

Parables of Jesus Week 2: Is God Fair? Matthew 20:1-16 **David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (July 11, 2021)**

Good morning Pathway! It's great to be with you this morning. How are you all doing today?

Let me start with a story. You've been struggling to find a job. Eventually, you are hired at Amazon, starting in their distribution center in Newark sorting packages. After a few months, you are promoted and overseeing a few people and are given a raise to \$45,000 a year. It's not a great salary for this area, but it is enough for you to live on, barely. It is the end of the year, and there's a huge Christmas rush. For the Newark warehouse, 40 more people need to be hired just to work the last two weeks of December, on a short-term contract. December 31 is their last day. You're given your paycheck on your last day, but as you open it, you see the name listed and realize you've been given the wrong check by mistake. You recognize that name, and it is for one of the short-term workers who started two weeks ago. You're about to close it up again to return it to get your check, but you notice the amount. It is for 45,000, for one pay period of two weeks of work.

You are shocked, and as you think about it, you become angry. You decide to talk to your supervisor, and you tell her exactly what you think. I've been working here for the last year, and I've put in overtime regularly, I've given my best, and I've done a good job. My team has performed well. How are you paying these people the same amount as me for an entire year? That isn't fair at all. With all this money that you are paying them, you could have given me a raise or at least an end-of-year bonus. I'm going to file a lawsuit for wage discrimination. Your supervisor looks at you and gives you your final paycheck for the year. It is for the correct amount, nothing extra. She asks if you have been paid the full 45,000 that was promised when you were promoted. You have to admit that you have been. She says that you have no basis for a complaint, because you have been given what was agreed, and simply because we have been generous to our short-term workers is no reason for your complaint or lawsuit. You walk out feeling unheard and aggravated and decide to start looking for a new job, one where your efforts will be properly appreciated.

Have you ever had an experience like this? Maybe not the exact same scenario where someone got paid the same amount for less time. It could have been finding out that someone less qualified, in a lower job tier was earning the same as you. This story was certainly not the worst experience we could have, but I imagine that most of us would be annoyed or upset if this happened to us. Speaking of the worst experience, take a moment and share with your neighbor the worst job you've ever had. Does anyone want to share with us what it was?

The worst job I ever had was similar a little bit to this story, and it was at a Christian ornament store in the mall. This was in Maryland while I was raising support to return to Kenya, and after a few months of support raising, I figured I could also work even while I met with people and shared at churches and youth groups. I had plenty of time on my hands. But I had a lot of trouble getting a job. I couldn't commit to anything at all long term, since I was hoping to leave the country at any time, as soon as I got enough funding. But I did finally get connected to a short-term job, just a few weeks, at this store. It only operated in December. I was the cashier and had to help customers find their Christmas stuff and

make sure everything was set up properly. For whatever reason, I did not get along well at all with my boss, and I found her very difficult to work with. Usually, I can pick up stuff fairly quickly, but I had a lot of trouble finding the right ornaments in the store, and figuring out how to ring up the different things and wrap them properly, and I didn't always do a great job. It didn't end very well, and she let me go a week earlier than she had promised because her niece came back for Christmas early, and she gave my position to her. There was nothing ever in writing, and she paid me in cash, which was a little shady, and then at the end, she didn't pay me for all my hours. I called her to say that there was a mistake in adding up my hours, or at least have her give me a record of how she calculated it to compare it with the hours I had kept, and she was like are you accusing me of lying, she started screaming at me, and got so angry she couldn't speak and hung up. I tried one more time and went in person to the store to ask for her to pay me what she owed me, and she refused to listen to a word I was saying and said she was going to call security to escort me out. I debated having her do it, and then I was going to ask the guard, hey do you get paid for the hours you work? Yeah, I think I should be too, and hope he would take my side and at least ask what had happened, but I decided not to try that and I just left. If nothing else, I learned that the Christmas ornament industry was not for me.

If you're familiar with the parables, perhaps you've guessed already which one I adapted earlier for our context. It is about the unfair treatment of workers, at least their perceived unfair treatment. I'm going to read Matthew 20, from verses 1 to 16.

20 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³ "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

⁷ "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

⁸ "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

⁹ "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² "These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

¹³ “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

¹⁶ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Unlike the parable of the Samaritan, this parable doesn’t need a lot of adaptation for us to understand it today. Our situation hasn’t changed much. I would imagine that all of us have been in a job where we see others being treated better than we are. We see people who have just joined or are much younger than us who are promoted above us or paid the same which does not seem fair, and perhaps is not fair.

