

It's Not Fair
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Matthew 20:1-16

- **Mulch Delivery Story:** Every spring we have a pile of mulch delivered to our house and our 5 kids ranging in ages 6 to 18 start the bargaining. They are required to spend a few hours helping us lay the mulch as part of their responsibilities around the house. But, the ones who work extra, get paid based on the amount of time worked. They are always trying to bargain for higher wages. Imagine if one of our kids worked an extra 6 hours and another worked 1 yet we paid them both for 6 hours of work. Guess what we would hear? Yes, it is the phrase that you've probably heard or said many times yourself . . . it's not fair !!!
- **Today's scripture text is a story that deals with the phrase, "it's not fair," and the frustration we experience when we think that life has dealt us a bad hand. The frustration boils up in us to the point where we want to scream, "It's not fair."** It is a story from the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus told about some vineyard workers who felt cheated. Let me paraphrase the story for you. The full text is in your Garden to Go.
 - Vineyard owner went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He found some workers, they agreed on a wage of a dollar a day, and went to work. Later, about nine o'clock, the owner saw some other men hanging around the town square unemployed. He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage. They went. He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o'clock. At five o'clock he went back and found still others standing around. He said, 'Why are you standing around all day doing nothing?' They said, 'Because no one hired us.' He told them to go to work in his vineyard. At the end of the day all the men were called together and starting with the last hired, each one was paid. Those hired last were given a dollar. When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more – they'd worked all day – a lot longer than the last workers hired. But they got the same, each of them one dollar. This was frustrating and they complained to the vineyard owner. "How can you pay us the same amount? These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun." The owner replied, "But, I've paid you what we agreed on didn't I? Can't I be generous with my own money and pay others the same amount?"
- **The story of the vineyard workers would have made Jesus' listeners uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable.** It was intended to do that. The story is a parable. Parables are short stories that usually contain a twist designed to shock or least make you squirm a bit. Parables teach without lecturing. If a picture can speak a thousand words, parables can speak millions. Though the parables in the Bible appear simple, they have multiple layers of meaning and can be quite complex. Jesus used parables frequently knowing that we love stories and are more apt to remember a story, than a rule or some other fact.
- **Why does the parable make me uncomfortable?** I agree that the vineyard owner can do what he wants with his money and be generous as he sees fit.

And yet, it is not fair for him to pay the last vineyard workers hired the same as the first ones hired. The first workers deserved more. Why did Jesus tell a story like this? There has to be something more to it than just to teach us that life is unfair – something most of us already know.

- **Our attitudes about fairness – especially in the workplace – are not much different than the first vineyard workers hired.** When we work hard, follow the rules, do what is expected to get ahead, we feel entitled to reap the rewards of our work. We get frustrated when in comparison to someone else, we feel like we've been cheated. Remember the first vineyard workers hired received what they had bargained for . . . technically, they vineyard owner did not cheat them. They felt cheated when they discovered that others who worked less received the same amount. It was in the **comparison**, that their wages seemed unfair.
- **Wimbledon Example:** I was flipping through the Sports Illustrated we'd just received in the mail and read about the recent results of Wimbledon, one of the most prestigious tennis tournaments in the world. For those who aren't tennis fans, this year Venus Williams won Wimbledon when nobody expected her to advance beyond a few rounds at most. She hadn't been practicing much or playing many tournaments. The first paragraph of the article suggested that many of the women competing on the pro tour right now must be frustrated with Venus' victory. While everyone else was training hard and dedicating their lives to the sport of tennis, Venus was designing clothes, spending time with her boyfriend, and living it up. Yet, she was able to pull off a victory that most thought was impossible. I'm sure there are many players complaining, "It's just not fair."
- **What about the times when life hasn't seemed fair for you?** When the door of opportunity didn't open when you expected it to. When you didn't get the choice project at work, when someone else got promoted before you, or when you worked hard and someone else took the credit?
- **There is another side to the topic of unfairness.** What about all the times when I've been the beneficiary of life's unfairness. What about the times when I've made bad choices and gotten away with it. What about the times when I've not gotten what I deserved as was grateful.
 - Sometimes I drive too fast on the highway. There's this sinking feeling you experience when you see a state troopers lights swirling behind you. At some point, you finally admit to yourself that were speeding and you deserve a ticket despite being able to formulate 50 different excuses as to why you only need a warning. This happened to me . . . once . . . and then the miracle occurred. The trooper wasn't after me. He was after the car in front of me. I did not get the ticket I deserved. But the guy in front of me did. Life is not always fair.
- **I enjoy songwriting.** As I was thinking about this message, the lyrics to this song came to mind. I'd like to share part of it with you.
- **Song.**

Standing on the threshold of a door that finally opened.
In the next moment, somebody slammed it shut.
Now you're feeling like your life has become a satire,

Of one more thing in this world that can be so unfair . . .
You want to scream at God, "It's not fair."

