

“What is Fair”

This parable sounds “unfair” to our ears, every bit as much as it sounded unfair to those who heard Jesus say these words 2,000 years ago.

But they are only unfair if you’re looking out for yourself first. I mean, what if, just for a moment, your main concern was for someone else to get ahead. I mean what if that was the only thing on your mind?

Then, this parable would be amazing. This parable would be exactly what you were looking for.

What would it take for us to cheer for those last workers who came as the bulk of the job was finished, and as everyone was cleaning up for the day? What would it take for us to whoop and holler when their check was just as big as everyone else’s?

What would it take for us to be for those workers who came in the cool of the morning, and who worked through the heat of the day to get the same paycheck as everyone else?

It would take us having the mindset of God.

Here’s the thing, when it comes to God’s Kingdom, there’s only one prize: Being in God’s Presence now and forever. Here in this world and in the world to come. That’s it. There isn’t a consolation prize. No silver, no bronze.

And, anyone is allowed in, whether they signed on early, or whether they skidded in at the last minute. AND, God is excited that each and every one of us is in, no matter how long our commitment.

Because the first laborers are God's Children. And the ones who came next; they are God's Children. And the ones who came last...they are God's Children.

So now, isn't this parable amazing? (1)

Professor William Barclay writes in The Gospel of Matthew; 'This parable may sound to us as if it described a purely imaginary situation, but that is far from being the case. Apart from the method of payment, the parable describes the kind of thing that frequently happened at certain times in Palestine. The grape harvest ripened towards the end of September, and then close on it heels the rains came. If the harvest was not gathered in before the rains broke, then it was ruined; and so, to get the harvest in was a frantic race against time. Any worker was welcome, even if he could only an hour to the work. The pay was perfectly normal; a denarius was the normal day's wage for the working man. It was not a wage which left any margin.' (2)

So, to me it sounds that no matter how much time a man worked at the end of the day the pay was the same. Seems totally unfair, but also sounds that they didn't have hourly wages.

The men would go to the marketplace first thing in the morning and wait until someone would hire them. Some men even stayed as late as five o'clock pm to get work. 'These men were hired laborers, the lowest class of workers, and life for them was always desperately precarious' says Professor Barclay. 'These men were entirely at the mercy of chance employment; they were always living on the semi-starvation line. For them to miss one day of work would mean that their children would go hungry at home.' (2)

The Jewish scholar C.G. Montefiore calls this parable 'one of the greatest and most glorious of all.' It may have had a limited application when at first it was spoken, 'but it does contain truth which goes to the very heart of the Christian religion.' (2)

Professor Barclay continues to write on Matthew 20: 1-16:

'It is in one sense a warning to the disciples. It is as if Jesus said to them: 'You have received the great privilege of coming into the Christian Church and fellowship very early, right at the beginning. In later days, others will come in. You must not claim a special honor and a special place because you were Christians before they were. All men and women, no matter when they come, are equally precious to God.' (2)

How does that make you feel. Maybe you have been a member of the church for years, and someone new comes in and knowing that they are just as precious to God as you are, a longtime member. After all, you

feel a little resentment because new members may want to change things. Things that you have put into motion, the way church is done. New members may bring in different plans and different ways. But ‘in the Christian Church, seniority does not necessarily mean honor.’

‘There is an equally definite warning to the Jews. They knew that they were the chosen people, nor would they ever willingly forget that choice. As a consequence, they looked down on the Gentiles. Usually they hated and despised them and hoped for nothing but their destruction. This attitude threatened to be carried forward into the Christian Church. If the Gentiles were to be allowed into the fellowship of the Church at all, they must come in as inferiors.’ (2)

God doesn’t favor one nation over another. We are all equal to God. ‘Christianity knows nothing of such a conception of self-importance. No one person or group is more important than the new person or group, and just maybe we can learn from them.’ (2)

‘These are the original lessons of this parable; but it has very much more to say to us:

