

Sermon for Year A Proper 20

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

It's just not fair!

It's not fair some seem to have everything, including money, lots of shiny cars and gadgets, popularity, beauty, talents, friends, and a full head of hair, while some people don't. It's not fair some people live full and healthy lives despite their best attempts to ruin themselves, while others look after themselves and their health, yet still end up with cancer, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and other insidious diseases.

It's not fair when the young die tragically, while older people who long to go to their eternal home hang around to watch their family and friends go before them. It's not fair when natural disasters like storms, floods and earthquakes strike at the innocent. It's not fair when evil people seem to profit from their crimes, while the innocent suffer at their hands or are criticised for doing the right thing.

It's not fair when society wants to redefine marriage in such a way it restricts a child's right to having mums *and* dads as parents. It's not fair innocent babies are aborted from life before they have a chance to bless their parent's lives. It's not fair when some are born with disabilities or genetic disorders.

Even in church it's not fair. Why don't people recognise or thank you for your hard work? Why do they seem to take your hard work for granted? Why do people seem to avoid you and don't want to listen to your pain? Why don't some of your loved ones have faith in Jesus like you do? And it's also not fair when Jesus says the last will be first and the first will be last!

It's just not fair!

Talking about what's not fair, Jesus uses an unfair picture to illustrate what the kingdom of heaven is like.

He says his kingdom is like a householder going out at 6am in the morning to find some workers to work in his vineyards. They agree to work for him for an average (if not above average) day's pay. This same householder also goes out at 9am, 12pm, 3pm, and even at 5pm to get more workers. Each time he agrees to pay them what's right, without specifying the amount.

Then at 6pm he tells his foreman to pay them their wages, starting with the ones who were hired last. Remarkably and very generously, he gave all of them all a full day's wage, no matter how long they worked.

Now for all those who didn't work a full day this wasn't fair, but the unfairness worked in their favour. They weren't going to complain because the owner has given them more than their fair share. They didn't deserve this payment, but the owner decided to be generous toward them. They could thank the landowner for his unfairness.

But seeing the owner's generosity, the first workers (who started at 6am) expected to receive more than the others, even though they had earlier agreed with the owner to work for exactly the same amount everyone else had just received. Therefore, when they received the same amount as the others, they grumbled about it, saying they worked much harder and longer in the burning sun than anyone else, so why should they receive the same? It's just not fair!

Then the owner reminded them he hasn't done them wrong. He gave them what they had agreed to. No injustice had been done. He just wanted to give everyone else the same amount, and isn't it his right to do what he wants with his own things? He then asked them if they're jealous because of his generosity. Or, literally, he asks them if their eyes are evil because his eyes are good?

And here Jesus puts his finger on our problem. We all have those monstrous green eyes of jealousy! Our eyes are what makes it unfair! We don't think it's fair because we're jealous—either for ourselves, or we could be jealous for someone else. But when we say things are unfair, the focus is shifted away from the generous giver to the *jealous* eyes of the individual.

You see, when we say it's unfair, it's no longer about God and his generosity, but it's all about you or me and the way we see things! We're jealous of God's generosity to others, so we end up judging God as unfair. But when we want to tell God what to do or tell God what's fair or not fair, we've just rejected God's generosity and set ourselves up as our own god who think we have the authority to judge the Creator of heaven and earth.

Not only this, but because every god must have their own religion, we end up making our own self-made religion based upon good works and rewards deserved.

It normally works this way: if you do good, then as a god, I think you should be rewarded, but if you do evil, then I, as a god, declare you should be punished.

Reward and punishment: isn't this the way we treat each other? Isn't this the way we expect to be treated, even by God? Isn't this why we're so jealous and discontent with what happens to us or those around us? After all, isn't this the basis of every other religion on earth? Well, apart from Christianity, that is!

As Christians, we're often challenged by the rules of God's kingdom because God doesn't work on deserving or what's fair. He doesn't work on your own self-imposed rules or religion of reward and punishment. God works by grace and not by demands.

The grace of God can be quite challenging because God doesn't work on a deserving basis. God works on a grace system, and grace ignores all the normal rules of reward and punishment. In Jesus' parable, the workers who didn't work the whole day didn't deserve the full day's wage, but that's the point! Grace is unfair, and always will be, because it's undeserving!

The ones who get upset with God's grace are often those who think God works (or should work) on a reward system. They're the ones who are usually proud of their own goodness (or at least their own perception of goodness). So it's the proud, who have striven so hard to be one of the firsts in God's sight, who get upset because they find God doesn't work on a reward system, but on a grace system. The grace system makes the first ones last and the last ones first. It's unfair! It's undeserving! But that's what grace is!

If God wants to bless someone else, what's it to you or me? God can bless whom he wants to bless! He can be gracious and generous with his own things. He can forgive even the worst of sinners because he's gracious and merciful. It's not up to you or me to say what he does with his own gifts. He doesn't have to answer to any of us. After all, he hasn't broken any promises to us!

He still loves you and me and has provided us with everything we need, like food and clothing, home and family, work and income, strengths, abilities, and senses. He's already forgiven us and given us the heavenly inheritance of his eternal kingdom. Even if we're struggling with a life of unfairness and sickness and difficulties here on earth, God still loves us! He still wants us to live with him forever. Our struggles in this life doesn't change any of God's promises to you or me.

Let's face it – God is unfair! It's just not fair he sent his own dearly loved Son into this cruel and heartless world to suffer at the hands of sinful, selfish, and jealous humans. It's not fair that in response to his wise teachings and miraculous healings they would criticise him, beat him, spit on him, and cruelly kill him on a cross set aside for the worst of criminals.

It's not fair Jesus rescued us when we were lost and sentenced to death. It's not fair he would shed his innocent blood to pay for sins. It's not fair he would receive the punishment we deserve. It's not fair he would forgive us for all our sins. It's not fair he would do any of this for jealous and arrogant people who often want to set themselves up as their own god.

It's not fair Jesus would accept us as God's own precious children even before we could ever deserve it. It's unfair we would receive all the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection, without earning this right. It's unfair we would receive eternal life as a free and undeserving gift. It's not fair that, no matter what time of the day we began life in his kingdom, the gift is still the same!

Even today, it's not fair Jesus would give us his holy body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. After all, we've sinned time and again, but he keeps accepting us at his banquet table. It's not fair, but God's grace is always unfair!

And then God asks us to be unfair to others by asking us to also forgive those who sin against us. They don't deserve it either. They'll probably hurt us again. It's unfair, but forgiveness is always unfair! Forgiveness is always a costly gift which can never be earned or deserved.

The unfairness of God lets criminals go free while the innocent One dies. No one here deserves Jesus' death, and no one here deserves Jesus' life, but 'deservings' go nothing to do with it! All of us equally receive the generous and undeserving gift of eternal life with Jesus in heaven! It's not fair, but thank God it's not fair!

Whenever you're tempted to grumble or complain about life not being fair, look to Jesus on the cross and see the greatest unfairness in the world. But on that same cross you'll also see the greatest and most generous justice and grace of God.

The grace of God is purposely unfair. On the cross the first One became one of the last ones in order that the last ones would become like the first One.

No, life and faith isn't about deserving. It's just not fair, but remember grace has never been fair – to the glory and praise of God!

And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen