

Something Better Than Fair

Our text tonight begins Matthew 20:1 as we look at one of Jesus parables sometimes called the laborers in the vineyard. In a lot of ways, this is one of the most puzzling parables Jesus ever told. According to the story there was a landowner who went out early one morning to the market place to hire laborers. Typically, people would work from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. (v2) He hired a crew and bargained with them for their wages of the day. He agreed to pay and they agreed to work for a “penny a day.” Some versions use the word “denieri.” They went out into the field to work.

Later in the day about the 3rd hour in the morning (about 9:00 a.m.) the landowner went back to the marketplace and he hired more workers. (v4) He told these workers to go into the field and whatever is right I will pay you. He did the same thing about noon and again about 3:00 p.m. Finally he went back at the eleventh hour (about 5:00 p.m.) while there was only one hour left to work. He saw some fellows there who hadn't been hired that day and were standing around. (v6-7) He asked why they were standing around and they say because no man has hired us. He instructed them to go and to work in his vineyard too.

At the end of the day, he had his foreman to go and gather the workers together to pay them their wage. (v8) He instructed the foreman to begin with the last one hired and work your way down to the first. (v9) When those came that had been hired the eleventh hour, they were paid a penny. They were paid a full days wage and how delighted they must have been. Implication is that all the others worked were also paid a full day's wage. Now those who had worked all day long must have been excited at the generosity of the landowner and could hardly wait to receive their wage for a full day's effort. If those who worked only a few hours received a full day's pay, then surely we will get a bonus because we are entitled to more than they. (v10) But when they came to get their pay, they like all the others received only a penny. This upset them and they began to complain to the landowner. (v12) They argued that he had made the one hour worker equal to us a 12 hour worker. We have burdened the bulk of the work even in the heat of the day. This is not fair.

The landowner responded (*Mat 20:13*) ***But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny?*** He said we both agreed on a penny's wage. I have not cheated you out of anything and what I decided to pay these others is my prerogative and has nothing to do with our agreement. Their problem was that they were envious of his generosity.

Having said this, Jesus concluded the parable with this lesson. (*Mat 20:16*) ***So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.*** It helps us understand this parable to recognize that most people of that time worked day-by-day. Most did not have a permanent job as so many do today. Early in the morning they would go to the market place and hire out for the day. This would go on day after day. There are some places still like that today in the larger cities. People that go to these kinds of jobs understand that the work is temporary and not permanent. This is the setting for our story. Workers were hired thru out the day. For what reason we don't know but it got down to only one hour of the workday left and those that had been standing around doing nothing all day were hired. Since they had not been hired, they were probably the less dependable employees. Perhaps they were older and maybe weaker than the others.

To set the stage for this parable, Jesus had just illustrated that the rich man does not have an edge on going to heaven over the poor man. Jesus said *Matthew 19:23 Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. (24) And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.*

Like some today that think money can buy your way to heaven, this reply amazed the disciples so they said “Who can be saved? (*Matthew 19:25 When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?*) To this question, Jesus made an astounded statement. *Matthew 19:26 But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.* Man cannot save himself. A rich man does not have the advantage when it comes to salvation. This is not to say that a rich man cannot be saved, but all too often they put their trust in their riches instead of God. But what man cannot do; God can do. Jesus has made salvation available to any man who will believe and obey his teaches and who will take us his cross and follow him. He must humble himself and obey the gospel.

Well this apparently concerned Peter as he said to the Lord, *Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?* It’s almost as though Peter has lost sight of heaven; if he ever had it at this juncture of his discipleship. This is why it’s good for us to be reminded from time to time why we are living for Christ. Being a Christian will cost you something and if we don’t do a little self evaluation once in a while there is a danger of losing focus. This is one of the reasons the Lord’s Supper is taken – as a memorial.

Jesus concludes chapter 19 with the statement “*the last shall be first and the first last.*” The parable in chapter 20 demonstrates this teaching. The landowner hired men throughout the day and the last hired was paid first and the first hired was paid last; but they all received the same amount of pay.

We see jealousy (or envy) on the part of the first workers hired. They felt it unfair to have worked all day out in the heat while the ones just showed up for one hour received the same wage. I imagine when they saw the last hired receiving their pay they could hardly wait to get theirs. If a person worked only one hour and received a full days wage then we who worked all day long should surely get a substantial bonus. Then they were paid a penny as well. They began to complain. Their quarrel was not that they had been treated unfairly; they felt the landowner was wrong in putting the last one-hour worker on par with them. They were jealous, and we can sorta see their point can’t we. Wouldn’t you feel the same way?

But then we see things from the landowner’s perspective. We see fair Judgment. *Matthew 20:13 But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny?* Notice he begins by calling them “*friend.*” The context would lead us to believe that these workers were kinda hot under the collar so this landowner trying to diffuse the tension calls them friend. I picture a man in exercising self-control and composure. “*Friend*” is an enduring word. It carries the idea of companion of comrade. Then he tells them that he did them no wrong. He paid them the wage that that had both agreed upon. But they were not mad because they had been mistreated but instead were bothered because the landowner had elevated the one-hour worker to their level.

I once worked for a place where they did not want their employees to discuss their salary with one another. For some this was not a problem because they viewed that as a private personal matter; but to others they did not mind discussing it with others. But this company didn’t want that divulged because of moral issues. Some of the employees were being paid substantially less than others and they feared that if this came to light then there would be a serious problem. You hear about this in the news regarding women vs men doing the same job but women being paid less. But if you agree to work for such an amount and you are paid that amount, then it should not matter what others are paid.

But the point of the parable is that some will receive the reward of heaven who served the Lord faithfully for a lifetime while others may have been a Christen for only a short time. Both receive the same reward. Is this fair? Yes it is because we are aware of the promised reward from the get-go. Judgment will be fair; in fact it will be better than fair.

In our parable the workers received a wage. A wage is earned in exchange of labor. But salvation is granted by grace. What we deserve or have earned is death. Separation from God would be fair – deserving. *Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

When you work for sin, your wages are death. When we serve God we get no pay which may not seem fair– but He freely gives us the best benefit package imaginable. Salvation is something better than fair.