

## Parables of the Kingdom: The Vineyard

“It’s NOT Fair!” How many times have you heard that come out of a child’s mouth? Children have a remarkable ability to grasp what’s fair and what isn’t. At least what is fair in their own eyes. And for most kids, ‘fair’ means equal. In fact, for most adults, ‘fair’ means equal. If you give a kid 5 smarties, you better give all the kids exactly 5 smarties (and preferably matching the colours as well). In the grown-up world, fairness plays out in much the same way. One of the places where this is most evident is in the execution of a will. Anyone who has been involved in settling someone’s estate, especially when it has been divided up unequally, will know that our base instincts for what we think is fair kick in pretty quickly, and often with significant emotion attached. Another place our drive toward fairness is demonstrated is in the workplace: “equal pay for equal work” has been the ruling theme since, well, since Jesus’ day, if not before.

But I think our ideas of fairness go deeper than working for “sameness”. Our ideas of fairness are inextricably tied to our ideas of justice, about what is “right” on a moral level. When the feminist movement sparked the ongoing fight for equality among men and women in the workplace, we found ourselves faced with the age-old notion that women were somehow lesser creatures than men, couldn’t possibly work as hard or with equal or greater results than men, and therefore *deserved* less. The same underlying principle applies for the reasons underlying slavery, ethnic cleansing, and a host of other injustices.

But, most people in our day and age would agree that all human beings, regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, or any other distinguishing factor, are inherently valuable and have dignity. Why else would we get so upset when others are bullied, oppressed or treated like animals? Why else would we get so upset when people are considered collateral damage in war? Why else would we get so upset by the Holocaust and other examples of ethnic cleansing? We get so upset because these things offend our deepest sense of what it means to be human – of the value of the essential worthiness of a human being. Our sense of justice tells us that it doesn’t matter how hard you work (or don’t work), or whether you are a contributing member of society (or not), there are some basic human rights that all people deserve, simply by virtue of being a human being, simply by virtue of being created in God’s image. Without such a sense, our societies fall apart, our world devolves into chaos, and the darkness of evil descends rather quickly.

But even given this very basic understanding of human worthiness, the basic criteria that we *functionally* use for determining fairness is the principle of merit. To be sure, all people are created in the image of God, but those who work harder deserve more, right? The concept of merit is the underlying philosophy of our entire economic and social system. If you work hard, you will earn rewards – usually in the form of financial security, recognition, or social status. If you contribute positively in the building of society, you *deserve* to be treated with a certain amount of respect. Those who don’t work so hard don’t merit the same respect or deserve the same rewards as those who do. All people deserve some basic human rights, but anything else beyond that needs to be earned.

This is the way our society works. We see it everyday, whether we walk on the other side of the street from those people we begrudge for getting a hand out and who “should just get a job”, or whether we are climbing the socio-economic ladder of promotion. Do more, get more. No one deserves a free ride, right?

This brings us to the parable Jesus tells about grace in the kingdom of God: The Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16). This is another one of those parables that our helpful translators have taken it upon themselves to interpret for us, but which I'm not sure is primarily about the workers. The basic story is this: As was customary then, (and still is in many parts of the world), the unemployed men of the town gathered in the town square each morning with the hope that someone would hire them for the day. Along came a landowner who hired some of them to work in his vineyard. Throughout the day, he returned to the square to hire more men. At the end of the day, he paid all of them the wage he had promised. But the workers who were hired early in the day, and had worked hard all day didn't think that those who had worked for only an hour deserved the same wage, and they complained about the unfairness of the landowner. Their primary complaint against the landowner is that he had treated the workers equally, not according to what they deserved. The landowner reminds the workers that he paid what he promised, and it was his prerogative to be gracious to whom he wanted to be gracious. The workers begrudge the landowner his generosity, and they are envious of those who didn't work as hard.

