

“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.’

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.’

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.” (Matthew 20:1-16)

Is God Fair?

“That’s not fair!” Have you ever heard that? Have you ever said it yourself! We all know kids say that. But we adults think that way, too. When our boss rewards someone else but doesn’t recognize our contributions, when other people get privileges we don’t get, we may say, “That’s not fair!” In essence, this whole “Occupy Wall Street” movement is people getting together and saying that life in America is not fair. And maybe when you heard the parable in the gospel lesson for this morning, you thought something like that yourself. A parable is a story Jesus tells in which he uses a situation we can understand to teach us an eternal truth. Maybe this parable leaves you with a question: **Is God fair?**

In the parable, a landowner needs to hire laborers to harvest his crop, in this case grapes. In Jesus’ day, when harvest time came, landowners would go to the local village marketplace looking for laborers. People who wanted to work also went there. The standard wage for a twelve hour day was a denarius, a Roman coin. So this land owner went to the market and hired the men he found there. They specifically agreed to that standard wage of one denarius for a day’s work.

When the crop is ripe, the owner needs to get it in quickly. The longer it stays on the vine, the greater the chance of weather or bugs or time ruining it. So if you had a large vineyard, you needed a lot of help. For that reason, a little later in the morning – about the third hour, or 9 a.m. – the landowner went back to the market place. He found more men and hired them. At noon and again at 3 pm, he did the same thing. But there was one big difference between these subsequent hires and the first group of men he sent out: he told the later hires that he would pay them what was right. These guys who were late getting there didn’t have much choice. If they wanted to work that day, they had to trust him. So they went. Of course, he went one more time, at 5 pm, just an hour before the work day ended, and he found more men standing around. He asked them why they had wasted a whole day without working. They answered, **“Because no one has hired us.”** So he sent them out, too, even though the work day was almost over.

Up to this point, Jesus really hasn’t said anything too difficult. But then comes the really challenging part. The workday ended, and according to the practice of that time, the landowner had to pay everyone. He began with the men that he hired last. Each one received a denarius, a full day’s pay for an hour’s work. And then each group followed, getting the same amount. Finally, the first group of men came. Since they had worked all day, they assumed they were going to get more. But the landowner gave each one a denarius, a

day's pay. They began to grumble: **“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.”**

Every one of us here can see their point. It doesn't seem fair. The landowner did defend himself. He reminded them that they had agreed to work one day for a denarius and he had given them exactly what he promised. Then he asked two questions: **“Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”** Of course, it was his money, he could overpay the other guys, if he chose to. And of course, the other workers were jealous. And I think we would be, too. In fact, if something like this happened in America, it wouldn't surprise me if there were lawsuits. It's hard for us to accept that the landowner treated those first workmen fairly – even though he did exactly what he promised he would do.

Jesus, of course, was not talking here about labor relations. He didn't tell this parable to guide the UAW's contract negotiations with the Big Three. He began the parable by saying, **“The kingdom of heaven is like...”** He was teaching us about eternal life. To understand why he told this parable, you have to understand the context. Just before he spoke these words, Jesus was talking about wealth and how it can keep us out of heaven, if we worship money and our standard of living. Jesus told us to put God first. Then Peter said, **“We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”** Jesus told them they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he promised that when Christians leave behind the pleasures of this life to serve God, the Lord more than makes up the loss with blessing in this life. And above all else, he promises us eternal blessings in heaven. But then Jesus said, **“But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”** He repeated that statement at the end of parable.

Jesus is talking about us and what we get for our faith. He's talking about the reward that Christians are looking forward to – and God does use that word reward sometimes. But it's not a reward that we deserve. It's a reward that God gives because he loves us. Is God fair about giving out heaven? The truth is, he isn't. The truly just and fair thing for God to do would be to send us to hell. That's what the law requires. The wages of sin is death, and not just physical death. The wages of sin includes eternal death in hell. But God loved us too much to just let that happen. So he sent Jesus to save us from death and hell. So, in a sense, it's not fair that any of us get to heaven. But it is true because God loves us. That's God's grace, his love that we don't deserve. Grace is the key to this whole parable.

The people in the parable are Christians. The denarius they receive is eternal life. What's the difference between the first hired and the last hired? In one sense, you could say it's chronological. The first hired are life long Christians. The last hired are people who come to faith late in life. Last week, I baptized two infant baby girls. They were less than a day old when they entered God's kingdom through water and the Spirit. I'm sure that many of you who have had a similar experience. You and I were baptized so long ago that we can't even remember it. We've fought the good fight of faith for decades. But I remember another lady that I served very briefly. Her sister called me and told me that she was dying and wanted to be baptized. She lived maybe a week after I baptized her. Yet, she received the same reward of grace, the same eternal life that a Christian of 80 or 90 years will receive.

