

It's not fair. A sermon preached on June 10, 2018 at
St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC
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Lessons; EXODUS 16:2-15
PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30
MATTHEW 2:1-16

Are we there yet?
Can I go to so and so's house for a sleep over?
Can so and so stay for lunch/supper?
Why can't I?...everyone else is
There's nothing to do...I'm bored!

How about this one? **It isn't fair!!**
Do you remember the first time you heard it?
Do you remember the first time you said?
Do you remember the last time, the last situation
which brought forth that declaration?

It's not fair!

The parable of the Workers in the vineyard that
Hilary read moments ago,
Can in no way be described by this world's
standards as a fair to the workers story.
It's an incident that would cause labour unions to
go ballistic
It's an incident that would trigger an investigation
for maleficence, and unfair labour practices

If the vineyard was part of a large venter co-operative or corporation, the owner of the vineyard would probably face disciplinary action – even termination of his job

It isn't fair!!!

Picture being paid exact amount for a full day's work is paid to the person who worked only an hour!

What game is this bozo playing?

Does he think we are thick, slow or stupid?

And to tell us in a summarily blunt way – can't I do what I want with what I own in the first place.

Boss needs a bit of a tune up – I know a person who knows a person who knows a person who can do this.

What makes the parable particularly shocking is the introduction **the kingdom of God is like...**

How can we line up such gross unfairness and unjustified rancor with God?

How indeed?

Let's look at the parable with that ever controlling question – what does this parable say to us today?

First, *consider where this parable fits in Matthew's account.*

It is not anchored in midair.

Matthew 19:20ff tells the story of the man who is only known as the rich young ruler.

He comes to Jesus.

He wants to be Jesus' disciple.

In essence, Jesus says – you will have to sell what you have and give to the poor and then come and follow me.

The Bible says that the young man went away grieving.

He simply could not do what Jesus asked.

His sense of worth, self, trust, purpose was exclusively tied to his material possessions!

Jesus continues with that familiar bit of hyperbole – the camel passing through the eye of the needle – easier for that to happen than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

NOT a blanket condemnation of the wealthy – rather a warning to those possessed by their possessions, their stuff, how much they have

With God all things are possible.

The phrase blows the disciples' minds

If it does not blow our minds, make us say 'wow' I mean 'wow' we have let the voices of the world become the default position in our attitudes and mindset.

Then Simon Peter – it's always Simon Peter – poses the question that is probably in the minds of most, if not all the disciples---so, we've given up everything to follow you Jesus. We're going to get a lot? Right?

Jesus reply

'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold,^[a] and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. (Matthew 19:28-30)

A hundredfold! I wonder if Peter was thinking only in terms of worldly goods –glory and honour, becoming a very important person, a person others clamour to meet, even touch.

A person who travels first class served by minions.

I wonder how many of us still buy into or long for this prosperity gospel to be true in terms of material and worldly rewards.

The preacher in the southern states who says to his flock – I need a new \$54Million dollar jet, so I am not exposed in a metal cylinder to evil people and influences – he certainly believes it

I wonder how may say yes to Jesus because then you get lots of perks and discounts owing to our faith and trust in the living Lord.

To Peter,

To us,

Jesus reminds us – there WILL be rewards alright and they will be beyond our imagination, but they will not be given out the way we think they are going to be given out.

Then comes the parable.

It is definitely not a story about fair and equitable business practices.

It's not fair is it! The person who works the whole day gets only the same wage as the person who worked an hour or less.

Verse 11 – **they grumbled against the landowner** is classic Biblical understatement

It's some unfair!!!

We understand the why of the grumbling don't we?

As we hear the parable now, how many of us can readily put ourselves in the day long workers?

Maybe not in a farming or vineyard setting

But we know that feeling and all the physiological and psychological emotions that bubble up in situations where we have been treated unfairly.

The job, the position, the work, the promotion that by all normal and logical signs out to have been ours,

But is given to someone else.

The person who is so laid back they are on the ground,

But comes through at the last moment and scores a mark or grade as good as or better than ours – and

we have really sweated bricks to do the project or complete the paper.

If you think your reaction would not have been one of utter indignation if you found out that those who worked only an hour,
Were paid the same amount as you who had worked for 12,
Then you are kidding yourself!

