

**“God Is Unfair!”**  
**Matthew 20:1-16; Exodus 32:1-14**

Some said he was a hard man. But most viewed him as a champion of justice. That is why they nicknamed him “Mr. Law & Order.” He had sat on the bench for fifteen years. He was death on drunk driving and drugs. He believed mandatory sentencing was the only way to get people’s attention. If you do the crime, you should do the time.

And that applied to everyone across the board. Once you were eighteen years old, you were an adult, so you had better act like one. Eighteen and nineteen year olds who came before him arguing they had just “made a mistake” received no sympathy. They knew better. And they knew the consequences. How could you let one off and not another? He prided himself on being fair and equal. He didn’t care who your mom and dad happened to be, this was about you. He was determined to throw a wrench into the patterns of drinking and drugs he saw in the young adults who entered his courtroom. Except for parents who pleaded for mercy for their children, everyone from the police to politicians applauded his judgments.

Then late one night the ringing of the phone bolted him upright in bed. It was the call every parent dreads. His son had been involved in an accident. He had been drinking. And driving. The other driver was badly injured.

At the station, he found a shattered boy. Inconsolable with grief, tears sputtered his words as he related how they had gone to a party and drank some beer. They hadn’t meant to overdrink. And he thought he was driving really slowly. All of a sudden this car was in front of them. He slammed on his brakes...”Oh dad, help me, help me,” the boy pleaded.

Questions and answers from every angle flooded the judge’s mind. How could this happen? His son had been raised in a home where having a drink consisted of one beer after cutting the grass. Repeatedly they had warned him about drinking and driving. He had promised them he wouldn’t. And they believed him. He was a good kid. He made A’s in school, was in the Honor Society. Every Sunday he accompanied them to church and Sunday School. He was active in the youth group. Where was his mind? How could he have done something so stupid?

And then it dawned upon the judge what this meant. Drinking, driving, serious injury, equaled jail time. Oh no, he thought, there is no value in that. What would jail teach him? In there with murderers, rapists, drug dealers, he would be fodder for these hardened criminals.

He couldn’t let this happen. This wouldn’t be in his son’s best interest. It would ruin his life. Surely, mercy was more appropriate than justice in his son’s case.

One of the strange and almost universal views of God’s mercy and grace, His love and forgiveness, is that we think it unfair when applied to others, but like it and find it appropriate when meant for us. Our parable from Matthew, often called the laborers in the vineyard, is both the most comforting, or most disturbing story in the New Testament, depending on the situation in which we currently reside.

Jesus begins by saying, “For the kingdom of heaven is like...” And then tells a story, a parable, about a vineyard owner. First thing in the morning, probably around sunrise at 6:00 a.m. the owner goes to the marketplace to hire workers to pick his grapes. In first century Palestine, and still true today even in places in America, unemployed day laborers gather in a common place awaiting business owners seeking unskilled labor.

The vineyard owner immediately hires the laborers he finds there. He agrees to pay them the usual daily wage, one denarius, enough to take care of the needs of a poor family for one day. He returns to the marketplace at nine o’clock, again hires those looking for work and agrees to pay them “whatever is right.” He goes back to the marketplace at noon and three o’clock and does the same thing. At five o’clock, one hour before quitting time, he again finds workers in the marketplace. They claim they are there because no one has hired them. He employs them to work in his vineyard.

Now, to this point, nothing Jesus has said surprises his audience. In Palestine, the grape crop ripens toward the end of September. It then becomes a race to harvest the vineyard before the rains arrive and ruin the grapes. So employing all the workers the owner could get, even at different times, would be common.

But the twist is yet to come. When sunset arrived, about 6:00 p.m., the owner tells his manager to pay the workers, beginning with those who arrived last. The Old Testament demanded workers be compensated after each work day. Those who worked only one hour step up and receive one denarius, a full day’s pay. Undoubtedly, the eyes of those in the back of the line who had worked twelve hours lit up like Christmas trees. If the owner would be this generous to those who worked only one hour, just think what he was going to do for those who had slaved all day under that torturous Palestinian sun.

But when they arrive at the front of the line, they, too, are paid one denarius. Immediately, they march right over to the vineyard owner. “What gives? We’re out there busting our humps for you twelve long hours. These guys show up for one hour. And you pay us all the same?” And the owner replies: “I did you no wrong. I paid you the agreed upon wage. What’s it to you? I can do what I wish with my money. Or are you envious because I am generous?”

A saleswoman is driving toward home in Northern Arizona when she sees an Indian woman hitchhiking. Since the trip had been long and quiet, she stops the car and the Indian woman gets in. After a bit of small talk, the Indian woman notices a brown bag on the front seat. “It’s a bottle of wine. I got it for my husband,” says the saleswoman.

The Indian woman is silent for a while and then she says, “Good trade.”

The twelve hour laborers did not think they had gotten a good trade for their work.

