. 99ff.

⁵Adapted from Yancey's *What's So Amazing About Grace?* p.p. 19-26.