

Matthew 20:1-16

The principle of fairness says, “you get what you deserve.” If you put in eight hours of hard work at the job, you deserve to be paid for eight hours. If you work for only four hours, you don’t deserve a full day’s pay—you deserve to be paid for a half day. We operate with this principle of fairness. If we didn’t our Free Market society would soon collapse. Would you want to work for a company that may, or may not pay you what you deserve?

And so we sympathize with the grumbling workers in Jesus’ parable. They were hired to work in the vineyard early in the morning. Around 9:00 other workers were hired. At noon still more workers were hired. More workers were hired at three in the afternoon, and more again at 5:00. At 6:00 it was quitting time. Although the workers who put in a full day had agreed to work for a denarius, the principle of fairness dictated that they should receive more—because the landowner gave a denarius to those who worked just one hour! But the full-day workers received the exact same pay.

There isn’t a person among us who wouldn’t have raised our eyebrows at this, and become at least a little upset. It simply wasn’t fair. Somebody was not getting what they deserved. If the full-day workers were paid a denarius, then the one-hour workers deserved less. If the one-hour workers were paid a denarius, then the full-day workers deserved more.

Now Jesus told this parable to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, and one thing the parable teaches us is: God is not fair. He does not operate with our principles of fairness. And that’s good. Because if He did, we would all perish. If God paid us what we deserve, we would get hell for our sins. If God was fair, Jesus would not have gotten the cross—we would have. But God, instead of being fair, is generous. He gives to us, not because we are deserving, but because He is merciful.

The one-hour workers would agree. They worked only one hour, but they were paid a full day’s salary. Did they deserve to be paid that much? No. The landowner was simply generous. The thief on the cross was a “one-hour worker”—a man who had no use for God his entire life...until he was dying. Only then did he repent. His entire life he had lived for himself—hurting others; stealing whatever he wanted from hard-working families. And yet, Jesus told him, “you shall be with Me in paradise.” That thief received the same reward that sacrificing Christians, who have spent their whole lives working hard for the Lord, receive.

In Jesus’ day there were prostitutes and criminals—the scum of society—who were turning to the Lord, and He was welcoming them into the Kingdom of Heaven...sinners who had lived filthy lives coming in at the eleventh hour, and receiving a full day’s pay—the reward of eternal life.

I am reminded, by this, of “Helen,” a woman in her 80s who had lived her life, not as a criminal, but as an agnostic. For more than 80 years she believed that “God,” whoever “He” was, could not be found. But then one day a neighbor shared with her the good news of Jesus Christ; that God was in Christ making peace with all sinners by His death on the cross. Helen was brought to faith in Jesus. She became a Christian. She was baptized, and just a few days later, she died. Now, what do you think...should Helen be barred from

heaven because for most of her life she did nothing for Christ? Or, should her joy in heaven be less than those who have been Christians for most of their life? Should the thief on the cross spend eternity in a corner somewhere in heaven?

Why would we begrudge someone for coming to faith in Christ so late in life? Jesus died for them, too. God wants all to be saved. He desires all to have the same joy in heaven forever. God has nothing less to give than what He gives to all who believe in Jesus Christ. You can't be a "partial" Christian and receive "partial" joy in heaven. It's all or nothing. Those who are in Christ get it all. Those who reject Christ get nothing.

And maybe you are one who is rejoicing in your heart over this, because you may have been brought to Christ at the eleventh hour. But you receive everything. If you had been brought to the waters of Holy Baptism as a tiny baby, and lived your entire life within the sanctuary of Christ's Church, you would still have no more joy in heaven than if you repented and turned to Christ in your dying hour.

So you see, no matter who you are, there is still hope for you. Jesus is calling you today, through His words to you. Repent and believe the good news. God forgives you in Jesus Christ. And through His parable He wants you to know that He is generous toward you. You do not deserve eternal life, but because God is generous, in Jesus Christ He gives you life in heaven forever.

Did that landowner need to hire those workers to work in his vineyard? No. He allowed them to work in his vineyard. You may be someone that God has brought into His vineyard, the Church, and you really haven't done much work for Him. You're more of a "sitter" than a "doer." But friend, God's gifts to you in Word and Sacrament, are the same to you as they are for the hardest worker in His Church. God forgives you just as much. He pardons all of your sins for Jesus' sake. He gives you the same body and blood of Christ at His Table that He gives to the church member who works ten times harder than you. He opens heaven's door just as wide to you.

You see, the only reason why any of us—and I mean any of us—are in His Church...His vineyard, is because He has allowed us to be here. He called us by His Gospel. He brought us in by the washing of Holy Baptism. And when our time here is done—when our last hour comes—He generously gives us the reward of heaven, not because we deserve it, but because God is generous.

There's something you should know about that vineyard. You see, the Landowner's Son died...and was raised to life again. And that's why the Landowner is so generous. For joy over His Son, He gives you what you do not deserve. He gives you a place in heaven.

And if you're a hard worker in the church—one who was brought into the vineyard early in the day, it's by the grace of God that you're here. And it's a privilege that you are able to work for Him who loved you and gave His Son to die for you. But when it's all over—when your time in the vineyard is up—God will give you heaven, not because you have earned it, but because Jesus earned it for you.

Each one of us may have been brought into God's vineyard at different times. But each and every one of us will receive the same reward—eternal life in heaven, not because we deserve it, but because we have, for Jesus' sake, a generous God. Amen.