

## FAIRNESS AND GRACE

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*When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Matthew 20:8-12).*

The two most typical reactions to this story are both bad.

Almost everyone thinks, "That's not fair! Why should the guys who worked only one hour get paid the same as the ones who worked all day?" Even if you like Jesus, that's just not fair.

And the second reaction, especially among business people, is, "That makes no sense economically. It destroys work incentives. If people thought they could make the same amount in one hour as they could all day, everyone would show up for work at 5:00. You could never run a business that way. Jesus obviously doesn't know much about economics!" For some tough-minded business types, this kind of story just confirms what they've suspected all along: religion may be good for getting to the afterlife, but it's not much practical use in the real world where we live here and now.

If Jesus was offering a seminar in economics, those complaints would be valid. It's not fair, according to our standard notions of fairness, to pay everyone the same for different amounts of work; and you never could run a business or an economy with such awful incentives. But Jesus isn't teaching economics here. He does have lessons about money and the economy, but this isn't one of them. And he gets the point about unfairness. It's his story, after all; he's the one who voices the early workers' complaint.

Any time Jesus says something that sounds dumb to us, we should probably ask whether we might have missed the point. If we really think Jesus may be the Son of God, which of us is more likely to be the dumb one?

So what is this story really about? Jesus says, this is about the kingdom of heaven. It's a parable about who gets what from God, and how we react to what everyone gets.

This is about grace. Grace is the good we get when we don't deserve it. Of course the guys who show up late don't deserve the same pay as the ones who worked all day. That's the point. They don't deserve it, but they get it anyway. It's a gift, and they receive it because the landowner is generous, not because they've earned it.

Grace comes gratis, free. It's something we can never earn. Grace is the coin of the realm in the kingdom of heaven, but our habits of thinking about what we deserve keep us from understanding the very idea of grace.

Why is our first reaction to this story so negative? Why are we so puzzled by it? Isn't it because we identify with the people who worked all day? The resentment comes from their perspective, doesn't it? But what if we identified with the ones who were hired at 5:00? Would we still focus on the unfairness? We need a day's pay as much as anyone else. If we realized that we didn't deserve the same wage as the others, wouldn't we be grateful instead of angry? Wouldn't we feel lucky to get such a break? Wouldn't we thank the landowner for his generosity instead of resenting it?

The thing that's so hard for us to get turns out to be the fundamental message of the gospel: that we are saved by grace, not by our own works. We're so hung up on what we think we deserve, we can barely get our heads around the idea that the most valuable thing of all, the thing we need most, is ours for the asking. We can't earn it, but we don't need to earn it. It's a gift from God.

Imagine two identical diamonds: huge, brilliant, flawless. Imagine they're worth millions and millions of dollars. Now imagine that one person works twelve hours in the field and another works only one hour in the same field, and at the end of the day their fabulously wealthy boss gives each of them one of these diamonds. Would you really say that the first worker earned it, while the second one didn't?

If the value of the prize is great enough, there really is nothing we can do to deserve it. The kingdom of heaven is like that. The kingdom of heaven is salvation itself. It's the presence and power of God in our lives, forgiveness and peace and healing in the end, for all eternity. It comes to us through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh to make us whole. What can we do to deserve that? Which of us can say to God, "You owe me that; I've worked hard. I deserve it"? Who can earn the kingdom of heaven, when it cost the Son of God his life to bring it to us?

The apostle Paul spent the first part of his life trying to work his way into heaven. He was a Pharisee. He thought if he followed all the rules and worked hard, he could earn God's favor and God would reward him. But the more clearly he saw God's glory, and his own shortcomings, the more he realized he could never be good enough to deserve God's blessings. As he wrote to the Romans, "through the law comes the knowledge of sin." The more we know about God's goodness, the less impressed we are with ourselves. We come to see that we're not as good as we thought we were. No matter how hard we work, we could never afford to buy that diamond.

So there's no distinction, Paul says. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. It doesn't matter whether we've worked all day, or only one hour. None of us comes close to deserving the kingdom of heaven. But the gospel is good news: we are justified, made right with God, as a gift of God's own grace, though the sacrifice of Christ, which we receive through faith (Romans 3:19-25).

