

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

1 Timothy 1:2 ...Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Just but Not Fair”

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Introduction

We all go through life with our fairness meter running. What I mean by a fairness meter is that we all try to calculate how fair life is and how we can make it more fair, especially if we feel life has been unfair to us.

Children are especially vocal about fairness. “That’s not fair!” was such a common refrain in my fifth grade class that my teacher would habitually repeat, “Life’s not fair.” I can’t remember much about what she taught me but I will never forget her refrain, “Life’s not fair.” It was good to hear the truth at such a young age.

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus reminds us that while God is just, he is not always fair. Our human nature doesn’t like to accept this truth but we should be thankful that God is not fair.

The Parable

Everyone wants to know what heaven is like and Jesus likes to answer as best as he can using earthly examples. Today’s parable compares the Kingdom of God to an employment opportunity.

In this country, we are so blessed with low unemployment that most young people can’t remember a time when jobs were scarce. I am sure there was a time in the US when people would hang out waiting for someone to hire them at a common place. I imagine

this being a railroad depot in the 1930's. In Hialeah, Florida, where my last congregation is, men would hang out at a certain gas station waiting to be hired.

We can all picture the scene in this parable. People are waiting to make a little money, hoping that someone will help them get by another day. They work first and trust that the employer will pay them fairly at the end of the day. Receiving pay as promised in this sort of situation is always uncertain. There are no written contracts. The workers have no power over the employer. Many employers take advantage of the desperation of these workers and use them to do backbreaking work and then cheat them out of their pay.

The master in Jesus' parable is not that kind of employer. He is just. He pays each worker what he promised so there should be no complaining. He didn't take advantage of them. He paid a fair wage.

So why are some of the workers upset? Because he was more than fair with some of these men. Their "fairness meters" are going off. They don't think it is faith that they did more work but received the same pay.

We can all see their point of view but the master is adamant that he has done nothing wrong. He is the master and he can do what he wants with his own money. Who are these unemployed laborers to judge him for being generous?

What Does This Mean?

When we read this kind of parable, we need to be careful not to say more than the parable says. This is not a parable about modern labor unions or about what kind of economic policy our government should have. It doesn't tell us exactly how God will

judge on the Last Day. It doesn't teach about God's attitudes toward Jews or gentiles.

The only message in this parable is a message of God's grace. One commentary puts it this way, "the principle in the world is that he who works the longest receives the most pay. That is just. But in the kingdom of God the principles of merit and ability may be set aside so that grace can prevail."¹

In other words, this parable teaches that what God gives freely is better than what we can earn from him. Those who want his justice will get it but they might be disappointed. Those who want his grace will be pleasantly surprised.

Pay We Have not Earned

This message is congruent with everything else about Christianity. Every week we remember that Jesus took our place when he was punished on the cross. We take his place when we go to heaven. We have not, will not and can not earn our way to heaven by good works. It is only God's grace in Christ that allows us to enter there.

As Christians, we are like the workers who come at the end of the day. Our good works don't accomplish much but we are given the full wages of a faithful servant. It is not fair. It is gracious.

Conclusion

God's grace is not fair, it is beyond fair. It is better than fair. It's better than anything.

One theologian (C. H. Spurgeon) puts it this way, "When God forgives our sins, there's more forgiveness to follow. He justifies

¹ Carson, D.A. The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, p.428

us in the righteousness of Christ, but there's more to follow. He adopts us into His family, but there's more to follow. He prepares us for heaven, but there's more to follow. He gives us grace, but there's more to follow. He helps us to old age, but there's still more to follow... Even when we arrive in the world to come, there will still be more to follow."

God does more than what is fair and there is more to follow!

May that peace which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.