

Now Serving Justice with Grace
Jonah 3:10-4:11
Matthew 20:1-16

The football game was grueling, and tempers were flaring. The referee called a penalty and marked off fifteen yards against the home team. One of the home team players was infuriated. He ran to the referee and screamed, “You stink!”

The referee picked up the football and marked off another fifteen-yard penalty. He then turned to the irate player who was still fifteen yards behind him and yelled to him, “How is my aroma from here?”

This parable in Matthew opens the door for some interesting reactions. If we are to look at it from a perspective of every day fair labor practices, it would make us angry. After all, who would not be upset if the person who only worked an hour at the end of the day got paid the same as the person who worked all day in the heat of the sun? Fortunately this parable is not about every day fair labor practices. This parable is an allegory—a story representing something else. In this case, the story represents the Kingdom of God. The landowner represents God, the hired laborers represent us, the work represents our work as Christians for the glory of God, and the payment represents salvation.

But let’s go back to the beginning and highlight a few things. The story begins in a way that would have been common place for persons in that day. It was typical for landowners to go into town and hire day laborers in exchange for pay. It was also common for landowners to pay a denarius as a daily wage. Research has demonstrated that a denarius was about the same pay as minimum wage today. A person earning a denarius a day would have just enough to feed oneself, but not likely a whole family. It was also common for the landowner to find whatever workers he needed early in the morning and have them work all day.

This makes the beginning of the story seem normal and fair. The landowner went early in the morning to find day laborers. When he found the ones he wanted he negotiated with them a fair days wage and they went with him back to the farm and worked hard for their pay.

It is after this point that the story becomes different than a normal experience. It was not common for a landowner to go back and hire more day laborers for the job. Landowners should know by morning how many to hire, so hiring more was a strange thing to do. Back in the marketplace about 9:00 a.m., the landowner sees more persons waiting for work. He hires them to work and says that he will pay them whatever is right.

He does the same thing several times throughout the day... at noon and at 3:00 p.m. he adds workers and offers them whatever is right for their labor. The last hire is perhaps the most mind boggling. He actually went out at 5:00 p.m. and saw more laborers standing around waiting to be hired. He asked them why they were standing there idle all day. They responded, “Because no one has hired us.” To these he also said, “You also go into the vineyard.” How strange would this be! Hiring more workers when the day was almost through?

At this point the day is almost over. The laborers who had worked all day and even those who worked most of the day were expecting fair labor practices. This means that they expected, not surprisingly, that they would receive more money for working more hours. Those that worked the least should get the least amount of pay. This is, after all, the only truly fair way to pay persons for their labor. Would we expect anything different in our day? Of course not.

So when the time came for the laborers to get paid, the landowner did something they never expected. The landowner worked with the manager and began to pay the shortest working laborers first. He gave each one of them the usual daily wage. This means that they each received a denarius. One by one the laborers came forward and each one received a denarius. The 3:00 p.m. workers, the noon workers, and the 9:00 a.m. workers—all received the same pay.

The time came for the all day workers to receive their pay. Even though they had been promised a denarius each—which was a fair wage for a full days labor, they expected that they would receive more simply because those who had worked less had received that amount. So when they only got paid a denarius each, they began to grumble and complain against the landowner: “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.”

Now looking at the response that the landowner gave, we find that it does make us stop and wonder. He replies, “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?” Although it doesn’t seem fair, the landowner did not short change anyone. He gave what he promised and used his money the way he wanted.

So too is God’s love for us. Do we all deserve God’s forgiveness equally? Does the Christian who devotes his entire life to the work of God deserve more than the person who believes in Jesus on his deathbed? God’s grace is not about what we deserve. God’s grace is about what God chooses to give to us. Yes, God is a just God. But God’s justice is also filled with grace. So whether we come to God as a child, as a teenager, as a young adult, as a middle aged adult, or as a senior, the grace of God is extended to us the same. It’s not about fairness, its about God’s love and grace.

Steve Winger from Lubbock, Texas, writes about his last college test—a final in a logic class known for its difficult exams:

To help us on our test, the professor told us we could bring as much information to the exam as we could fit on a piece of notebook paper. Most students crammed as many facts as possible on their 8 & ½ x 11 inch sheet of paper.

But one student walked into class, put a piece of notebook paper on the floor, and had an advanced logic student stand on the paper. The advanced logic student told him everything he heeded to know. He was the only student to receive an A.

No matter when we put our trust in Jesus, whether it is young in life or later in life, we have Jesus standing by our side to make sure we make the grade. God's love and grace is not about being fair, it is about God's free gift to both those who deserve it and those who don't. Amen.

Prayer:

Gracious God,
Help us to live our lives in ways that share your awesome gift of grace and love in Jesus Christ.
May we never be found comparing what we deserve in relation to others, but how awesome your love is for each one of us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.