We are saved by grace through faith, so no one has any bragging rights. The people who work all day have scarcely any more claim on the kingdom than the ones who show up at 5:00. The only reason anyone gets paid is because the landowner went out and found them, and invited them to come and work for him. If they all receive what they need in the end, that's no reason for the early workers to complain. If they had any sense, they'd all just be grateful.

Which is to say, we could all probably stand a bit of attitude adjustment.

Those of us who see ourselves as working hard all day could be less jealous of those 5:00 workers we think are getting off easy. The perennial temptation of seriously religious people is to resent those who don't seem to be trying very hard or doing their fair share. *We're* working hard to resist temptation, *they* give in so easily. *We're* here all the time, volunteering, and tithing our income; *they* show up when they want to, and don't do much, and give only a tiny fraction of their resources to the church and to God's work in the world. No wonder the Parable of the Laborers seems so unfair to those of us who identify with the early morning crowd.

But the landowner's reply to them in Jesus' story is disarming. First, he calls them friends. He doesn't beat them up for their ugly mood, any more than the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son beats up the elder brother for resenting the party thrown for his kid brother's return. "Didn't you agree to work for me?" he asks. "And didn't I give you what I said I would? I've done you no wrong. Or do you envy the others because I was good to them?"

That's it, isn't it? What does it mean if we envy those who seem to be getting more than they deserve? Is it such a burden for us to work for God? Is there no joy in serving God, or are we only doing it for the reward? Would we do less for God if we thought we could still get to heaven? What does that say about our motivation? Is it God we love, or just ourselves, if it's all about the reward?

For many religious people, the problem isn't only why bad things happen to good people. It's also why good things happen to bad people – or at least those we think are not good enough. But if we envy others when they benefit from grace, doesn't that mean we still have issues of our own?

Why should we resent somebody else's blessings? If we really loved God, wouldn't we work for God anyway, and please God, regardless of the rewards? And if we loved our neighbors as ourselves, wouldn't we be as happy when they received a gift as when we get one ourselves? In fact, wouldn't other people's blessings become blessings to us as we share their joy? If we're envious and resentful because others are doing well who seem to be less deserving, maybe we're not as deserving as we think. Maybe the early workers aren't so different from the late workers after all. Maybe they have different issues, but they're all in need of grace.

That's something for the early morning crowd to think about. Now here's something for those who show up late but get the same pay as the people who worked all day.

If that's how you see yourself, you probably feel unworthy. You know you haven't done as much as some other people. You see the unfairness of it too, and it makes you uncomfortable. People who think they lose on account of unfairness resent it; those who see how they themselves benefit tend to feel embarrassed.

But there's no need to be embarrassed. God loves you and wants you to have the kingdom of heaven as much he wants those who have worked all their lives to enjoy it. It's a gift – and it's as much a gift for them as it is for you.

People who know they don't deserve such blessings have an advantage over those who assume that they do: they're not so tempted by envy and self-righteousness. But even people who know they don't deserve what God gives them can have challenges of their own.

Once in a while someone sees how badly she's messed up, what a terrible mistake she's made – but when she hears about God's grace, she says, "But I don't *deserve* grace!" You see the irony. Of course you don't deserve grace. That's the point. Grace is a free gift of God's love. Nobody deserves grace – least of all the people who think they do. But God gives grace anyway, not because we are so good, but because God is good.

The only sensible response to grace is gratitude and joy. As long as we're fixed on who deserves what, we miss the grace of God and the joy of salvation. If we're like the people who worked all day in the parable, grace is more annoying than amazing because we resent it's going to all those undeserving folk. And if we're hung up on the fact that we don't deserve it, grace is still troubling because we don't know what to do with it.

Either way, as long as we insist on getting what we deserve, we miss the point. Only when we see that none of us deserves much of anything from God – only then does the kingdom of heaven come to us like the gift it is, the greatest gift of the God who loves us. And only then do we really begin to know its joy.