Whatever else the employer was –
Legalistic, generous, he was also simply unfair to those who had worked the hardest.

How we dislike it when the breaks go the other way.

Failure of others – tolerable.

Good fortune – particularly if it is better than ours, is hard to take

And undeserving good luck experienced by another is perhaps hardest of all – especially in matters as important as money!!!!

That is what the parable reveals.

I wonder, what kind of people are we that the good fortune of others sends us into fits of indignity

I wonder why it is kindness to others is so resented at times.

I wonder why do we more times than we might care to ever admit to others, let alone ourselves how often we begrudge generosity to others.

I wonder are our lives so centred on our own self-interest that the success of others causes us only resentment.

That is one thing the parable tells us about ourselves if we permit it to do so.

I remember some years ago sitting with a colleague at an induction service for a new minister in a congregation.

The preacher preached on one of these probing parables of Jesus – if I remember it was sower in the field and the various soils.

During the taking up of the offering, my colleague leaned over to me and said, good message eh? Yes, most surprising, given the vessel!

Herb, you are already thinking how and to whom YOU could preach this parable back at X Yep...I am...

Herb...a word of caution and counsel.

Before you preach this to THEM – focus the light of the gospel and the grace of God on them

Focus that same light on yourself

Let the parable shine in the dark corners of your life

Let yourself be exposed to the often searing, but always cleansing light of the grace of God.

Not what I wanted to hear, for me
Already had a sermon outline in my head.

But that counsel that evening remains one of the wisest pieces of counsel in leading worship that I ever received

And it's actually quite Biblical if you remember...
Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount

³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's^[a] eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbour,^[b] "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's^[c] eye. (Matt. 7:3-5)

I suggest that the parable of the workers in the vineyard is not only about the reactions it causes in our lives — *how we handle personal unfairness*.
It is also about God's actions in a world that is regrettably unfair a good deal of the time.

For remember,

The parables are stories of the world as it is,
Not as it ought to be.

In this very unfair world then, what reminders need to be highlighted about the actions and the behavior of the landowner of the vineyard? For I believe, though it is not specifically stated that the *landowner in this case is God*.

A word again of context – farm workers at the time of Jesus were downtrodden.

For the most part,

They were landless peasants with no organization to protect them.

Without property, they were dependent upon someone else to offer them work...which is another way of saying – to provide them a chance to feed their family!

When Jesus shaped the prayer petition – **give us this day our daily bread** – he understood the cruel reality that for many, no daily work meant no daily bread.

Further, in Jesus' day, it would be common for people to line up every day at some gathering place in the hope that someone would hire them for daily work.

Obviously the young and strong would have the advantage of being chosen first

Others hoped that someone would need them – and waited in that hope

No work=no money

No money=no daily bread to feed the family

Always there was the reality of supply and demand...the people needing work invariably exceeded the jobs landowners could provide!

Enter the landowner of the parable.

- ✓ He is one who is serious about caring for his vineyard
- ✓ He goes out early to hire workers
- ✓ He pays them the usual daily wage – they agree to this as does the landowner before the work begins
- ✓ More help is needed – again the landowner goes out and hires more people **I will pay you whatever is right (vs.4)**
- ✓ Three more times – noon, 3 and 5 – more are hired. More are included. None is left without work and payment.
- ✓ When it is time to settle accounts, everyone gets what was promised and agreed to. There are no hidden deductions or claw backs. It is enough to feed a family for a day – resonances of this morning's Old Testament lesson from Exodus and God's daily provision in the wilderness.

Resonances of Jesus' teaching about birds of the air, lilies of the field and being anxious (Matthew 6:25-33)

One of the most insidious attitudes and mindsets today is that of entitlement.

That somehow owing to our worldly power, good works, position, educational level, skin color, race, background – we are ENTITLED to more than others.

It is one reason this parable continues to be troubling.

For it is a reminder that *it is God at the centre – NOT US!*

God will provide for our daily needs and actually a considerable number of our wants.

But He does this, not because we are entitled to these things – rather because he loves us.

Difficult to believe,

To see, to accept? Yes, it is

But believe, see and accept it we must in our priorities, mindset, attitudes, and perception.

It is one of the only ways we are going to make it without bitterness, cynicism and a critical spirit in this unfair world in which we live.