For the last few years BG and I lived in Nairobi we lived in a neighborhood called Jamuhuri, and it was right outside of the large Kibera slum. Right by our house, there was a little area off the sidewalk where I would see a group of men sitting, almost every day. I realized that it was a labor base, and there were available to be hired for any day work like construction. Most days they would sit there all day, and I’d walk by in the late afternoon and see them there and I really felt for them, and I tried to imagine how I’d survive on such a sporadic income. But some days they would be projects and they would be hired, and they would be probably be paid at the end of the day just like in this parable. For people in this situation, shelter in place and other covid restrictions are absolutely devastating, and especially in the absence of other financial support means that they lose all their source of income.

By using the example of people being paid disproportionately, which in this case is the same amount for very different amounts of work, Jesus is hitting at our fundamental tendency to compare, and be envious of others when they receive favor we believe belongs only to us.

- **How do you respond to unfairness?**

God does care for the situation of workers, and one of the rules in the Hebrew law was that you must pay a day laborer at the end of every day. Some have used this parable to argue for a living wage for all workers, and while I do believe we should pay a living wage I don’t believe that is the main point of this parable. Sometimes people interpret this parable to highlight God’s incredible generosity, but paying someone a denarius for one day of work was average, not generous. It was about \$3.50 for a day of work. Even then, this was a subsistence wage, like living on minimum wage here. It is possible, but very difficult, and your quality of life will be low.

Somewhere like Nairobi, paying a denarius would be paying people a dollar a day, which is about what the workers by our house would be paid for a day of work. When I first moved to Kenya, I was shocked by how much people were paid. Right before I moved, I was working in my college IT department, and I was making 10 dollars an hour. I got the same job at my school in Nairobi, and I was making \$1 an hour, a 90% decrease. And that was still way higher than the many people paid a dollar a day. I saw a chart that illustrated this, and it showed how long the average worker would need to work to buy a hamburger. Chicago was the best of all the major cities compared, about 20 minutes. Nairobi was the worst in the world, at almost 4 hours. And it was true – the cost of a hamburger was about \$3.50 in

both places. Making \$10 an hour, you get three burgers an hour. But in Nairobi that would take three and a half hours to get one. That is not fair is it, for doing the same work. Here's the main message of this parable for us:

- **Don't envy God's grace for other people.**

Let's look again at the last part of the parable:

¹³ "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Literally, what the vineyard owner said in verse 15 was "Is your eye evil because I am good?" An "evil eye" in texts below is an expression of envy or stinginess (Snodgrass, Klyne R.. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Eerdmans, 2018. Kindle edition, 363), which is why it is translated in the NIV as "are you envious because I am generous?" "Prov 28:22 links an evil eye with greed and Prov 22:9 says that the person with a good eye gives his bread to the poor" (*Stories with Intent*, 363). Generosity is the antidote to envy. **God's generosity should never incite our bitterness.**

We are not told the exact audience for this parable, but it is most likely the disciples, and they clearly needed to hear this message. Right before this story in Matthew 19, Jesus is approached by the rich young ruler, who asks what good thing he must do to inherit eternal life. They review the commandments, and Jesus says that to be perfect he needs to sell his possessions, give them to the poor so that he will have treasure in heaven, and then come to follow him. Peter listens to this, and then is quick to point out that they have actually done that – he says in Matthew 19:27, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

That's usually our question, isn't it – what is in for me? So, Jesus, I've given my life to serve you, I've given up alternative careers, lived overseas for the sake of your mission, what do I get for all this? On the one hand, God does promise an eternal reward for our sacrifice and ministry here on earth. This is how Jesus answered Peter:

²⁸ Jesus said to them, Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, 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 wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Klyne Snodgrass wrote a great book about the parables called *Stories with Intent*, and this is how he summarizes this parable: "The parable instructs us that God's treatment of people, his judgment, is not based on human reckoning and human standards of justice." God saves by grace, not by our worthiness. We believe in equal pay for equal work, right? That's a core principle, especially when fighting for equality for different racial groups and for overcoming the gender pay gap. I believe that

this principle is valid and important, but the message of this parable is that is not how God operates. He does not calculate rewards on our scale. We are told we will get one hundred times as much as we give up, which is a lot – but that doesn't tell us what someone else will get, even if they come to faith later than we do, or don't serve the same way, or don't put in quite the same hours that we do.

There's a big similarity between this parable and the parable of the two sons or the prodigal son – both of them are about the response of religious people to others receiving God's mercy. If we are like the older son, who has been faithful, coming to church when others were out partying on Sunday morning, or being faithful in others, how do we respond when we see God extending favor to those who do not deserve it?

Reflection Questions

- When have you felt like God was unfair to you or someone else?
- Who are you most likely to envy?
- How can you extend them grace instead?

We know that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God loves all people and desires everyone to come to salvation. Let's not stand in the way of that. Let's celebrate all those who experience the goodness of God, even and especially when it does not seem fair.