

Text: [Matthew 20:1-16](#)
Date: August 25, 2019
Title: “The Parables of Jesus: Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard”
Theme: Of course it’s not FAIR, otherwise GRACE could not be GRACE.

Intro

These past few weeks, we’ve been exploring the parables of Jesus
And our goal has been not to teach them in some sort of didactic way,
where we recount the story and explain what it means
But to try and reclaim them as shocking and surprising
As #truthbombs

Today, our story is “The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard”
Which one commentator re-named “The Parable of the Eccentric
Employer”
If you’re not familiar with this story, you’ll see in a few minutes why that’s
probably a more fitting name

Question

What do you think are the most important Christian values?

1

I want to begin with a video that I think you’ll find relevant to today’s parable
<Video: [Two Monkeys Were Paid Unequally: Excerpt from Frans de Waal’s
TED Talk](#)>

2

The video proves something to me
I’m SUPPOSED to hate this parable – this is how God made us!

If even MONKEYS react badly to unequal pay, then certainly those in the
story, who worked a whole day in the vineyard, are ENTITLED to be
angry
We are HARD-WIRED to react this way when we perceive unfairness

We are created to WANT to confront people who cut the line
It's natural to react badly when a promised discount turns out to be a bait-and-switch

So we certainly don't like it when Jesus tells this story and says, "the kingdom of heaven is like..."

We would expect the Creator, who apparently gave even monkeys the ability to differentiate fairness from unfairness – to be better than this!

If this happened to us – that is, if we were in that first group hired – I guarantee we would have messaged a friend and/or put something on Facebook about it

(But, you know, probably in a backhanded, passive-aggressive way that would cause your friends to ask repeatedly, "Oh no. What happened?")

Don't you love it when people do that?

3

I would like to make another observation, though:

If we had been among the people in that last group hired – wouldn't we still be telling THAT story?

About how great it was that we worked only an hour and got paid for a full day – because of our 'Eccentric Employer'?

I mean, all of us love a story about getting away with something (so long as it's innocent, of course!), maybe getting a discount we didn't expect, an unexpected stroke of good luck, those kinds of things

"You'll never believe what happened to me!" - Isn't that how these kinds of stories start?

I swear this really happened:

I knew a guy who went into a car dealership and one of the salespeople became convinced he had seen this guy on America's Most Wanted

Before long, local, state and federal law enforcement descended

It was a horrible and humiliating experience, no doubt

But he LOVED the punchline of the story:

The dealership ended up giving him a free car!

4

The punchline of THIS story –

At least as Matthew has situated it – because so much of how we interpret Jesus' parables depends on how the gospel writers place them in Jesus' ministry, and our interpretations are heavily colored by the events going on around their telling –

The punchline of this story is “the last will be first, and the first will be last”

That's a theme in Matthew 19 & the rest of chapter 20

What you see is that Jesus is in arguments FIRST with the PHARISEES – who always thought they were first in God's eyes

The Pharisees probably would have recognized this story right away as being directed at them – because the image of the vineyard was an old biblical image for the people of Israel (cf. Isaiah 5:1-7)

But keep reading and you come to realize it was ALSO aimed at Jesus' DISCIPLES – who repeatedly argued over who was the greatest and who Jesus liked best

“The last will be first, and the first will be last” may sum up the story, but it doesn't make the message easier to swallow

We want a kingdom that's fair – and fair to us means you EARN what you GET

If we showed up at the crack of dawn to secure our spot in line – you know, trying to live right, going to church, saying our prayers – we sure don't want to be told they're going to take people starting from the back!

And it sure is uncomfortable to think that when we speak up to point out how unfair this is, we're told to “get out!”

Now, that said, we don't mind if OCCASIONALLY the last go first

So long as WE'RE the last – I mean, so long as we're the monkey getting the grape and not the cucumber, right?

Still, this story leaves us with a very uncomfortable feeling, that

SOMEWHERE out there SOMEONE is getting something they don't deserve

5

Now I feel compelled to point out a detail about the story
One that certainly would not have escaped the notice of Jesus' listeners

Wealthy landowners in ancient Israel weren't typically involved in the day-to-day operations of their properties

They would either have a trusted slave or a hired manager to run their vineyards, farms, etc.

And indeed such characters often show up in Jesus' parables

But you'll notice something about this story – the manager doesn't show up until the end of the story – until it's time to make the payments

It's the VINEYARD OWNER himself who goes out and does the hiring
First thing in the morning, and then again at 9, noon, 3 and 5

6

We should ask ourselves why that is, and what it means
Because I'm starting to hear something - Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick....

Doesn't it seem like really poor planning to keep going back to town for more help?

Is this guy really that clueless? Is this his first harvest season?

Or is something else going on here?

If you go back to the corner where all the day-laborers hang out at 9, who are you going to find?

You may find some folks who wanted to work, but no one wanted to hire – maybe they're not the sharpest, or the hardest-working

If you go out at noon, you have the guys who maybe were out the night before and needed a little time to sleep one off – but who had promised their wives they would go looking for work

But the people who are hanging around at 3 or at 5 – now THESE are people who are desperate – they're hoping against hope that someone might want to hire them, even though no one did yesterday or the day before – maybe they're not from around here – maybe they're disabled But they keep hanging out, hoping maybe someone will come by – even though the likelihood of it is so small as to be ridiculous – who goes out to hire anyone at 5:00?

They do it, though, because they don't know what else to do
The vineyard owner doesn't send his manager to go hire these guys
Do you know why? Because the manager WON'T.
He won't spend his master's money on "charity cases!"
He can't pay grapes to someone who's only worth cucumbers!

6

But the owner – the owner doesn't have the same values as the manager
Doesn't see the world the way the rest of us see it

This is a parable of the kin-dom
A kin-dom where the prime value isn't fairness – it's compassion
This is what the world doesn't understand

This isn't a story about people getting what they deserve – thank God!
In fact, it's just the opposite –
Where we expected condemnation, we found grace!

It's not about what's fair
It's not about what we've earned
Otherwise, grace couldn't be grace!

These are the vineyard owner's values
These are Jesus' values
His question then – as now – is whether his followers will make them our values, too!

Amen.

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