

INFURIATING GRACE

Matthew 20:1-16

“It’s not fair!” Older children can feel that way when they see a younger brother or sister getting away with what they could not do when they were that age. Parents get more patient and mellow as they get older. It can seem from the older siblings' perspective that the younger siblings have it so much easier. Also parents go up the ladder of success and earn more, so they seem to offer more financially for their younger children than their older ones. We can really see that conflict when siblings come together to draw wills and inheritance. “How come he gets that?” “I wanted that.” “I spent more time taking care of dad. Why does he get that, not me?”

That is the kind of attitude some of the workers had in the story Jesus tells in our text. To understand the story better, it is interesting to note how the man hired and paid the workers. He goes out at 6 AM in the morning to the marketplace to hire workers for his vineyard. If a man was standing in the marketplace during the day, it was like waiting in an employment office today. He might as well have had a “looking for work” sign around his neck. The man knows how much work he has and how many workers he needs. So why does the man go out again at 9 AM, noon, 3 PM, then 5 PM to get more workers? It would be obvious to Jesus’ listeners that this man hires more workers, not because he needs them, but to give them work. This is a generous man!

Then we see how he pays them. He pays each the same wages, whether they had worked a full 12 hour day or only one. But even more than that he makes a point of paying the workers who worked the least first and paying those who worked all day last. If he does it the other way around, those who had worked all day would go home happy. He has paid them what he had promised—a denarius, which was a typical day’s wages. But by paying them last he can show them how generous he is. Of course their reaction is “It’s not fair!” Twelve hours is a long day of work especially through the heat of the day. The men who started at 5 PM did so as the sun was going down and only worked an hour. That’s not fair!

So why did the man pay first the workers who worked only an hour? He was showing how generous he is. He didn’t hire the later workers because he needed the work done, but because they needed the wages. Those men had families who often just made it from day to day in whatever they earned. In the Lord’s Prayer we say, “Give us this day our daily bread.” That may not have that much impact on our lives. If we run out of bread, the grocery store is not far away and many stores are open 24 hours. On one of our spring break student servant events, we worked each day in Mexico. We had to carry all our water in because the local water was unsafe to drink. Before we’d leave each day to go back to Texas, we would hold the cooler of ice water out and let local kids take turns gulping the water that came out of the cooler. This gulp of cold, clean water was the only water like that those kids would get those days. In their world “Give us today our daily bread,” really means just that—the bread you need each day just to not go to

bed hungry. This man was allowing those men the bread they and their families needed for that day! He was generous!

This is a man filled with kindness. He wants to be generous. He has grace—amazing grace. But that grace is also infuriating. “How come they get the same pay as we do?” “We worked all day during the heat of the day, and these wimps get the same wages.” Of course they forgot that the man had paid them what he had promised. They were not being cheated.

God’s grace is amazing. It is not a matter of being “fair.” We hear about other churches growing and doing all kinds of helpful ministry. Our reaction is to be jealous. We think, “How come they get all the attention?” instead of rejoicing at how God is generous to them. Or people from other cultures get involved with the church and have special needs. But why should we give them so much attention when we have our own needs? Why should we do things for students who have their own parents and home churches when we can take care of our own? Why should we find programs at church to help others when we have so many needs ourselves? How much of what I put into the offering plate goes to help me and my family? Is that fair?

Grace is infuriating because it doesn’t matter who we are or what we have done. God reaches out to all. I can be raised in church, memorize the whole catechism, head the youth group, teach Sunday School, go on mission trips, tithe my wages, serve on church council, take my family every week to church and Sunday School, and I get no more than the dying skid row junkie who comes to faith on his deathbed. It’s not fair!

Why is it not fair? Here is what a psychologist says about what is in the mind of children when they say, “It’s not fair!”:

They are having trouble seeing the big picture. This could be because they are missing key information or they may have not yet fully developed their ability to see things from other perspectives.

They actually don’t even understand the concept of fairness. I’ve discovered on several occasions that to many kids fair means “It’s what I want” and “not fair” means “It’s not what I want”.

They have beliefs that have them seeing through the lens of what’s working for others and what’s not working for them. This leads to the distorted perception that others are always more fortunate.

They have discovered that these words have “worked” for them in the past. Kids quickly learn that these “magic” words trigger any ounce of guilt or doubt in most adults and easily pull us into catering to their demands.

There is something else going on in their lives that is truly unfair, and the trivial circumstances that are arising on the surface are triggering a bigger underlying issue.

Does that sound at all like us? If we look very carefully, what is not fair is what we have done to ourselves and to our world by not trusting in God. When we look for fair, it so often means, “What I want.” If it were to be truly fair, then you and I should be wiped off the face of this universe.

What you and I really need is mercy, not justice. We need God’s amazing and infuriating grace. God’s grace is infuriating because it is totally unfair. In fact it is scandalous. Why should the Perfect One be condemned and the sinner go free? Why should God’s Son who totally loved the Father go to the cross and not us ungrateful people? Why the innocent be punished and the guilty go free? Why? Because of God’s infuriating grace.

That grace leads us to be scandalous in sharing it. “Love your enemies,” Jesus said. “Turn the other cheek.” “Give without expecting anything in return.” We live in a world in which we are taught to defend our rights. I’ve got a right to a good job, to a nice place, to health coverage, to a good car, to good instructors at the university, to a comfortable retirement. But as Christians, we have only one right—to be like our Savior Jesus Christ and serve as He served us.

A group of Mennonite missionaries in the 1700’s wanted to share the Gospel with the African slaves in Jamaica. The slaves’ owners would not allow them to do so because they were afraid this would cause the slaves to revolt. But the owners finally agreed when the Mennonites offered to become slaves with the Africans. They gave up their freedom to serve as Jesus has served us.

God’s grace is infuriating. St. Paul quoted the Proverbs when he wrote to the Romans:

If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
If he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.

As we live God’s grace, we too will be infuriating. When people were thrown into the lions’ den at the Roman games, they were entertaining when they fought back. But when Christians were thrown into the lion’ den did not resist and prayed, that was not entertaining. It was infuriating! Jesus came into our world to interrupt things with God’s infuriating grace. And we are called to interrupt, to bring Jesus and His grace into the lives of others.

Yes, that can be infuriating. Yes, it is not fair. But it is amazing; it is grace!

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