

Is God Fair?  
Matthew 20:1-16

You've saved up for months. You've rearranged your work schedule. You booked your flight a year in advance. All so you could see your favorite musical artist perform in front of 20000 screaming fans. And it was everything you thought it would be, you cheered, you sang along, you were having a great time, that is until you hear what sounds like fireworks going off. You assume it's someone else celebrating. Then you start hearing the screaming, people running, others falling the ground around you. See, what you didn't realize, is that while you were preparing to enjoy a great evening, a 64-year old man was preparing his 32<sup>nd</sup> floor suite to be a shooting gallery. Last weekend dozens of fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters, went out to hear music, get away from work, have a good time, but ended up coming home to their families in a body bag. Doesn't seem fair does it?

Did you know that of the thousands of rescue workers who were at ground zero on September 11<sup>th</sup> helping and saving people, more that 2500 of them have been diagnosed with cancer to this day? It has now been scientifically proven that those heroes who risked their lives that day are far more likely to get cancer because of all the deadly dust and smoke they were exposed to as those buildings collapsed in New York City. That doesn't seem fair does it?

But sometimes life isn't. If I asked you whether God is loving or unloving, I don't think many of you would have a hard time giving the right answer. If I asked you if God was almighty and powerful or too weak to help his people, you'd probably point to the resurrection. But if I asked whether God is fair or unfair, what would your answer be? The truth is a lot of people struggle with this question!

The prophet Jonah from today's first lesson sure did! Almost three thousand years ago, God called the prophet Jonah to go to a wicked city full of immoral unbelievers and warn them of God's coming judgment.

After running away, being swallowed by a fish and spit out, a reluctant Jonah walks into Nineveh and gives them God's message: "**Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed**". But then something unexpected happened: The Bible's single greatest conversion. Those hundreds of thousands of wicked people living in Nineveh – they believed. They put on sackcloth and ashes, repented of their sin and prayed to God that he might have mercy on them and forgive them. And in a move that cut Jonah to the core, God did.

Jonah probably brought more people to faith in one day than even Jesus did during his ministry. Most pastors would love to have a day like that. But not Jonah. Jonah was mad. Mad at God for forgiving and sparing these wicked people after all the awful things they had done. He was mad at God because He wasn't being fair!

So God asked Jonah, "**Do you have the right to be angry about these things?**" And what did Jonah say? "**I ...**" He said "I." If you look at your first lesson today Jonah chapter 4 has eleven verses. Jonah speaks in 4 of them. And in those four verses, he says, "I – I – I – I – my – me – me – I – I." Nineveh's life, for the first time, revolved entirely around God. God was the new center of their universe. But the center of Jonah's universe was ... "I." He cared less about what he could give the world and more about what it should give him; less about the glory he was giving to God in serving him, and more about how well he was being served and loved by

everyone. Does it shock you that one of God's own prophets was so upset about whether God was being fair or not? Jonah wasn't the only one.

Seven hundred years after Jonah, Peter came to Jesus with a question that was on all the disciples' minds. In the words prior to today's text, Peter asks Jesus, ***"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"*** I think this is a fair question; the disciples left their homes, their jobs, their families and their friends to follow Jesus and needed to know it was worth it. If you're anything like me, then sometimes you probably wonder that too, when you think about what you could do with your extra time or money if you weren't giving it to God at church.

Jesus' answer was simple – ***"I'm giving you an eternal life that nothing can compare with; I won't let you down"*** – but Jesus knew that Peter and the disciples were wrestling with a question that was much more dangerous, and if you're human, it's a question you probably wrestle with too: ***"Is God really going to be fair when he deals with me?"*** And so Jesus tells the parable we have before today to reveal whether or not God is fair.

Jesus said ***the Kingdom of heaven***(the heavenly way God interacts with his people here on earth) ***is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius (a day's wage). About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing... So the owner promised them what was fair. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour – and even at the eleventh hour – just before the end of the day – and did the same thing.*** But it's what the landowner did at the end of the story that seemed so unfair. ***"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' 'The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men 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.'***

It's no surprise that some of his workers thought he was unfair. Even after a day wasted in laziness, the workers hired last received the same pay, and that doesn't seem fair.

But this isn't just a story about a vineyard. God says this is the way he deals with his people. When God calls us into his Kingdom, he doesn't base his love for us on how wonderful of people we are or how hard we work for him. He calls us the same way he called the people of Nineveh. He tells us that fair treatment from him means destruction for our sins. And when we look to him in repentance, he tells us of the forgiveness we have in Jesus.

