

Grace Over Wages – Matthew 20:1-16

Our Quest for Fairness

But Mum, how come? But Dad, why can't I? IT'S JUST NOT FAIR! Sound familiar? Kids are the best at telling us when something is not fair, especially when they are the ones who have been impacted. Every week at Youth Group, there is at least one youth that will claim they have been 'robbed' because of unfairness, whether in a game, not being first to supper, or in punishment. But it isn't just kids that want fairness, we as adults want it too. In our work circumstances, when co-workers get praise for work that we have done, or they get a bigger bonus even though we work harder than them. It wouldn't take us long to think of a time when we were unfairly treated or didn't get something that we deserved. Often, whether loudly, or within the quiet of our hearts, we cry out that is not fair! Just give me what I believe I deserve!

But what happens, when our view of fairness meets the generosity and grace of God? Well, we see a glimpse of that in today's parable, which Jesus tells the disciples in Matthew 20

An unfair situation

Our parable begins with the landowner going out first thing in the morning, intent on finding workers for the day. When he finds some, and offers them a denarius, or a day's wage, to work in his field, they agree and are put to work in the vineyard. Throughout the course of the day, the owner goes out on a further 4 occasions to find workers to work in his vineyard and agrees to pay them 'Whatever is right' for their work. Interestingly, to our ways, there is so much wrong with this parable. Surely the owner would not go out and hire workers, that would be the manager/foreman's job. At the same time, if the owner knew he needed workers, would he not only go out once, maybe twice if there weren't enough available workers in the early morning. He wouldn't go out every 3 hours to find workers. But most interestingly, is the way that the workers were paid.

Unlike today's wage system, it was Jewish law¹ that day labourers were paid at the end of each day, so that they could live and provide for their families that night. It was designed to protect them against poverty, in an age where you couldn't just log onto Service NSW and apply for financial support. So, when finishing time arrives, the owner calls for the foreman to pay the workers, in order from last in, to first in. Now this means that those who were hired first, were able to see how much the workers who just arrived are paid. Which seems backwards. Surely it would make more sense to pay those who were hired first. First in, first out. That way they would not see or know how much each of the other workers were paid. They could take their wage and leave. But now, they can see how much those who arrived after them are paid. When they see how much it is - their hearts grow. They see the generosity of the owner to those who worked a mere hour, and they eagerly await to see how generous the owner would be to them.

But Jesus, the master storyteller, is setting up a great conflict. The Pharisees, and the disciples, and we might have expected the parable to continue along the lines - 'Those hired first were paid much more than those hired last, given how much harder they worked.' It would only seem fair that the parable would continue on

¹ Deuteronomy 24:14-15

that way, wouldn't it? They would have expected the owner's generosity to have overflowed for those who had worked the hardest and the longest. But it is here that we find the great conflict of the parable

Matthew 20:10 - So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.

To the surprise and frustration of the hired workers, they did not receive a greater amount. Despite all their hard work - they received the same amount as those who were hired last. And their response was to take it out on the owner -

Matthew 20:11 - 12 - When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. These 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.'

'How is that fair' - they grumble. They don't deserve the same as us! We worked harder, longer and in more difficult conditions. If you are paying them a day's wage, we deserve more! But there is an inherent problem with their thinking - they think that because they worked harder and longer, they were different from those who were hired last. That is why they are offended by being made equal in wages with them. They found their value in what they were paid. But the workers aren't all that different, and the difference isn't what we might think. Each one of the workers came from the marketplace, where they were jobless and would most likely have gone hungry had they not been hired. Neither group was chosen because of anything that they had done or any skills they had. They didn't have CV's and resumes for the owner to peruse before picking them. It isn't really even about what time they were hired. So what then is the difference?

Matthew 20: 13 - 14 - "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take your pay and go.

The real difference is the conditions of the contract that they entered into. Those hired first agreed to the usual day's wage of a denarius. Each other group of workers agreed to receive 'whatever is right'. The first group was locked into their wages, and upon seeing the generosity of the owner, realised that they had short-changed themselves. The others were solely dependent on the generosity of the owner. Those hired first got what they deserved. The rest got more than they deserved, or they had a right to ask for.

When God's Grace trumps Human Fairness

Grace is the enemy of wages, because grace isn't about effort. It isn't about what is fair, or what we deserve. It is based on the generosity of the one showing grace. Where wages are based on merit and hard work, Grace is all about us receiving what we do not deserve and cannot earn. In this parable, we see Jesus turn our idea of fairness on its head;

Matthew 20:16 - "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Which is the reverse of where we finished last week's story

Matthew 19:30 - But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Our society would say, it's only fair that the first will be first, and the last will be last. But that is the great reversal that comes with grace. There is no difference between first and last, because all are equal in receiving. Even for the disciples, there is a warning here. All throughout the section we have been looking at this term, we have seen the disciples struggle with their pride. We saw back in Matthew 18, they ask the question 'Who

is the greatest in the Kingdom?', to which Jesus replied with a lesson in humility 'the one who takes the lowly position of a child.' Then last week we see Peter ask of Jesus

Matthew 19:27 - *Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us*

At the heart of this question is pride. They think that because they have given up everything, they will be greatly paid in return. A few verses later in Matthew 20, we see 2 of the disciples claim they are able to do what it takes to sit as Jesus's left and right-hand men in the coming of the Kingdom, without realising what it takes. The disciples hadn't yet understood humility. God's kingdom isn't about rewarding those who work the hardest, the longest, who work in the most difficult conditions, but rather it is a kingdom of Grace where 'the first will be last, and the last will be first.' There is no wage-based earning system in the Kingdom of Heaven, because we will all be there based on the Grace of God.

