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Title: Not Fair!

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Scripture: [Matthew 20:1-16](#)

Text: [Matthew 19:23-30](#)

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I warn you. You will not like today's story. Nobody likes this story because when it comes to parables, this one doesn't sound fair. The old hymn we sing is "Fairest Lord Jesus." If you know how the hymn goes, you know that he is the fairest of the fair. Jesus is fairer. Jesus is purer.

I remember singing it as a child in Sunday school and thinking, "That's who I need." Let's face it. Growing up, you see all sorts of things which cause you to quickly adopt the opinion that life isn't fair. Someone undeserving gets recognized in school. That's not fair. Your neighbor is allowed to do the very thing you are told you cannot do. That's not fair. Everyone always gets a bigger piece of cake. That's not fair. Researchers have found that children as young as 19 months seem to understand the concept of fairness and appear surprised by scenes of blatant favoritism. "That's not fair" finds its way into our lexicon early.¹ Then comes along a song about Jesus. Jesus is fair; every child can relate. But of course, the hymn isn't about being fair but looking fair, being more beautiful than all nature, more lovely than sunshine or moonlight, fairer than the twinkling starry hosts. I didn't realize this. I just wanted him to be fair. Then, Jesus tells a story that's "not fair."

You may or may not know the story. It never makes it on top of the best parables of Jesus list. It is one which I readily admit that I want to forget.

Like last week, it's an explanation story. It comes on the heels of another passage that we would just as soon forget. A rich young man approaches Jesus with an earnest question. "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16) Jesus answers. Keep the commandments and then he gives a few examples. Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness. Love your neighbor as yourself. The young man says, "I've done all these things since my

youth. What do I lack?" Jesus said, "If you want to be perfect, sell all your possessions and give them to the poor. Then follow me."

The young man went away grieving because he had many possessions. This prompted Jesus to offer a saying that we hate. "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven....it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:23) Ever since Jesus said it, pastors like me have tried to make it go down a little easier for those of us who have accumulated resources. Why? Because it seems unfair to have to give up everything that God has blessed you with.

We aren't the only ones who experienced this. The disciples protest, almost saying, "that's not fair." Astounded they ask, "Then who can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.' Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.'" (Matthew 19:25-27) That's even closer to "Not fair!" But Jesus doesn't make it any easier saying, "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (Matthew 19:30). Now from the viewpoint of the disciples, that surely feels unfair. They were first to follow Jesus and they will have to go to the end of the line? Before they could stamp their feet in protest and shout, "That's not fair!" Jesus starts with the story with those seven familiar words. "For the kingdom of heaven is like..."(Matthew 20:1a)

What's it like? It's like "a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." (Matthew 20:1b) He drives his truck down to the market in town where all of the day laborers gather. Every community has a place and many gather there when it is harvest season. He talks to a group of men and agrees on the usual daily wages. In Jesus' time, it would have been one denarius, the amount needed for a worker to feed and house a family of four. It was the minimum wage. Let's make it \$100.00 which is a little bit more than our Indiana minimum wage of \$7.25 for the 12-hour day the usual workday in Jesus' time. We don't know how many pickers the owner hired but he threw them in the back of his truck and off they go, down the highway and up the dirt road to Heaven's Gate winery. They knew the routine and began to work quickly harvesting the ripe grapes. ²

By nine o'clock, the owner sees that there is no way possible for the group which he hired at 6:00 a.m. to complete the work. So back into town he goes and he finds a second group of men standing around, doing nothing. "Are you looking for work?" he asks. And they say "yes." So he says, "Jump in the truck, work the rest of the day in my vineyard, and "I will pay you whatever is right. So they went." (Matthew 20:5) Again, he drives down the

highway, up the dirt road, to Heaven's Gate winery and the newly hired begin to pick right alongside the first crew.

