

It's Not Fair!
Matthew 20:1-19

It's just not fair! Why should that lazy no-account get the same benefits I receive when he didn't do anywhere close to the same amount of work I did? The men in Jesus' story who had labored all day in the vineyard weren't the only ones with this concern, were they? Many modern taxpayers feel the same way about how the Social Security system works. Hardworking students wonder why slackers should be graded on the curve, or why those who obviously haven't mastered the material somehow keep passing from year to year. Believing that hard work will eventually pay off naturally goes along with the idea that those who don't put in the effort shouldn't reap the same rewards as those who do.

But however valid this might be as an economic observation, does this sort of thinking belong in church? Martin Luther certainly didn't think so when he published his Ninety-Five Theses on this date in 1517. Instead, he argued strenuously that there is no good work we can perform, much less any money that we can pay to the Church, that can possibly satisfy the debt, the death penalty that our sin deserves. So, in this passage, is Jesus disagreeing with Luther? Is Jesus somehow implying that we must do some sort of good works in order to earn favor with God?

Not at all. For when Jesus tells a story, He isn't necessarily endorsing everything that happens in it. Take for example the story of the king and the two servants Jesus told us back at the end of chapter 18. He certainly wasn't telling us to emulate the ungrateful servant, to take advantage of God's forgiveness so that we can wring every penny out of those who owe us much smaller debts, was He? Or think about our responsive reading from Luke 15. Jesus certainly isn't applauding the younger son's callous demand for half of his father's estate, his wish for his father to be dead just so he could have his money. No, just because such a hateful wastrel was eventually welcomed back into his father's house, Jesus isn't somehow encouraging us to engage in the same sort of spectacular, selfish sin.

But in the same way, Jesus also doesn't approve of the older son's refusal to go to the party thrown for his sorry little brother, any more than He agrees with the laborers' accusation that their employer is somehow unfair.

And why is that? In the case of the older brother, it's obvious, isn't it? Even though the prodigal son obviously repented, humbling himself before his father, and even though he had confessed his unworthiness to be forgiven, his older brother continued to harden his heart against him. The older brother steadfastly refused to forgive him, in much the same way that the king's ungrateful servant refused to forgive the man who owed him a comparatively tiny debt.

And those who had worked all day in the vineyard had hardened their hearts in a similar way against their fellow workers, and largely for the same reason: they thought their own hard work somehow made them more worthy of being blessed. That's why they just couldn't believe they should receive the same pay as those who went into the vineyard just before quitting time. After all, they had "borne the burden and the heat of the day" (v. 12). Just like the older son who had given his father so many faithful years of service, they were sure that they deserved more than those who had only worked for a few hours!

Well, no. No they didn't. For how does the owner of the vineyard respond to their grievance? He made it clear that they had received exactly what was fair – a penny, which is the way the King James Version translates the word "denarius," a coin worth a day's pay for a laborer in Ancient times. By the way, the abbreviation for a British penny still reflects this meaning – it's a "d" for "denarius," not a "p"

for “penny.” Those who had worked all day had, in fact, gotten exactly the wages due to them, not a penny more nor a penny less.

So, if we aren’t supposed to share the outrage of the workers who labored all day long, what are we supposed to learn from this story? What is the lesson that Jesus is trying to tell us? Well, look back up at the very first verse of the passage. For Jesus doesn’t say that the kingdom of heaven is like a group of workers. He doesn’t even say it’s like a vineyard. No, he says the kingdom of heaven is like the householder, the landowner. That means the owner of the vineyard is supposed to be the focus of the story, just as the father is the focus of the story of the Prodigal Son.

Okay, so what do we learn about this landowner? Well, we’ve already seen that he is a man who keeps his word, a man who is just in all his dealings. After all, in verse 2, he promised to pay the first men he sent into his vineyard a denarius, a fair wage for a day’s labor. And in verse 10, that’s exactly what he gave them.

And in the same way, we can trust Jesus to keep His Word to bring perfect justice to the world. And if we take a look just at the previous few chapters, we find him promising over and over again to do just that: “The Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds” (16:27). In fact, just a few verses before today’s passage, Jesus made it clear that He was in fact going to sit on His glorious throne and entrust the judgment of His people to His disciples (19:28).

