

**Rejoice in God's "unfair" grace!**  
*Matthew 20:1-16*

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I don't know about your family, but our children have a keen sense for what is fair and just. How many times have you heard in your family the words, "That's not fair!" If we have cookies for dessert, all, of course, must have the exact same number and they cookies better be very similar in size. If all must help clean up the house, the slackers are singled out and the parents are duly notified.

But it's not just children that fight for what is fair and just. We adults are also outraged when we see a manager or boss being unfair. Advocacy groups fight for equal pay for equal work, others fight for equal opportunity employment, and still others the elimination of prejudice and racial profiling and more.

It's only natural, then, that we tend to apply our sense of justice and fairness to the kingdom of God as well. So let's consider something very basic in this sermon: Is God's grace "fair?" In other words, is the way God showers his undeserved kindness and favor on people just? On the last day, as we look at the grace God gives each individual, will we nod our heads in agreement, "Hey, we're only getting what is fair. We're getting what we deserve."

The answer may surprise you. Listen to Jesus parable of the workers in the vineyard recorded in Matthew 20:1-16:

" "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. "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 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?' " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' "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.' "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. '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.' "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' "So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'"

As many of you know, the chapter and verse divisions we have in our Bibles are not divinely inspired by God. When the books were originally written, the text was written in a continuous line... lacking even punctuation! It was just a few hundred years ago that our Bibles were divided into chapters pretty much as we have them today. So it sometimes happens that we see chapter divisions where it doesn't really seem there should be one. Matthew chapter 20 is definitely one of those places. To understand what Jesus is teaching in the parable, we need to look at the verses that precede it.

A rich young man had come to Jesus asking about how to get eternal life. The man thought that he would get heaven by keeping the commandments. Jesus pointed out that if he really was perfect, then he ought to sell all he had, give it to the poor and follow Jesus. This he couldn't do. His service to God had limits. He went away sad.

Jesus' disciples seemed surprised by this answer. Surely this man deserved a place in heaven... he was a good man. And if not him, then who could get to heaven? They were thinking like we tend to think, weren't they? What is fair? What is just? The better man deserves a better reward!

Jesus answered, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." In other words, heaven is a reward of God's grace... not a reward we can earn or deserve. A man can't earn or deserve a place in heaven, but God by his grace *can* get man into his kingdom. The disciples didn't grasp what Jesus was saying. Peter immediately asks whether he and the other disciples deserved a better and higher reward since they were giving up much to follow Jesus. Our Savior confirms they will indeed receive a great reward, but then finishes with these words which immediately precede our text: **"But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."** Again, he turns conventional thinking on its head.

Now Jesus tells the parable we have in our text in order to illustrate and teach what he has been trying to teach to his disciples. It's the story of a landowner who had a vineyard. The custom of the day was that potential workers would gather at the city gate and wait for someone to hire them for the day. The owner came and gathered his first group of workers early in the morning at 6 AM and both parties agreed that the wage for the day was a denarius – a typical amount in those times for a full day's work. Attempts to convert into modern currency usually don't work very well. Just consider in your own mind... what is fair pay for a day's work? That's what the vineyard owner agreed to pay. Both understood the terms of employment. Then the owner went back at 9 AM and noon to get more workers. Apparently the wage isn't specifically mentioned... the owner simply says he will pay them what was fair. He kept going back even until the last hour of the day... 5pm... just an hour before quitting time. The quality of talent was probably pretty low by now. These are the people no one else would hire. They were surely convinced they would go without a paycheck that day. But he hired them to work in the vineyard, too.

Finally at the end of the day it was time to get paid. The land owner went against the usual custom of paying the folks who had been there the longest first. He paid them in reverse order as they had been hired. Those hired last were put in the front of the line. But the workers didn't really seem to mind, did they? When they saw what the people were being paid at the front of the line they were more than willing to wait in the back of the line because it stood to reason that they would be paid more. They deserved more. They had earned it, after all.

But what happened? The workers who had been at it all day working hard in the heat of the sun received the very same paycheck as the ones who had worked for just one hour. Now I

know there are kids out there thinking, “That’s not fair! They worked a lot harder! So they should get paid more.” And I bet most of you adults are inclined to think the same thing. And I bet Jesus’ disciples were also thinking the same thing.