But it was a big harvest, maybe bigger or better than he'd ever had so every three hours, he realizes he needs more help so "...he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same" (Matthew 20:5) promising to pay whatever is right. Then one last time, as the day was coming to a close, he goes back down the hill, into town and finds a few men left in the market. They'd been there all day because he recognizes them and asks "Why have you been standing around here doing nothing all day long?" Because nobody will hire us. Why wouldn't anyone hire them? Did they look suspicious or dirty or unreliable? Maybe they were too old? Maybe they were crippled or sickly or seedy. But it didn't matter to the vineyard owner. He says, "Jump in. I'll take you out." And he does. They go to work the final hour of the harvest of grapes at the Heaven's Gate winery. This story could take place anywhere, at any time, in the history of vineyards. It is in fact, taking place in many places, right now.

But when the day comes to a close, things are a little different. The harvest, at least for the day, is complete. Now is the time for the owner, who has hired not one but five different shifts of workers, to give them what they deserve. But an amazing thing happens unlike no other vineyard in the country. "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'" (Matthew 20:8) If the manager thought it was odd, he didn't say anything about it. And it was odd because it will surely create an appearance problem, reversing the order. But this seems to be the point.

So they come, this group who were the last hired, expecting seven or eight dollars for an hour's work, a pathetic lot who weren't worth hiring, limping up to the paymaster, hands outstretched. To their surprise, they are given an envelope and when they look inside it, they pull out a crisp \$100.00 bill. They got a denarius, a full day's wage.

No sooner than this is revealed, then word travels down the line and all those other laborers who had worked three hours and six hours and nine-hour shifts and the all-day laborers do what you and I would do. They start doing the math and spending their money. Three hours should get three one hundred dollar bills, six hours six hundred dollars, nine hours is nine hundred dollars and the guys who were worn out from twelve hours of sweat and tears are thinking they should call the wife and get her to make to book dinner at the best restaurant in Tiberius. They hit the motherlode. Only that's not the way it went down. When the guys who showed up three hours

earlier get to the head of the line, they get the same envelope with just one crisp 100-dollar bills. Every worker, no matter the number of hours they work, receives just one denarius, one crisp 100-dollar bill, no more, no less.

None seem to complain until the ones who worked all day. The others may have felt it but they said it. "That's not fair! These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." You can feel their pain, can't you? I would feel exactly as they feel. It's not fair!

But the owner of Heaven's Gate vineyard said "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20: 13b-15)

All of a sudden, we know that this isn't a normal vineyard. The vineyard is in the middle of the kingdom and the Lord himself is the one handing out the envelopes. This is Heaven's Gate vineyard. We realize the story connects with the story about a rich young man who wanted to know what he must do to inherit eternal life and the disciples protesting with the question, "Who then can be saved?" All of those questions are about how things will be in the end. Jesus is saying it won't be what you expect. The rich won't be the first in the door and the poor won't be the last. The hardest workers won't be in the front of the line and the one who barely shows up won't be at the end. It won't be what we expect because God doesn't play by our rules. Ours is the rules of fairness and God's is the rule of grace.

In the parable of the vineyard, the owner doesn't pay them what they deserved; he pays them what they need. Think about this. The ones that worked only an hour needed a denarius as much as the other workers. They may be even needed it more if, because of their appearance, they had trouble getting work. Remember, they were unwanted. No one wanted to hire them.

But, it isn't fair. Of course, it isn't. It's not fair. If we have labored faithfully in the vineyard, then we should get what we deserve. But let me ask you this. Would any of us want what we deserve? Is there any righteous man among us that believes God owes him heaven? Is there any wealthy woman that believes she can buy her way in? No, when it comes to heaven we have to hold out our hand like beggars because if God was fair, we'd get what we deserved and we truly don't deserve much.

God is not fair and thank the Lord, God is not fair. God's ways are not our ways. God loves us all indiscriminately.³ Up and down the line, from the very last to the very first and everyone in between. God shows that love to each of us by not giving you what you deserve. Rather God gives you what you need and what you and I need his grace. That grace is offered generously to you on a cross, by the one we call fair, the beautiful and fairest Lord Jesus.

¹ Cook, Gareth. The Moral Lives of Babies. November 12, 2013. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-moral-life-of-babies/>.

² Somerville, Jim. "Is there no Justice?" Sept 24, 2017. Retrieved at AsermonforeverySunday.org. The narrative is largely reworked from this sermon.

³ Taylor, Barbara Brown. The Seeds of Heaven. WJK, 2004. P. 106.