And how do we know that Jesus will judge the world in perfect righteousness and justice? Because at the end of today’s passage, He repeats yet another promise, a promise he had already made to His disciples back in chapter 16 and in chapter 17. He promised that when He arrived in Jerusalem, He would deliver Himself up to the religious leaders of His own people, and then to the Gentiles, to the Romans. He would allow Himself to be condemned to death, to be mocked and scourged and crucified. He would go through all of this, He would keep that promise to demonstrate God’s perfect justice. He would suffer the pain and the shame and the death of the cross to show us exactly what all our sins deserve.

And so, if we are perfectly honest with ourselves, we’ll confess that it’s not necessarily good news that Jesus is so faithful and righteous and just. For when we look just at the last few chapters, it is clear that none of us comes close to the standards Jesus holds for us and for all mankind. For which of us is completely trusting Jesus to move the mountains in our lives, never giving in to worry or despair? Which of us is ready to sit down with a brother or sister who has harmed us, being both humble and honest about the problems that arise between us? Which of us has forgiven all those who have hurt us, humbly and sincerely treating them as if they had never done anything wrong? Do any of our eyes and minds and hearts come close to Jesus’ standard of selfless purity and perfect unity in marriage? Which of us is truly willing to rid ourselves of all the things in our lives that have become more precious to us than Jesus?

No, however much we outwardly pious and respectable Presbyterians might like to identify with the hardworking men who labored all day in the vineyard, thus earning rewards from God that we so richly deserve, the truth is that we are a whole lot more like those who went into the vineyard at the eleventh hour after sunrise, those who had barely started work before quitting time. None of us deserve the salvation of the Lord – in fact, none of deserve anything more than Jesus got on the cross.

But remember the good news – it was Jesus who went to the cross, not us. And if Jesus told his disciples over and over again that He was going to die, that He was going to shed the blood of the covenant for them, that He was going to be the Lamb of God by whose death the sins of all the world

would be washed away, he also repeated a promise that's even more amazing. For in the last verse of today's passage he told them once again that he would rise from the dead on the third day. He would thus make it possible for all those who trust in Him not only to be released from the death penalty that we all deserve, but to receive instead the amazing blessing of resurrection life – abundant life in this world and eternal life with Him forever.

And that's why the second thing we learn about the owner of the vineyard is such good news. For if this story illustrates his perfect justice, it also demonstrates his amazing grace. For what did he do with those latecoming slackers, those who hadn't deserved to receive any pay at all? He put them at the head of the line. And the good news is that He gave them much more than they could possibly have deserved – a whole day's pay for just a few minutes of work.

In fact, the owner of the vineyard is a whole lot like the father from our responsive reading, isn't he? After all, that father saw his younger son while he was still a long way off, so we know he never stopped looking for him. He never stopped wanting him to come home, regardless of how spiteful and hateful he had been. And then, the father demonstrated the greatest of compassion even for such a selfish wastrel, running to meet him, dressing him in fine clothes and throwing a party for him. This father never stopped loving his son, and he kept on blessing his son, no matter what he had done.

Ah, but who was it who missed out on the blessings in our responsive reading? It was the older son, the son who clung to his rights and who insisted that he get what he himself deserved. That son found himself outside the party, enjoying none of the music and food and fun.

And what about the guys who were proud of the work they had done in the vineyard, those who resented the blessings poured out on those who were undeserving? While the latecoming slackers were richly blessed by the landowner's generosity, those who were proud and hard-hearted got exactly what was coming to them, not a penny more nor a penny less.

No, the sad truth is that those who are proud, the ones who look down on those they think are somehow less deserving, the ones who think they deserve to be first in line will end up last, left out of the party, getting only what they actually deserve. Ah, but those who repent, those who are humble, those who know they don't deserve anything at all from God, those who know they should be last in line to receive God's blessings – well, they are the ones who will find themselves in the front of the line, receiving much more than they could ever ask for or imagine or deserve, both in this life and in the life to come.

So, how do you see yourself today? Will you cling to your pride and receive only what you deserve? Or in humble repentance, will you cling to the cross of Christ and receive salvation as a free gift by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone?