

Introduction: Most, if not all, people have a built-in sense of fairness. We know when someone has treated us unfairly. This can motivate us in two ways: we can be moved when we see others treated unfairly, and we can resolve to try to treat others fairly – a version of the ‘golden rule’. *** Fairness is hard to define. Because each person is unique there will be differences in how fairness is defined. And in a diverse economy, fairness should be defined for each part of the economy, in all human relationships. *** There are many laws and regulations addressed to fairness. One category is ‘fair use’. This addresses the copyrighting of intellectual property. For example, how much of a book can be quoted in a book review without compensating the author? There are ‘fair labor’ standards regulating minimum wages in each state. What about a federal minimum wage, overriding state laws? There are ‘fair housing’ laws to prevent discrimination by zoning and other means. What should be in these laws? And, given a law is truly fair, will it be consistently and fairly enforced? *** I had a first-hand lesson in ‘fair trade’ laws my sophomore year of college in 1972-73. These laws allow manufacturers to put a floor (that is often quite high) on the retail price of their products. My roommate was on his way to being a millionaire by age 25. He sold high end stereo equipment to fellow students, and some town people, as a representative for a man based in Watertown at a price some twenty percent below fair trade. As a rule, retail prices are marked-up one hundred percent over wholesale. Many retailers make a good profit with a sixty percent mark-up. That was roommate’s boss. He gave his customers a twenty percent discount from ‘fair trade’. It seems like a win-win. But what they did was illegal, and therefore ‘unfair’. *** This sets the stage for today’s parable from Jesus about God’s generous grace. God is BOTH fair AND gracious. He never goes against His Word; but, He often goes far beyond what people would expect based on what they are willing to give each other. *** Since people tend to measure themselves against other people, and overvalue themselves at the expense of others, we perceive grace as unfair when others receive it from God. *** With this background, let’s tackle this difficult topic of fairness and grace with Jesus’ help.)

I. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a housemaster and hired day laborers in his vineyard. (Matthew 20:1-7)

A. He hires laborers for the going rate at dawn. (Verses 1-2)

1. For the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man, a housemaster, who went out with the early morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. (Verse 1)

Housemaster: This man is the owner of a large vineyard that requires many laborers. So he went out with the sunrise at 6:00 AM to hire workers.

2. Having agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. (Verse 2)

Transaction: As we heard last week, he is paying the going wage for a day laborer. He transacts a fair agreement with men in the labor pool.

B. He hires unemployed laborers at three hour intervals agreeing to pay them what is right, and a final group he commands to work the last hour. (Verses 3-7)

1. Having gone out the third hour, he saw others standing in the marketplace unemployed. (Verse 3)

Unemployed: At mid-morning, about 9:00 AM, some day laborers had not yet been hired.

2. He said to them, ‘You must go also, you, into the vineyard, and whatever may be right, I will give you. (Verse 4)

Command: He commands these men to go. He needs more workers.

Pledge: But pledges to pay them what is right, fair.

3. And they went on their way; but again, having gone out the sixth and ninth hour, he did likewise. (Verse 5)

Twice more: Twice more, at noon and mid-afternoon, the housemaster owner needed more laborers to finish the work he needed done.

4. But, the eleventh hour, having gone out, he found others unemployed, and he is saying to them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day unemployed?’ (Verse 6)

‘Eleventh hour’: Is this behind the English expression: ‘eleventh hour’, meaning ‘last minute’?

Why: He asks them a reasonable question. They could have turned it back on him, why did you not take us the other four times you were here? But, ...

5. They are saying to him, ‘Because no one has hired us’; and, he is saying to them, ‘You must go also into the vineyard’. (Verse 7)

Desperate and needy: How did it feel to stand in the marketplace all day, and not be chosen to work? It is 5:00 PM and the day is almost over. They are desperate, without hope. But the housemaster’s vineyard is so big, he needs still more laborers to finish the work.

Command: He commands this fifth shift to go to his vineyard to complete the day’s work.

II. At sunset, he commands his foreman to give the laborers their wages. (Matthew 20:8-16)

A. They are paid from last to first, all getting a day’s wages; and, those who were hired first were grumbling against the housemaster. (Verses 8-12)

1. Having become late, the lord of the vineyard is saying to his foreman, ‘Thou must call the laborers, and must give to them their wage, having begun from the last to the first’. (Verse 8)

Evening: It is now evening, the day is over, and he pays his workers per the Torah, ‘The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night’ (Leviticus 19:13).

Reverse order: The last to go into the vineyard are the first to be paid. In accounting lingo, L.I.F.O.: last in, first out.

2. And those, having come the eleventh hour, they received, every man, a denarius. (Verse 9)

Generous: The owner was generous to these last hired men. He gave the gift of grace.

3. And the first having come, they expected they will receive more, and they likewise received, every man, a denarius. (Verse 10)

Expectation: It is a reasonable human expectation to receive a higher wage for twelve hours of work than for one hour of work.