That probably doesn't bother us very much. We're glad when God rescues someone from hell, even if it's in the last seconds of their life. But there's another way of looking at this, a way that fits in much better with Peter's question. Those men who were hired at the beginning of the day are those Christians who do all the work. In every congregation, there's a nucleus of dedicated members who get everything done. Sadly, in most congregations, it's a fairly small percentage of the membership. Each group hired after that represents less active people, until you get to the guys who were hired just an hour before the workday ended. Those are the people who let others face the heat of the day and they enjoy the benefits of having a congregation because those other guys do all the work.

Those people who don't do much, get to heaven, too. When those of us who have dedicated endless hours of our lives look at those people who do almost nothing, and we see them getting the exact same reward that we get, we might just be tempted to shout, “That's not fair!” That's what the workers in the parable thought. But the landowner didn't back down. And God doesn't either. We don't have a right to complain. God promised us eternal life, and everyone who dies trusting that Jesus has won that eternal life will get the same heaven. There is no difference. And we who do all the work that keeps this congregation going don't get heaven because of our work. We get it because of our faith. And even that faith is a gift from God. It is sinful pride to think that God owes me a reward for all that I do around here. It is sinful pride to think that I'm a better

Christian because I give more or I do more than that family sitting in front of me. In truth, if I'm giving and doing because I think that's going to score points for me with God, I'm wasting my time and money. I'm not giving or serving from faith anymore, so I'm sinning because I'm feeding my sinful pride.

I can hurt my faith by the work that I do when I'm doing it for me instead of for God. Then I deserve hell instead of heaven. Now that does not mean that all of us here today who do next to nothing and contribute next to nothing are really the better Christians. Not at all. God calls all of us, the people of God, to do the work here. God calls us to generously contribute to supporting the work here. When we're too busy with other things to give God a generous portion of our time and our effort, we're guilty of the same sin: pride. Our time is too valuable to give to God. Our effort is too precious to waste on our congregation.

We're all in the same boat. None of us deserves the denarius. But Jesus died for us all and he paid for that pride in our hearts. Jesus wiped the slate clean. That's God's grace. In the parable, the landowner is generous. Those guys that were hired last, they didn't deserve a full day's wages. But the landowner gave it to them. God has been generous to all of us in Christ. To us who have dedicated our lives to serving him, but who struggle with pride and judging the works of our brothers and sisters, Jesus says that we are forgiven. God is generous to us and gives us that coin of eternal life. And to those of us who haven't been generous to God, who let others carry the burden of the work, who are guilty of pride and laziness, Jesus says that we are forgiven. God is generous to us and gives us that coin of eternal life. All our sinful pride and all the actual sins that come from that pride are paid for and forgiven.

We are all going to the same heaven. Does that mean that there will be no differences at all there? No. When James and John's mother asked Jesus to give her sons the positions of honor on his right and left hand in his kingdom, Jesus did not deny that those positions existed. Rather, he said that they already belonged to others. To whom do those positions of special honor in heaven belong? Only God knows. I believe that there will be many simple Christians, many women who just took care of their children and taught them about Jesus and cleaned the church and never asked for a moment of recognition, many overseas Christians who let foreign missionaries butcher their language but who received those men with love and joy because they brought them the gospel, many simple Christians who will have seats in heaven above guys like me. God decides who gets what degree of glory in heaven. You know what? When we get there, we won't be like those grumbling workers in the parable. God will put us in exactly the right place and we will rejoice in his judgment because in heaven, our hearts will be perfect. We will look at everything the way that God does. We will rejoice for all eternity in all that he has done.

Is God fair? When you first heard that question, you might have thought that I was going to talk this morning about the way he deals with us here. And, Jesus did have that in mind, too. He said that when we sacrifice for God we will receive a hundred times as much and we will inherit eternal life. God gives us faith. The blessings of faith – the trust, the hope, the comfort, the ability to bear the cross knowing our Savior's love – more than outweigh all that we give to God, even when it seems like we're bearing the burdens of our faith and the heat of a day in which the whole world hates God. And then comes heaven. Is God fair? No. And thank God for that! He is full of grace. God gives us love that we could never earn or deserve. God will care for us and build up our faith and comfort us in all our losses and griefs. And he will bring us home to heaven, where we will rejoice with him forever. Amen.