

Matthew 20: 1-15 The parable of the workers in the vineyard.  
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We all have a kind of "inbuilt fairness radar". When we come across something that doesn't seem fair we naturally react to it. For that reason you may not going to like today's parable. It doesn't seem fair. We believe in a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. ....and when it comes to rewards, we expect that God should operate the same way! A bit like the RAA membership scheme of Gold Silver or Bronze with different levels of benefit depending on how long you have been in.

But God's ways are not our ways; His thoughts are not our thoughts, and nothing says it more clearly than the parable of the vineyard workers. It comes on the heels of one of those upside-down kingdom statements from Jesus. The first will be last, and the last will be first. Not our way of thinking is it? It doesn't seem fair, but then God isn't fair. He's just. He's gracious. He's good. Anything but fair in the way we ordinarily judge such things.

The first labourers had an agreement, a contract with the landowner to work for a denarius, which was the going rate for a day's work. This was a fair day's wage for a good day's labour. The other labourers, however, had no such agreement or contract. Rather, the landowner simply said, "*Go into the vineyard, and whatever is right, I will give you.*"

Now if that were you, would you have gone to work for this landowner? Would you work for him not knowing what your wage would be, if all you had to go on was his promise to do

what was right? Well, that all depends, doesn't it, on what kind of person you think him to be: is he miserly or generous, is he a man of good character or bad? It depends on whether or not you trust him. For if you did not trust the landowner, you probably would not go into his vineyard. If you did trust him, you would go.

That, ultimately, is the difference between the first and the last in this parable. The first were dealing with the landowner on the basis of a contract; the last were dealing with him on the basis of trust in his goodness. The first wanted to deal with him on what they considered to be fair. The last dealt with him on the basis of what he deemed to be good and right.

The owner of the vineyard in this parable is, of course, God the Father. By His Word and Spirit He sends out the call of the Gospel to come into His vineyard, which is the church, and for His people to be about the things pertaining to His Son. Some come into the church from the first moments of their life, baptized as infants, remaining faithful their entire lives. Others are converted as adults. And some people are not brought to faith in Christ the Saviour until they are on their death bed.

But here's the deal: God gives the same thing to all at the end of the day: full forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, everlasting life with Him in heaven. He doesn't do this because He is unfair; He does it because He is generous and loving and merciful. He pours out His gifts on

His people abundantly and lavishly. For the reward at the end of the day is given not based on our work but on the work of His Son, who lived and died and was raised again for us.

The problem arises when some in the vineyard of the church begin to think that their length of time and service deserves some special reward; they want God to work on the merit system. But this is a problem for two reasons. First, it destroys the relationship of love that God wishes to have with His people. Love has nothing whatsoever to do with what is owed or deserved. Real love is a freely-given gift with no strings attached. As soon as we start wanting to deal with God on the basis of what we think He owes us, it is no longer a relationship of love, but in the end one of manipulation, where we try to get God to do what we want by pulling the right strings. We put in the good works, like a coin into the slot, and out pops the blessing. To treat God like that is to treat Him as nothing more than a vending machine.

Furthermore, if we want God to deal with us on the basis of what is fair, then we put ourselves in terrible danger. If we demand to get what we deserve, we had better be careful, because those who want the merit system with God have no idea what they're asking for.

You want fair wages? Fine; then here's what the Scriptures say: "*The wages of sin is death.*" Those who go to hell are really only getting what they asked for, namely, the just and fair payment for their sins. In their unbelief the damned will bitterly disagree with God's judgment and spend all of

eternity growing more and more angry with Him whom they consider to be unfair.

Do you find yourself considering God to be unfair because of your situation in life or because of something that has happened to you? Is your personal religion like a contract with God, a system of rewards for your good deeds? Do you negotiate with God in your prayers? You know how this works: "I'll do this for You, God, if You'll do this for me." If that's the way you deal with God, then you are behaving like the first labourers in this parable, and you must repent. Turn away from ranking yourself against others; turn away from your own works, and turn to the works of Christ alone. Believe that it is only and entirely through Him that you receive any blessing at all from the Father. Trust in Christ alone to save you from death and hell.

That, dear friends, is the difference between the first and the last; it is the difference between unbelief and faith. Unbelievers seek a God who is fair, and when they find Him, they want nothing to do with Him. Believers seek a God who is merciful and gracious, kind and generous, and when He finds them, they love Him. Believers know that it is only by grace that they are even in the vineyard, no matter how long they've been there. They consider it a privilege and an honour to be able to contribute to the health and the growth of the vineyard. Thank the Lord He isn't fair but gracious, and his generosity to you will blow your mind! AMEN.