The first thing that strikes us about the parable is its blatant unfairness. The vineyard owner is obviously God. And rather than hiding, or explaining away God’s unfairness, Jesus flaunts it. “Look everyone, God isn’t going to deal with you fairly. No siree, a whole lot of people are going to get a whole lot more than they deserve.”

Now, we don't like this parable. It offends us. It rubs against our sense of justice, of hard work, of getting what is our due. And Jesus would say, "That is exactly the point. None of us get what we deserve." This parable is told in response to two questions. First, the Pharisees, who argued that God would judge us on our actions, were quizzing Jesus. Second, Peter, always looking to the future, says, "Hey, we (the disciples) have left everything and followed you. What are we going to get out of this?" You can imagine how unhappy he was to hear this parable.

But, before we label God's way of dealing with us unfair, let us ask this question: Do any of us get what we deserve?

For instance, the Old Testament says we should give ten percent of our earnings to God's work. Jesus said, "Oh no, that's where you start. You are to give sacrificially." What if I went into the church office and pulled out everyone's pledge card and put them up on a big screen? Would everyone look at your and my pledge card and say, "Oh yeah, they deserve their good life, look what they give." Or, would they say, "I think they must be one of those vineyard laborers who came to work at 5:00 p.m.?"

Or, if we could be Dr. Spock on Star Trek and do a mind probe where we could see what you and I are thinking, how many of us would have to admit we have made gods of status, recognition, popularity, or occupation? How many of us would it show as treating someone at work, a spouse, a store clerk as beneath us?

Now, we could go on and on, pointing out the vast array of sin all of us commit. The point is that none of us get what we deserve. In spite of our sin, God still loves us and forgives us, still blesses us in so many ways. Thank God, and I mean that literally, we thank God none of us get what we deserve.

In his book, The Parables, Gerald Kennedy tells about an English minister whose small daughter would often ask for a favorite prayer before she went to sleep. "Now," she would say, "the prayer about the crumbs." And the father would repeat the Prayer of Humble Access in the Anglican Communion Service: "We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou art the same Lord, whose mercy is unfailing..."

Every one of us can pray the prayer about the crumbs.

Only by understanding and accepting our lack of deserving are we enabled to comprehend, applaud, and apply grace. God's grace, the giving of His love and forgiveness is not based on fairness, on tit for tat. If it was, every single one of us would be in trouble. It is human nature to look around and say, "Well, they seem to blow God off and do just fine." Trust me, what is on the surface seldom portrays the turmoil below. God loves us, forgives us, and tries to help us, but continually ignoring his laws and precepts will eventually manifest a devastating toll. All the money in the world cannot fix a broken family and the pain it engenders.

For me, the best way to understand grace is to view it in the context of our personal relationships. For instance, do you deal with your children, or spouse, or parents with fairness or grace? As Maryon Pearson, wife of former Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson once said, "Behind every successful man is a surprised woman." In our close

personal relationships we deal with one another with grace, with the attitude of the parable. If fairness was our rule, we'd all end up in divorce court and no teenager would have a home. Thank goodness, there is not woman in this sanctuary who deals with her husband fairly.

Think of how you function with your children, or how your parents raised you. Fairness is not the motivation of our child rearing. You love them, nurture them, pray for them, try to lead them into maturity. If our parents dealt with us fairly, we all would have been grounded for life.

We are God's children. He loves us, forgives us, nurtures us, even when we don't deserve it. The radical, unfettered, undeserved love and forgiveness of God is what Christianity is all about. It flies in the face of every human sense of fairness and equality. And *that* is what makes it so divine, and so life changing.

A woman went to the doctor's office where she was seen by one of the new physicians in the group. After about four minutes in the examination room, she burst out of the office screaming as she ran down the hall. An older doctor stopped her, settled her down and asked what the problem was, and she related the entire story. After listening, he had her sit down and relax in another room. He then marched down the hall where he found the new, young physician and demanded, "What's the matter with you? Mrs. Terry is 63 years old, has four grown children and seven grandchildren, and you told her she was pregnant?" The new doctor continued to type on his computer and without looking up said, "Does she still have the hiccups?"

The truth of God's grace, his radically generous gifts of love and forgiveness, go against all conventional human assumptions about how we should be treated by God and others. But, it works.

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In Paul's letters in the New Testament, we find that some questioned this core belief of God's grace through Jesus Christ. They argued that it led to cheap grace, people sinning and then glibly asking forgiveness. People responded better with a sword hanging over their head, they said. Parents know that's true with children – until they go away to college, where there is no sword. And, cheap grace, glib forgiveness quickly lose their ability to bring about the desired change in one's life. Whether outwardly, or inwardly, continual sin takes a toll on us.

God wants us to love him just like you want your children, or spouse, or friends to love you, not because of what you can do for them, but just because you love them. That kind of love produces the actions, words, and deeds the Christian life exemplifies.

God is unfair... Thank goodness.

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