Agreement: They conveniently forgot the agreement they transacted with the owner at dawn.

4. Having received, they were murmuring against the housemaster saying, ‘These last worked one hour, and equal to us you made them, the ones having borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat’. (*Verse 11-12*)

Perception: They see the owner as unfair in his labor practices. Why did those who only worked one easy hour get the same as them? They had worked hard all day, even in the scorching noonday heat.

- B. Calling on a companion, he says he is fair according to their agreed upon terms; then, he says it is proper for him to be (generously) good with what is his. (*Verses 13-16*)

1. But, he having answered, said to one of them, ‘Companion, I am not being unjust to thee, did thou not agree with me for a denarius? Thou must take thine and thou must go. I am willing to give to this last, as also to thee ...’ (*Verses 13-14*)

Companion: He is gracious in the way he addresses this disgruntled day laborer.

We agreed: He explicitly reminds him they entered into a mutual agreement at the start of the day.

Willing: The owner housemaster says he is willing to give the short term, eleventh hour, easier time of day laborer a full wage. He insists this is not wrong.

Let us rejoice in the owner’s unfair generosity

2. ‘... or, is it not proper to me what I am willing to do with what is mine? ...’ (*Verse 15a*)

Proper: My gracious generosity with my wealth is proper, legal and even fair.

3. ‘... or, is thy eye being evil because I am decidedly being good?’ (*Verse 15b*)

Me-you: The owner of the vineyard calls out the day laborer for an evil reaction to his gracious dealing with a deflated fellow worker. May we be moved by the tragic deflation of value experienced by unemployed people so we rejoice with them when they receive God’s grace.

Creator of universe-us: This is more true of Creator God and us, His creatures. His grace is more unfair (in human eyes) than the housemaster in Jesus’ parable.

Let us rejoice in The Owner’s unfair generosity.

4. Jesus concludes, ‘In this way the last will be first and the first last’. (*Verse 16*)

Grace is NOT ‘fair’: May we receive wisdom about God’s gracious LOVE to accept the ‘scandal’ of grace that is greater than what we consider to be fair. Let us thank God for His grace that gives faith and meaningful Kingdom work to all who are in Jesus.

Let us rejoice in The Owner’s unfair generosity

III. David’s song of secure inheritance in The Covenant God - Yahweh. (Psalm 16)

- A. His pleasant inheritance. (*Verses 5-6*)

1. Yahweh is the portion of my inheritance and my cup, you are holding my lot. (*Verse 5*)

Portion: This refers to the portion of land God said He would give to the descendants of Abraham (*Genesis 15*). For the Levites, Yahweh Himself was their inheritance (*Deuteronomy 10:9*).

2. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places, and moreover my inheritance is beautiful. (*Verse 6*)

Beauty: David is saying what he has inherited from God is both pleasant and beautiful.

- B. Yahweh’s instruction means he will not be moved. (*Verses 7-8*)

1. I will bless Yahweh who has given me counsel, and also corrects my emotions in the night. (*Verse 7*)

Counsel: This word is used in Proverbs five times, including ‘Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed’ (*Proverbs 15:22*, see also *Proverbs 11:10-14*).

2. I have kept Yahweh always before me, because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved. (*Verse 8*)

Stability: Whoever keeps near to The Covenant God will not be moved away from Him.

- C. Result: He will dwell securely as Yahweh makes known to him the pathway of life. (*Verses 9-11*)

1. Therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoices, also my flesh will dwell in safety; for You will not leave my soul in the grave, neither give Your Holy One to corruption. (*Verses 9-10*)

Joy: There is great joy in being kept by Yahweh while we are living.

Resurrected life: And because Jesus, The Holy One, was resurrected, all who are in Him by faith have the same hope of resurrection after they die. The relationship is good in life, and gets better at death.

2. You will cause me to know the way of life, in Your presence is fullness of joy, in Your right hand is pleasure forevermore. (*Verse 11*)

Path made known: When we receive God’s instruction, He lets us know the way of life leading to full joy and eternal pleasure.

The Covenant God makes known the way of life

Bottom Line: Let us diligently be doing God’s Kingdom work, knowing that, at minimum, He will treat us fairly.

And likely, we will get more than we deserve: security, a pleasant inheritance, and guidance in life.

Conclusion: God’s Kingdom is like an owner of a vast vineyard who hires many workers throughout the course of a day.

The first who were hired early in the morning get a full day’s wages, and so do those who were hired last and only worked one hour.

Although the full day laborers receive full compensation, they resent those who did less work for the same wage, and grumble against the owner. They need to be reminded they were treated fairly so they should be grateful, and they should accept the owner’s generous grace to the others. And, those who can be grateful for God’s grace will have a sense of security in Him and

will be given knowledge of the right way to walk life’s path.

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