

**What Does He Think He's Doing**  
**Matthew 20: 1-16**  
**Don Lincoln**

Some years ago, two zoologists at Emory University wanted to explore where our distaste for unfairness comes from. They designed an experiment using monkeys. Pairs of monkeys were placed in adjacent cages where they could see each other, and were trained to take turns giving small rocks to their human handler.

Each time a monkey relinquished a rock, she would receive a piece of cucumber as a reward. After a few fair and even exchanges, the handler rewarded the first monkey with a chunk of cucumber as usual, but gave the second monkey a grape – which in monkey-world is the equivalent of fine wine or excellent caviar.

**Watch this TED talk video by the scientists about how that went:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKhAd0Tyny0>

**Video transcript:** She gives a rock to her – that's the task. And we give her a piece of cucumber and she eats it. The other one needs to give a rock to us. And that's what she does, and she gets a grape. And she eats it. The other one sees that. She gives a rock to us and again gets a cucumber. She looks at the cucumber and throws the cucumber back at us.

“That's not fair!!!!” It starts when we're very young! And carries throughout our lives. Most of us would agree that we hate when things aren't fair.

But, I'm sure you noticed in the video, the monkey who **did get the grape**, was really worried and anxious about her next-door-neighbor who only got cucumbers... **RIGHT?** Yeah, **NOT!!** Maybe our desire for fairness and equity only rises up when **WE** are the ones on the short end of the stick! So long as I get **MY** grape – everything's fine – too bad for you.....

Of course, this parable is somewhat the inverse. The first workers – the all-day workers – get exactly what they signed on for; an agreement reached with the landowner when he hired them first thing in the morning. A full-day's wage. No short-changing there. A day's pay for a day's work.

But when they see the Johnny-come-latelies getting the same wage, and nothing more for themselves, they're offended. “**Equal pay for equal work!**” they cry out. We're offended too. You do the job; you get the pay.

Oh really? **Equal pay for equal work?** I'm not sure our corporate or individual history will stand up to a fairness gauge like "equal pay for equal work." Slavery sure didn't prove it. We say "But that was a long time ago...." Well – gender gaps in pay **still exist**....

Just what **DO** you and I have in mind when we cry foul and ask for FAIR?

But the fact of the matter is, while this parable has long been known as the parable of the **workers** in the vineyard, my friend and Middle Eastern New Testament Scholar Ken Bailey writes: "Such a title assumes the workers are the focus of the parable, and they're not.

The central focus of this story is the amazing compassion and grace of the employer, rather than the employees. I prefer to call this story the parable of the compassionate employer, for throughout the day this vineyard owner demonstrates sensitivity and compassion for the unemployed. That deep concern is then augmented by his generosity at the end of the day."<sup>1</sup>

You and I don't know why the landowner keeps coming back for more workers. Maybe other farms finished harvesting early, and workers are back in the market square looking for work. Maybe they were late to the corner in the morning because they can't get moving as early as some others. Maybe they didn't have transportation to town and had to walk. Maybe they were immigrants, and didn't speak the language and didn't know where it was people gathered in that village. Maybe they just weren't as able-bodied and so weren't hired first.

All the landowner cares about is that every last person in the marketplace finds a spot in his vineyard – the early bird and the latecomer, the able-bodied and the infirm, the young and the old, the popular and the forgotten. When the workday is over, what concerns the landowner is not who deserves what. All he cares about is that every worker ends the day with the dignity and security of a living wage. The capacity to go home and feed their family another day. Sufficient security and peace of mind to sleep well. A better grasp on hope.<sup>2</sup>

Because, after all, it IS a parable of the Kingdom, isn't it? Didn't Jesus start this parable, "The Kingdom of heaven is like this?"

You and I know our basic economics. Do the job; get the reward. But that's not – **thanks be to God** – the economics of grace.

**But even when it comes to grace**, you and I can be offended. Most of us hate those death-bed confessions by life-long scoundrels. "Not fair! I worked all day, and she worked an hour – and you gave the same pay. Not right! Not fair!"

The good news of the gospel is that God **ISN'T** fair! And grace goes way beyond fair. If God were fair, Jesus would never have died on the cross! Instead of being fair, God is merciful. And gracious. And generous. Extravagantly so. To all. No matter what hour the hire. Same gift; same reward; same grace.

And why would we cry, "**Unfair!?**" Does that imply knowing and loving God is somehow less its own blessing than living much of life apart from Him, without hope? The more hours

you and I get in God's vineyard, the luckier we are. Those who work only the last hour of the day don't have the joy of knowing the vineyard owner nearly as long as those who started first thing.

Of course, the really funny thing is, if you're like me, you probably identify yourself with the workers who clocked in at 6:00 a.m. Truth is you and I are 5:00pm workers. We're here because we stand on the backs of others – the first hour workers named Peter, James and John. The other workers that filled the day – Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Knox. I've been pastor here 20 years!! My predecessor 32 years. And one of the pastors before him? 35 years!

The reality is, we are all 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers. Every one of us could find someone who has worked harder, longer and more faithfully for the kingdom than we have.

And thankfully, God is equally gracious to all, even to latecomers like you and me. God says "We use a new math here in this Vineyard. The new math is NOT based on who you are, what you have done, what you deserve, even what you can earn. It's based solely on my generosity. Here you get not what you deserve but, what you don't deserve – mercy. Here you and I get what we can never earn: love. In the kingdom of God you and I get what we can only freely receive: grace."

Today would've been the day of our mission fair here at Westminster, where we would've celebrated in our fellowship hall all the ways this congregation's operating budget uses kingdom economics. Because we don't believe you have to earn your way in God's kingdom. If we did, there wouldn't be a clinic in Honduras, an orphanage in Mexico, a Food Cupboard in West Chester, or the countless other ways we show God's extravagant generosity to others, in response to God's extravagant generosity with us.

May our annual giving campaign be a testimony to how well we know that, and how much we want to continue to model kingdom economics in and for the world.

May it be so. Amen.

1. Kenneth Bailey; *"Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels,"* 2008.
2. Debi Thomas, [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net), "On Fairness;" essay on the texts for Sunday, September 20, 2020.