‘There is the comfort of God. It means that no matter when people enter the kingdom – late or soon, in the first flush of youth, in the strength of the middle of the day, or when the shadows are lengthening – they are equally dear to God. The Rabbis had a saying: ‘Some enter the

kingdom in an hour; others hardly enter it in a lifetime.’ No matter when they come to Christ, they are equally dear to him.’ (2)

May we not go even further with this thought of comfort? Sometimes people, like my mom die full of years and full of honor, with their day’s work ended and their task completed. And sometimes young people, like my daughter-in-law Beth die almost before the door of life and achievement has opened at all. From God, they will both receive the same welcome; for both, Jesus Christ is waiting, and in neither case, in the divine sense, has life ended too soon or too late.

‘Here is the infinite compassion of God. There is an element of human tenderness in this parable.’

‘There is nothing worse in this world than unemployment. ‘One great teacher used to say that the saddest words in al Shakespeare’s plays are the words: ‘Othello’s occupation is gone.’ (2)

In that marketplace, men stood waiting because no one had hired them; in his compassion, the master gave them work to do. Because he could not bear to see them idle.’ (2)

‘It seems that the fewer the hours a man works, the lesser his pay should be. But the master knew that if he did so, knowing that one denarius wasn’t great pay, the worker would go home to a worried wife and hungry children; so, the master went beyond justice and gave them more than was their due.’ (2)

If only that could happen today. When a person that wants to work, can actually find work so he or she can support their family. Instead we have a great many on unemployment, way too many hungry children and a system that doesn't help the people live better lives.

'Here is also the generosity of God. These men did not all do the same work; but they did receive the same pay. There are two great lessons here. The first is, as Robert Browning said in 'Pippa Passes': 'All service ranks the same with God.' It is not the amount of service given, but the love in which it is given which matters. A wealthy friend may give us a valuable gift, and in truth we are grateful; a child may give us a birthday or Christmas gift which cost only a small amount but which was laboriously and lovingly saved up for - and that gift, with little value of its own, touches our heart far more. God does not look on the amount of our service. As long as it is all we have to give, all service ranks the same with God.' (2)

'The second lesson is even greater – all God gives is of grace. We cannot earn what God gives us; we cannot deserve it; what God gives us is given out of the goodness of his heart; what God gives is not pay, but a gift; not a reward, but a grace.' (2)

What greater gift to receive than the gift of God's love. We can't buy it, we can't earn it, it is given freely to us. Can you say that about the love you give? Do you give your love freely? without restrictions,

without bias? I know it can be hard to, to love without any boundaries, to open up your heart as God does for us. As a Christian we are called to do just that, to love others as God loves us.

‘Surely that brings us to the supreme lesson of the parable – the whole point of work is the spirit in which it is done. The servants are clearly divided into two classes. The first came to an agreement with the master; they had a contract; they said: ‘We work if you give us so much pay.’ As their conduct showed, all they were concerned with was to get as much as possible out of their work. But in the case of those who were engaged later, there is no word of contract; all they wanted was the chance to work, and they willingly left the reward to the master. (2)

‘We are not Christians if our first concern is pay. Peter asked: ‘What do we get out of it?’ Christians work for the joy of serving God and others. That is why the first will be last and the last will be first.’ (2)

‘Many in this world, who have earned great rewards, will have a very low place in the kingdom because rewards were their sole thought. Many who, as the world counts it, are poor, will be great in the kingdom, because they never thought in terms of reward but worked for the thrill of working and for the joy of serving. It is the paradox of the Christian life that those who aim reward lose it, and those who forget reward find it.’ (2)

It is just that simple, it is just that hard.

1. "What is Fair" A reflection on Matthew 20:1-16, the gospel lesson for Proper 20a, according to the Revised Common Lectionary. By Rick Morley
2. Most of this is quoted from Professor William Barclay's book:
The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew Volume Two