Now I don't know about your math but mine doesn't add up here. That doesn't seem fair. That's rewarding our lack of effort and laziness, with a full day's work. But that's kind of Jesus whole point here. It's NOT fair. It's Grace!

***Jesus says, I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do [that]?*** God took the sins of the world and put them on Jesus so that at the end of the day, all people could be offered the same gift. If that seems unfair to you, you're not the first person to think that way.

The reason why ***"Sola Gratia,"*** the teaching of "Grace Alone" (today's focus), was one of the main truths to come out of the reformation, is because people back then were approaching

salvation in the same way as those workers who showed up early in the morning and worked the entire day, but walked away angry. It was a common belief during the time of the reformation that God would pay you, but only for the work that you *did*. That only seemed fair. So if you sinned a lot, you'd have to do a lot to make up for it. You put in the work, and you get rewarded for it. And that mindset goes along with everything we've been taught from early on right? You get a job, you work hard, you earn a wage. You work harder than the person next to you, you climb up the job ladder and that wage increases. And the same would naturally seem to apply to our eternal reward. That was the belief at the time of the reformation as well.

You pay your money to the church, you're rewarded with eternity. You do your penance, and you get years off purgatory. You do good works, and you slowly climb that ladder. That seems fair. And if God was fair, that's what God seemingly would do right? The only problem with that is this: **God isn't fair.**

In the parable Jesus told, the landowner only promised the first workers a denarius. When he hired the other workers, he didn't name a price. Instead, he said he would pay them "*whatever is right.*" And what was right in the mind of the landowner was to have them work up to eleven hours less than the guys laboring in the heat of the day, but pay them exactly the same.

And since the landowner in Jesus' story is God, he was saying that sometimes God is going to unfairly reward you for the work that you do. Sometimes the reward you receive won't quite match the effort he sees from you. Sometimes faithful service is rewarded with heartbreak and pain. And sometimes a whole lot of it.

**But Christians, I want this text today to change your perspective on what is fair:**

Consider this: What if you could cut a deal with God before your life even began and agree that, in exchange for your work, in exchange for you following him and loving him, you could expect to receive good health, a long life, a steady job, a faithful spouse, great children, and of course, eternal life when it was all over.

But what if you fell short of your end of the bargain? Would it be fair to expect God to keep his? What if you stopped working for him? What if you got distracted by some sinfully-satisfying, short-lived temptation, and neglected some of the good things you said you would do for him? What if he promised to send trials to test the sincerity of your love for him, but instead of trusting him when they came, you got angry at him and started complaining, even after he told you he was going to give you this? What if you stood in front of church at the dawn of your relationship with him and promised to never leave him, to be faithful to his Word, but then walked away halfway through because you found something else more important? What if you loved something in this world more than you love him? Do you think you could just ask Jesus to hang on a cross so you could be forgiven? If you wanted God to be fair, you couldn't!

Do you want God to be fair? Because he's not. But if you still demand he treat you fairly, that he give you what you deserve, then you already know your wages. If, for us, his kingdom is all about me and how everything affects me and how people treat me unfairly, then we are living in a different kingdom. In other words, if we want to be treated as first, we will end up last and nowhere near him.

But if you know why you suffer, sometimes unfairly; if nobody has to tell you why we confess our sins every morning and why the Apostle Paul looked in the mirror and called himself the "least," then you will be the first one seated at the heavenly feast.

That's not called fair. It's called living by grace. Grace alone promises forgiveness after every sin. Grace alone promises life after death and healing after pain and balm for your wounds and a home where there is no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain that your own eyes will someday see after God has wiped every tear from them.

Dear friends, you will one day stand before your Savior. And do you know what he'll say to you? When you hold to his grace alone and nothing else, when you know him as a Lord who delights to give forgiveness to sinners and calls the last first, he will simply say, "Come. Come into the kingdom prepared by my heavenly Father. It's what I've promised you – yes, even you, and all sinners who hear my gracious call."

No, it's not fair, but that's grace: the underserved, unfair, love of our God. God gave to us something that we never could have earned. And so 500 years after that truth was once again brought forth, may we still see, believe, and cherish the unexpected truth that our God isn't fair, for the promise of salvation by grace alone assures us of that! Amen.