You deserve so much more,
But there've been times when you deserved less,
Thank God we don't always get,
Everything that we deserve.
It's a sweet paradox,
How God reaches out to us,
At our best and at our worst,
When we're found and when we're lost.

- God reaches out to us at our best and our worst, when we are found and when we are lost. We don't earn this from God. Thinking about this gave me a **fresh perspective** on the vineyard worker parable and what Jesus was trying to tell us all about God through the parable.
- You see, the last vineyard workers hired were probably old, or weak, or sick. That's why they were the last ones hired. The healthy, strong workers would have been hired first. All of the workers would have been living precarious lives – they needed to find work each day or else they and their families would go hungry. Even slaves in ancient times often lived with more security than the day laborers. Most slaves knew where their next meal would be coming from. Jesus' listeners would have understood this.
- Taken in this light the story begins to look less like one about the unfairness of paying someone a full days wage for working only part of a day, and more about compassion and mercy. Compassion and mercy for those who in terms of productivity and economics were not very useful to society. Compassion and mercy for those who were on the bottom of the ladder.
- **San Francisco/Glide:** A few weeks ago, my husband and I were in San Francisco. We visited Glide, an urban United Methodist church with a very diverse congregation. All kinds of people come to Glide. You may recognize the name of the church from the movie, *The Pursuit of Happiness*. Your pastor, Linda McCoy, may also talk about Glide – in fact the Sunday that my husband and I visited, we ran into Linda and her husband Mike and sat with them during worship. Nothing like traveling across the country and meeting up with someone from the Garden and St. Luke's.
- As we were leaving the church after worship, we noticed that ropes divide the sidewalks for a few blocks leading up to Glide. People were lining up on one side of the ropes. They were getting in line for food – Glide has a mission program that serves meals to thousands of people a week . . . to hungry people who need help for some reason or another. I'm sure that some had made bad choices that landed them on the street, some had lost their jobs or couldn't find jobs that paid enough to allow them to eat. Glide does not ask whether the people deserve a meal, they feed everyone who comes. As I thought about the people to come to Glide and other programs like it to eat, I can't help but wonder . . . do they compare themselves to those in our country with plenty and want to scream at God, it's not fair?
- Song

Standing in the mission line, his oasis after doing time
A meal and a shower and some place to sleep.
His only possession is a trumpet that he used to play.
The drugs have all stolen his talent away.
Does he want to scream at God, "It's not fair?"

He may not deserve more,
Some think he deserves less.
Thank God we don't always get,
Everything that we deserve.
It's a sweet paradox,
How God still loves us,
At our best and at our worst.
When we found and when we're lost.

- God reaches out to us at our best and at our worst. When we are found and when we are lost. When life seems fair and not so fair. Even when we don't deserve it.
- We have something very important to learn from all the vineyard workers in the parable. They all responded to the offer of work. Even the last vineyard workers hired responded to the vineyard owner's offer -- they did not even negotiate their wages like the first workers hired. Nobody forced the workers to work. Nobody forces us to accept and respond to God's higher love.
- Where are you today? Are you on top of your game – would you be one of the first vineyard workers hired? Or, would you be one of the workers hired later in the day – or even at the end of the day? For God, it does not matter – you are loved and valued wherever you are, whoever you are. We are going to close with the song called Higher Love. As the lyrics indicate, there is a higher love -- God's love that supports and empowers us even in the midst of life's unfairness. God brings us a higher love that we do not earn and in many cases don't deserve.
- Song: Higher Love
- Closing:
 - The parable of the vineyard workers does not teach us that God likes unfairness. We need to keep striving for fairness in the world recognizing that we are creatures with free will, we aren't perfect, and we will make mistakes that often lead to unfair results. It's ok, go ahead and scream it's not fair. God can take it. But take the next step, respond to God's higher love -- accept it and then extend it to those around you.