

It Isn't Fair, But It's Just

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Matthew 20:1–20

The kingdom of heaven is not fair. It's just but it's not fair. And that's good because grace isn't fair. Fair is the law; grace is the Gospel. If it's fair, it's not good news. If it's law, then it's all up to you. If it's fair, the first come in first, the last come in last, survival goes to the fittest, the race to the swiftest, the kingdom to those who achieve it. But if it's grace, gift, then the first are last, the last are first, and the deadbeat sinner gets justified in the same way as the righteous saint. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's go the parable.

A man had a vineyard and needed laborers. He went to the union hall at 6 AM and negotiated with the union boss for some laborers at a denarius a day and off they went. At 9 AM, he noticed he was a bit short-handed, and so he went to the Home Depot and found some idlers standing around doing nothing so he said, "Come work for me and I'll pay you whatever is just." Just. Not fair. Just. Same word as "justified." Remember that.

He did the exact same thing at Noon and at 3 PM. He found some idlers hanging around and hired them for some unspecified just wage. And they agreed. At 5 o'clock he saw that the sun was setting, there was still work to do, and he needed more help. So he goes to a local bar where some deadbeat losers were hanging out all day doing nothing because no one hired them and who could blame them? "You go into my vineyard too," he says, not even promising to pay them a dime. But they figure, "What the heck, it's only an hour, we're running low on beer money, so why not? How hard can it be, anyway?" And off they go.

Six PM hits and it's Miller Time, as they say. The workers head for the foreman with the money. This is where the fun begins. The vineyard owner has them line up in reverse order, from last to first, from the eleventh hour losers to the first hour union workers who agreed to work for a denarius a day. When the eleventh hour workers opened their pay envelope, what do you suppose they found? A shiny denarius! Wow! One hour's work and a full day's wage. Such a deal! But the truth is, there was no deal. There wasn't even any promise of their being paid. He could have paid them nothing. Or he could have paid a twelfth of a denarius. That would have been fair. But they get a whole denarius.

The word start to trickle back in line. "He's paying a denarius an hour!" The twelve hour union boys at the end of the line are giddy and rubbing their hands together. At this rate, they're going to get twelve denarii, the equivalent of twelve days work for one day. Such a deal! But the vineyard owner had made a deal with them. One denarius. And as the workers are paid, the reality settles in. Everyone gets one denarius.

So who's the happiest and who's the least happy? Of course, the happiest are the eleventh hour hires. No promises of pay were made at all to them for their measly hour of work. And yet they got a whole day's wages, a bright shiny denarius. The third, sixth, and ninth hour workers don't have too much to complain about. All the owner promised was to pay them "what was just." And in his justice, that was a day's wages. They were probably pretty happy too, so long as they didn't think too much about those eleventh hour deadbeats.

But the first hires, the union guys, the ones who had worked the full twelve hours, they would be the ones to grumble the loudest. "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. Not fair!" Yet they have the least to complain about. They were paid what they agreed to, union scale, a denarius a day.

And then the vineyard owner pops the Gospel cork and pours a strong one. "Friend." That's not a friendly kind of "friend." That's more like, "Hey, Buddy." I'm doing you no wrong. Didn't you agree with me for a denarius a day? Take what belongs to you and get out of here. It's my money and I do with it what I please. If I choose to give these losers a full day's wage, what's that to you? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"

I like the way the original Greek text puts that last question: "Or is your eye evil because I am good?" Do you cast an evil eye on my goodness?

One of the toughest pills for religion to swallow is the idea that God justifies the ungodly and that our salvation at the world's Miller Time is not based on our works, achievements and accomplishments, but the sheer grace of God in Jesus Christ who doles out a denarius of salvation to everyone alike, whether a lifer Lutheran or a deathbed convert. Religion turns an evil eye to all this. God may be good but He's not that good, say Religion's union bosses. Besides it's not fair, is it? The last being first, the first being last. It's bad enough that people are trying to take the competition out of kid's sports so that there are no winners and losers.

But imagine a league where the last place team gets the same big trophy as the undefeated first place team, in that order! Yikes!

A day's wages for a day's work. That's fair. That's what we expect in this world, and that's right. This world runs by the rule of law. In fact everything we do is run by the rule of law. There's no way around that. But, as Isaiah reminds us, God's thoughts aren't our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways. He deals with us not according to what's fair but according to His goodness.

"The wages of Sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Wages are what you earn; gifts are given and received freely, unearned, without any merit or worthiness on the part of the recipient. If you want God to be fair, to deal with you according to your works, your achievements, your accomplishments and all the things you do, then you will be damned. That's fair. Those are the terms of the Law.

Equality. That's the name of our game. I think we learned it from the French Revolution. It's almost a mantra with us. Equal pay for equal work. Equality of the sexes. Equal protection under the law. Everyone's equal. Treat everyone the same. But that's the way the Law works. In fact, when people want to enforce their equality, they turn to the law. But that has nothing whatsoever to do with grace and gift and goodness.

The mother who treats all of her children the equally loves none of them. To deal in equalities, you have to apply measurements, the way my brother and I always checked across to the table to see who got the bigger piece of pumpkin pie. Equality means measurement and measurement means law. But with God, the rule is equal salvation for unequal work. A denarius just for being there, regardless of what you did.

In our parable this morning, everyone got paid equally but there was no equality. Nor was it fair. But it was "just" in the sense that it was justified and righteous. The ones who most lived by the law were the first hour workers, who worked all day for an agreed-upon denarius, got precisely what they deserved. They were also the least joyful, the least grateful, the least aware of the vineyard owner's goodness, the most whiny and complaining about fairness. That's how it is with those who live under the Law. They are bitter, resentful, always comparing, always measuring, always justifying themselves by how much they've done and how little everyone else around them has done.

The later workers had no such labor mt_20.1-16_agreement, but fully expected to receive “what was just,” whatever that was. But the eleventh hour workers had no reason to expect anything. No wages were even promised. Let’s kick the parable up one more notch, shall we? What if the vineyard owner went out into the streets and alleys after he had paid his workers their denarius apiece, and gave everyone he met a denarius for no work at all. Now that would have been pure, unadulterated, 24-karat grace!

And that, my friends, is precisely what God does in His Son Jesus. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. While we were still ungodly, He justified us. Before we so much as lifted a finger to work in His vineyard, He already tucked a denarius of salvation in our pockets. Jesus labored the full twelve hours under the heat of the Law’s sun. And at the close of the day, He put the denarius He earned into your account. And that’s not fair. And it’s not equal protection under the Law. And for us, it’s not Law at all. It’s what we call Gospel. Good news. Grace not works. Gift given and received, not wages earned.

Religion is deeply offended by this. Tell people that this is how God works. He’s like a crazy vineyard owner who pays his last workers the same as his first. Better still, he pays before they’ve even so much as worked. The last are first, the first are last. And in the end everyone gets the same death and resurrection, the same Baptism, the same Body and Blood, the same forgiveness. All by grace through faith for Jesus’ sake.

Outrageous? Oh, you bet it is! “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts,” says the Lord. And thanks be to God that they are! Because if God thoughts were like our thoughts, and His ways our ways, none of us could be saved.

It isn’t fair, but it’s just and good and gracious.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

William Cwirla · Matthew 20:1-20 / Proper 19A / 18 September 2011 / Holy Trinity – Hacienda Heights, CA · Text: Matthew 20:1-20

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “It Isn’t Fair, But It’s Just”, posted 2011-09-18 (<https://htlcms.org/2011/09/it-isnt-fair-but-its-just/>).