

Matthew 20:10-16

Dear Fellow Workers in God's Vineyard,

A rich young man had come to Jesus asking about the way to eternal life. When Jesus told him to go and sell everything he had and then come and follow him, he went away sad. He couldn't bring himself to do what Jesus asked. Peter responded that he and the other Apostles had not only been among the first to follow Jesus but they had given up everything for Jesus. They had left their jobs and their homes and their families so that they could be with Jesus full time. Jesus assured him that they would receive great blessings and have eternal life, but he also warned them that there was a danger in being among the first to follow Jesus and to be among those who had given up much to follow him. The danger would come if they would compare themselves to others who came to follow him later. He warned them, and he warns us, to be careful about what you expect from God. If you expect him to meet man's standard of fairness you might end up like the rich young man; you might end up last or even outside of God's kingdom. If you expect God to be merciful, not only to you but to everyone, then you will praise him forever and ever.

Jesus starts his parable by telling us that a landowner went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. There is a sense of urgency here. He didn't send one of his servants to the marketplace to hire workers. He went himself. He went early in the morning. He didn't wait until late in the day. Maybe it was harvest time. We aren't told, but it seems obvious that there was a lot of work to be done.

Those who were there in the marketplace early in the morning would seem to be the ones who were eager to work. When the landowner came they were happy to go to work for him and they considered the contracted pay of a denarius, the common wage for a day's work, to be fair. So off they went to work in the vineyard.

Again we see the sense of urgency in the mind of the landowner. He keeps going out personally to the marketplace, at the third hour and the sixth hour and even at the eleventh hour and sends whoever he finds to work in his vineyard; only with these workers he doesn't make a specific contract. He simply promises to pay them **whatever is right**. And again, they are willing workers. They are happy for the opportunity to work and to receive something from the landowner, whatever it might be.

I don't know about you, but I can't help but think of Jesus telling the disciples that the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. God will never have too many workers in his vineyard. He won't turn anyone away even if they begin their work just before the **night comes when no one can work**; even if they begin their work late in life or just hours before he comes again in glory. If just one person is harvested, just one sinner is brought to repentance and faith in Jesus through them, there is rejoicing in heaven.

Peter and the apostles, like these first workers hired by the landowner, had been called by Jesus himself to work in his vineyard. They didn't choose him, he chose them. They had been with him from the start of his ministry and they would be with him, through good times and bad, **bearing the burden and the heat of the day**. Peter's question **what will there be for us who have left everything to follow you** hinted that he and the others might be tempted to take pride in the fact that they had been with Jesus from the beginning. Would they be tempted to complain if someone like that rich young man came again later and did follow Jesus? Would they be tempted to think it was unfair that someone like Paul, who had spent years persecuting

the church and was even present at the stoning of Stephen giving his approval the execution and only later became an Apostle, would receive the same blessing that they would receive?

And what about us? Most of us have been Christians since our baptism as infants. In grateful response to what God has done for us in Jesus many of us have willingly volunteered our time and our treasure to try to make sure God's harvest of souls is brought in. If someone becomes a Christian late in life, or if someone doesn't seem to contribute much to make sure that God's harvest of souls is brought in and they seem to receive the same reward, the same pay, the same place in God's kingdom that we do, will we be tempted to murmur; will we be tempted to think "that's not fair?"

We will if we try to judge fairness by human standards. We know how politicians have misused the idea of fairness. Imagine trying to apply all the ideas people have of about what is fair to God.

The Landowner in the parable makes it clear that he is not being unfair. Rather they are the ones who are in the wrong. They are the ones who are letting jealousy take over in their hearts. After all, when he hired them first they were happy to work for him and they gladly contracted for a denarius a day. It didn't matter what he paid the other workers, they should not *expect* to receive more than the agreed amount. He would pay them what he had agreed to pay them and they should take it and go. As Jesus said about the Pharisees who sought the praise of men, **they had their reward in full.**

The bottom line is, if you expect God to be completely fair and to give you what you have earned, as Paul says, **the wages of sin is death.** If we insist on getting what we think we deserve he will say, **take your pay**, whatever praise or recognition you have received from men for the work you have done in the church, **and go**, go away from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, because whatever you have done selfishly you have not done for me. You might have done much in the church on earth and said "Lord, Lord," but I don't know you.

Those who want God to meet their definition of fairness and pay them for what they have done, even if they were the first to be his disciples, they will end up being last. They are in danger of losing their eternal life. But those who see and rejoice in God's mercy to them and others, who see themselves as saved only by the grace of God in Jesus, they are the first in the kingdom of God.

Consider the mercy, the generosity of the landowner in the parable. He was under no obligation to hire anyone. None of the workers came to him, he came to them. The workers didn't own the vineyard. They hadn't planted it. The landowner had all the rights. Everything belonged to him, so who would dare to dictate to him how he should manage his vineyard or his money? Who would dare to argue with his generosity? Only those who didn't see how generous he was being to them.

You see the parallels, don't you? God is the creator of all things. He is absolutely sovereign. No one has the right to dictate anything to him. He has no obligation to call anyone to work in his vineyard. He could do everything all by himself with just a word, "Let it be done." Yet, he has come to us and called us out of the marketplace of sin and unbelief to faith in Jesus and even to work in his vineyard. That's already unfair. That's already more mercy than anyone deserves. But he shows even more mercy, he promises that he will bless those who follow him

and work in his vineyard. He promises to bless those who give up things the world prizes so that they can devote themselves to serving him.

If we remember what we were when God called us, sinners deserving condemnation, we will see that whatever God gives us is because of mercy. Nothing we have, no earthly blessing, and certainly not our eternal life, is earned or deserved. It's all a gift of his mercy and grace.

When we realize this and take it to heart, instead of accusing God of being unfair if it seems that he has given someone we don't think has done as much for his kingdom as we have the same or more than he gives us, we will rejoice. We will praise God for his great mercy, because if he treated us fairly, as our sins deserve, we would not end up in heaven.

Are you, like Peter, among the first? Have you been a Christian as long as you can remember? Have you worked hard in God's kingdom and born the burden and the heat of troubles and maybe even persecution because of it? Remember, if you expect that because of what you have done God owes you more than someone else you are in great danger. If you demand that God be fair you will get what you have earned, eternal punishment. Instead, no matter how or when God called you to faith and put you to work in his vineyard, remember he acts in mercy. He didn't have to call you. He doesn't have to give you any kind of reward. Simply rejoice each day in his mercy to you and you will find that you will also rejoice in his great mercy to others.