I think most of us would probably respond in the same way. The landowner's actions offend our basic sense of fairness. Those who work more deserve to be paid more than those who work less. But here is where Jesus turns our ideas of fairness upside down. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven isn't like our earthly kingdoms. Fairness in God's kingdom offends our sense of what is fair in the world. The Jews expected a kingdom that would match their sense of justice – of being rewarded for doing what they were supposed to do. [Note: I think we need to be very careful about how we define what constitutes a worthy contribution to society lest we overlook the more hidden but valuable ways that people are a part of our communities.] The Jews thought they could keep God's favour by their works, and would be blessed accordingly in his kingdom.

Instead of affirming their ideas of what they think they deserve, Jesus says that all that work you do, all that "contributing" you do, really doesn't count for much when it comes to how God sees you in his kingdom. And the bottom line is that God isn't fair – at least according to our sense of fairness and merit. For those of us who really have worked hard and done the right things, this upsets our sense of fairness significantly. But those who know they don't deserve God's favour are suitably humbled and blessed to be counted among the "worthy" by God.

We have considered the jealousy of some of the workers, and the prerogative of God to be gracious. Let's look for a minute at what the wage is. The wage is grace – the outward signs of God's unmerited favor, kindness, care, love, but how is that grace given?

Simply put, it is handed out from the cross. According to God's criteria, no one would ever be able to meet the standards of relationship that God had set. No one would ever be able to work hard enough to warrant God's favour, though they tried and tried and tried. And we try and try and try. We say to ourselves, "*if* only I pray properly and often enough, and read my bible often enough, and serve others in the community, and love my neighbor – *then* God will love me. Not only will God love me then, but I will *deserve* his love. He *owes* me his love. But pretty soon we find that our efforts begin to wane, our energy falters, our resolve weakens. And we beat ourselves up because we believe we have failed God and will be punished by him, and most certainly won't experience his favour and blessing. We resolve to try harder next time. The cycle continues. That was the cycle the Jews had gotten stuck in. Be good and faithful religious people and you will earn God's love. Failure to do that merits judgment

from God and others. And not only do we beat ourselves up in our failures, but we beat others up for theirs.

The Good News is that in Jesus, God showed his unconditional love for his entire creation. Unconditional means that merit plays absolutely no role in determining the nature of God's love. In Jesus, God chose to love *all* people and to draw them back to himself by that love. Through the offering of Jesus, God revealed that he didn't count people's merit or non-merit for anything. The wage is Jesus – the embodiment/incarnation of God's grace. And God offers his Son freely to all.

The parable speaks to us about the leveling nature of grace. God's grace, his favour and love, disregards social or economic status, or levels of respect. God's grace takes the distinctions between people that we make in our world, and razes them to the same level playing field. It's all the same at the foot of the cross.

There have probably been times in our lives when we too have begrudged God the grace he has extended to others, particularly others who we don't think deserve God's grace. But God really does give the same wage, the same grace, to all, regardless of whether we think they deserve it or have worked for it. God gives us all Jesus. God gives us all himself. And since God is free to give himself to whomever he chooses, who are we to impose the criteria we think he should use to determine who gets how much? How could we possibly think God should withhold his love from some people and shower it freely on others? Don't we want all to know the love of God? Don't we want all to be made whole by his love? Are we really so arrogant and selfish that we would allow our jealousy and petty and warped sense of fairness to deprive others of God?

Where does this leave us? Today is Mission & Outreach Sunday. It is the day that we recognize and celebrate the fact that we believe that God's grace is for everyone, regardless of social status or ability, or financial success, or degree of respect, or the level of contribution they have in the world. And because God has shown us his great love in Jesus Christ, because God has counted us, along with everyone else, among his beloved children, we are compelled to proclaim this good news, to demonstrate this good news in the ways we treat, serve, and support others. As God's people, living in *his* kingdom, we are the hands and feet of Jesus – we are the hands and feet of the wages – given to all without consideration for merit. This congregation has proven itself time and time again as a community that has compassion for all God's people. I encourage you to allow God's Spirit to continue to change your perspective on who deserves what, and how you might be the actual, real, fleshy hands and feet of Jesus (the pouring out of God's grace) to all you meet. If God extends mercy and grace to all, without condition or judgment and regardless of merit, shouldn't we attempt to do the same? God's kingdom isn't fair as far as our standards go, but thank God it's not!