Why does Jesus tell this story? What is he trying to teach us, his disciples? In this parable, the owner of the vineyard is God. The workers hired are believers who are called out of this world into God’s kingdom and into his service. Some people are members of God’s kingdom almost from birth. Through baptism God calls the infant out from the city gates of the world and brings him into his vineyard (his kingdom) for a glorious lifetime of service. But some are called into his kingdom later in life... some much later. When Jesus returns in glory to judge the living and the dead, those who came to faith last will be at the front of the line. And they will receive their eternal reward. The last will be first. Finally will be all those who were life-long Christians. And what will they receive? The very same eternal reward as those who came to trust Jesus late in life.

A part of us wants to say, “Hey, but that’s not fair! Some of us have labored for the Lord our entire life!” And that’s when we need to wrap our heads around the very point Jesus is making in this story. The reward God gives to his followers is one that operates in an entirely different sphere than justice and fairness. Jesus is telling us, “get your head out of that sphere of thinking called justice and fairness, or you’re not going to grasp the Kingdom of God and how God works.” So get this: instead of in the sphere of justice and fairness, God’s kingdom operates in the sphere of grace and love. Let me repeat: God’s kingdom operates in the sphere of grace and love. If we can grasp this concept, we will look at the parable and instead of saying, “But that’s not fair!” we will say, “The owner sure was loving and generous with those later workers!”

One of the privileges of being a missionary over in Russia was the opportunity to be the Lord’s messenger in calling many into the Lord’ vineyard... many of them late in life. Let me tell you about one of those people. Her name is Kapitalina Ivanovna. She’s an elderly Russian babushka in her 70’s. We called her Baba Kapa. (Baba is the short form of babushka which means “grandma.”) She did not know or believe in Jesus Christ her whole life. She knew there was a God. Her conscience told her that she had done wrong. And it told her that she wasn’t right with God. But no one ever shared with her the good news that Jesus is the one who removes our guilt and makes us right with God. She heard this good news for the first time at our church in Russia. One time before I left on a furlough back to the States, Kapitalina Ivanovna asked me to convey a message to the congregations in the United States. She said, “Thank them for caring about us, and for sending missionaries to tell us about Jesus. I was searching all my life. Only now have I found the answer to all my questions. I only wish I had known about Jesus earlier in my life. So many things would have been different.”

Baba Kapa is one of those workers from the parable that was called into the field at the last hour. And her reward will be eternal life... the very same eternal reward life-long Christians will receive. And what is our response: “Not fair! We should get more! We earned it! We deserve it!”

No, not at all. To those clamoring for what they deserve, God reminds: “My dear child, trust me when I tell you that you don’t want me to deal with you and others according to what you have earned or deserved. You see, my standards for *earning and deserving* the eternal reward are these: Absolute holiness and perfection. I demand that you be as I am. Well, you are not. What you have earned and deserve is... *death*. Remember how I said, “The wages of sin is

death?' I don't think you want me to pay you the wages you have earned, for that will mean eternal torment in hell."

Instead remember this: With man, earning eternal life is impossible. But with God, all things are possible. God in his infinite love and mercy has shown us GRACE. Are you familiar with the definition of grace that goes off each letter in the word "grace"? G.R.A.C.E. God's Riches At Christ's Expense. That's grace! God's Riches At Christ's Expense. God loves us and wants to shower us with his riches at judgment day. But we have a huge debt that prevents that... sin. Christ took on our debt. He suffered and died for our guilt and wrongs. He credits his perfect life to us. At Christ's considerable expense, then, we receive God's riches! Isn't God incredibly generous? Isn't he so good? The first will be last and the last will be first. Not fair?! Wrong. Amazing grace!

Dear friends, as you leave the service today and throughout this week I would like you to rejoice in God's "unfair" grace! Rejoice that although we have sinned, he will give us eternal life through Christ Jesus. Rejoice that Baba Kapa will be standing ahead of you in line on the last day, and she will receive the very same reward you will. Rejoice when you also see in that line ahead of you a common thief (the one that hung on the cross, and Jesus promised he would be with him in paradise.) Rejoice at the death-bed converts standing ahead of you. And criminals who came to know Jesus while they were in prison. Rejoice! For the owner of the vineyard is indeed generous and gracious. Rejoicing in God's grace and awaiting the final hour, let's return to the vineyard in the heat of the day and with a smile on our face and a song of praise in our heart, let's work for our gracious Master while it is day. For he is worthy of our very best efforts. Amen.

And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard and keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.