Our God is the God of Grace, and in His Kingdom - Grace isn't the exception, it's the rule. He freely and generously gives those who are in His kingdom what they do not deserve. Friends, if gaining God's favour, if eternal life and our eternal salvation was solely dependent on how hard we worked, then we are in great trouble. The Apostle Paul paints a very bleak picture in Romans Chapter 3

Romans 3:20 - *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.*

God does not owe us anything - and if was to pay us what we deserve, we would receive nothing but punishment. And that would be fair, given that we have not only failed to uphold God's Law, but we have broken it. Thankfully for us, Paul continues to tell of a salvation that isn't dependent on our works;

Romans 6:23 - *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The Grace of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Eternal life cannot be earned, nor is it fair that we will get to experience it if we trust in Jesus. Without God showing grace, we will not be saved. Because we cannot earn our salvation, nor do we deserve it. No matter how hard we work, no matter how good we are, we cannot possibly earn it. We are the ones in the marketplace, waiting and hoping that someone will be generous to us. God showing grace to humanity is greatly unfair, but not to us. We are the receivers of unfair generosity. By trusting in God's grace - we remove the weight of constantly trying to be good enough. Now this doesn't excuse us from doing good, rather it fills us with a want and a desire to do good, given how much we have received.

This doesn't mean that God is not fair, for we see in this parable that the landowner is fair. He does not cheat the workers, like was the norm for employers in Jesus' time (and sadly still is today). God's grace does not cancel out his fairness, or his divine justice in punishing Sin, but it does show us how broken our definition of fairness can be.

When bad things happen to us and not others, we think that God is not fair. Even now, as we are confined to our houses because of Covid 19, unable to see friends and family, some of us have even lost income and jobs and as a result are financially struggling. It's tempting to say - God, how is this fair? Like the workers, we can reason that based on our view of fairness that God owes us, because of the things we do in his name - whether

it be serving at church, or evangelising to our friends, or even cutting a particular sin out of our lives. We can fall into the trap of thinking that 'I deserve' instead of taking 'whatever is right' and resting in his grace.

The Danger of Jealousy

But there is another danger that comes with trusting in our own efforts, and it is easy to just skim over it in the parable. Let's have a look at the 10th commandment that God gave his people, to help us see the danger.

Exodus 20:17 - "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Coveting is a deep desire to have what is not yours and is a particularly dangerous sin. Even if it is never expressed, it is able to eat away at us from the inside. But usually, it does express itself, in the breaking of other commandments, especially the first commandment - 'You shall have no other gods before me.' Coveting places us and our desires at the center. It prevents us from noticing the many ways God blesses us, because we are always comparing ourselves, and the good things that God gives us, to someone else. Instead of being thankful for what God gives us, we become jealous of what God has given to others. Which is what we see happen in the parable

Matthew 20:15 - Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

We see at the heart of the workers, not just frustration at the owner, but a sense of jealousy against those who had been hired last, for they only had to work an hour for a whole day's wages. The owner had been generous to those hired first, but they were blinded by his generosity to those hired last. But again, the owner reminds the workers to check their attitudes - reminding them that it is in fact his money, to spend how he wants. He has every right to pay the other workers however much he desires to. How the owner distributes his wealth was not the concern of the workers.

Yet at times, it is easy for us to share in the thinking of the workers hired first. Thinking that we deserve a bigger reward based on how faithful we are, or the more we sacrifice, or how long we have been a Christian, doesn't just lead to trusting in ourselves, but it can also lead to being jealous of blessings that God decides to give others. Instead of creating unity, it creates division, as we wish we had gifts and talents that God has given to others. The New Testament paints a picture of the church being unified despite our differences in gifts. That the different gifts we have been given are to be used to encourage each other, to build one another up to follow Jesus. Instead of comparing the gifts we do or don't have, let me encourage us to thank God for his grace in giving us different gifts, and to use them to share his kingdom.

But a more dangerous temptation is thinking that it isn't fair that God would save someone who lives their life not caring about who Jesus is, and then repenting on their deathbed. You know that you should rejoice, but as you struggle to live for Jesus, and as you think about all the things that you have given up along the way, it's hard not to think 'That's not fair! It's not fair that God shows them the same grace he has shown me. I've been a Christian my whole life, and they only had to do it for a short amount of time. How can God show them the same Grace? But at the heart of that thought is the lie that we deserve salvation. By God's grace, he offers all humanity the same eternity with him. And by God's grace, someone may very well repent right before Jesus returns, and may we rejoice knowing that another person has been saved from hell.