

Living Counter-Cultural: Fairness

Matthew 20:1-16

I. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner; 20:1-7.

¹ *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³ "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶ About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷ " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'*

The ancient workday was typically divided into three-hour increments, running from about 6:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. The landowner hired the first workers at the beginning of the day to work the entire day. At the third hour (9:00 A.M.), the landowner needed more laborers, so he went back to the marketplace and found people still waiting for the chance to work. These laborers agreed to work for "whatever is right". The landowner went again at the sixth hour (12:00 noon) and the ninth hour (3:00 P.M.). Needing still more laborers, the landowner went back and found workers; it was the eleventh hour (5:00 P.M.), close to the end of the workday. These workers would have expected only one-twelfth of the amount of those who worked for the denarius.

II. The kingdom of heaven redefines fairness; 20:8-12.

⁸ *"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' ⁹ "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'*

As the workday ends, the landowner pays the workers. He begins with those last hired in order to send shock waves among the rest when they learn of

their wage. The first group of workers is stunned as they receive twelve times what they expected. Those hired first air the loudest complaints. The workers grumbling echoes the common complaint of Israel against God in Moses' day.

"We deserve more because we worked harder. We were here longer," is the standard by which the lost world works, but not God. Thus, we are called to live counter-cultural to the world. This is grace.

III. In the kingdom of heaven the last will be first and the first will be last; 20:13-16.

¹³ "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The landowner addressed one of the first hired laborers. This man did not have a regular job, so getting the denarius that he had agreed upon was more than what he would have had at the end of the day except for the intervention of the landowner. He should be thankful that he had enough to care for the day's needs for his family. The central issue was the self-centeredness of the laborer. He was only thinking about himself, not about the generosity and intervention of the landowner, or the blessing of the other workers. The expression "are you envious" is literally, "Is your eye evil," indicating that the laborer could not be thankful because he was blinded by his self-centered envy.

The intended application to Peter and his request for preferential treatment and reward is obvious. Although he and the Twelve were the first to give up all they had to follow Jesus, contrary to the rich young man, Jesus includes all true disciples as having done the same thing. Those who think they should be first, God says from His perspective will be last.

God rules by grace. The rewards are not earned, nor are they proportionate to human effort. Their very natural disappointment and sense of unfairness helps us to reexamine how far our reactions are still governed by human ideals of deserving rather than by the generosity of the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom in which "the first are last and the last first" there is no room for envious comparisons, and attitudes of "I deserve more."

The parable is about what should be a disciple's motivation for service. We should serve out of gratitude, for it is only through the intervention of Jesus that any disciple receives anything. We should be concerned only to rejoice when others are called to the kingdom without serving as long or as hard as we have.

If we think that we deserve something because of our time, hard work, and commitment of service, we have negated the real value of what we have done. All who respond to the grace of God in Jesus' kingdom invitation are equal disciples. We must be careful not to measure our worth by what we have done, what we have sacrificed, or how long. Our calling is still one of grace. A grateful heart will serve without thought of reward or without comparison to others.

Gratitude must be a compelling motivation for the community of believers. Self-promotion will produce envy and comparison, which will in turn tear apart the cohesiveness of the community of faith. We must look deeply at what God has done for us. We, who have nothing of our own, have been called to the kingdom of heaven and endowed with the privilege of being Jesus' disciples, with the promise of a just reward. All that we are, everything that we have, and all that we ever hope to accomplish is a pure gift. Gratitude is the only appropriate response.