

## Unfair God

### Matthew 20:1-16

We live in an unfair world. And it's always unfair against us. Every week, we can point to at least one missed call that went against the Cyclones that might have changed the course of the football game. Last week, it was the fact that a field goal call cannot be reviewed if it goes above the uprights. This week, who knows? But there will be one, maybe even one bad enough to add to the apology letters Athletic Director Jamie Pollard has up in his office.

We don't only see how unfair the world is in sports. Last Friday, the United Auto Workers went on strike, for the first time striking against all three major auto makers in the US at the same time. They claim they gave up pay and pensions to help the auto makers survive the recession 14 years ago, and now is the time to make it up. Strikes in Hollywood continue with no end in sight, as writers and directors claim they are being compensated unfairly in this new age of streaming, while the studios claim it's unfair when there isn't as much money in streaming as everyone thinks there is.

But the world is unfair, and it's always unfair against us. That's true today, and it was true 2000 years ago as Jesus told a parable about workers in a vineyard who were treated unfairly.

Jesus tells this parable in response to Peter's earlier boast in chapter 19: "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matthew 19:27). In other words, "Look! The twelve of us gave up everything to follow you: our families, our jobs, our friends. Now tell us what we are going to get out of it! What will be our reward?" To which Jesus replied:

"Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:28-30).

Jesus promises the apostles that yes, they will receive honor and glory in the coming kingdom. Indeed, everyone who sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom of God will receive a reward: eternal life (19:29). But lest we only follow and serve Jesus for the sake of the reward, he adds the caveat that "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30). In other words, in the coming kingdom, we will be surprised by who gets in and what they receive once they're in.

And so Jesus tells us the parable of the workers of the vineyard to show that God is generous and unexpected. Jesus tells us this parable to prove that the world is not arranged the way we might like. We believe that "you get what you pay for" and "pay for what you do", you "get out of it what you put into it," and all the like. "The early bird gets the worm." And "God helps those who help themselves." But that's not grace, and that's not how God works. God doesn't help those who help themselves; God helps those who cannot help themselves, because God isn't fair; he is merciful.

Instead of an absentee landowner we get in some parables, Jesus here tells of a hands-on landowner, who needs workers to work in his

vineyard. He keeps going back and back to the town square where the workers are hanging out waiting for a job. He promises to pay the first group a denarii, a day's wage, and then promises to pay the rest of the workers fairly.

The problem arises when he decides to pay the workers, beginning with the last ones hired, and pays them each a denarii. Those who were hired earlier and worked longer begin to think that they will get a bonus. When they receive the same pay, the pay they were promised when they were hired, they get upset.

God isn't fair. And that's a good thing. We don't get what we deserve, and we get what we don't deserve. We don't get the punishment our sins deserve. Instead, we get forgiveness and life and salvation. Not because we've earned it, but because Christ earned it for us. People regularly understand and appreciate God's strange calculus of grace for themselves, but fear and resent it being applied to others.

Instead, God gives us what we don't deserve. As Isaiah tells us, our thoughts and our ways are not the thoughts and ways of God. And the fact that God doesn't think like us is a really good thing. Instead of giving us what we deserve, God gave Jesus what we deserved. And what Jesus earned for us, for perfectly keeping God's commands throughout his earthly life, for working in God's vineyard since time began, is what we get. It is not what we deserve, but it is pure grace.

Isaiah tells us to seek the Lord while He may be found. But with the workers in the vineyard, it was the vineyard owner who was seeking us. He is the one who kept coming back, looking for more workers. And it was he who hired the workers no one else would. The ones with the black marks on their resumes, who didn't quite

dress the right way or clean up as well as others. The ones who for whatever reason were still waiting at the end of the day.

That's the way God continues to work, as well. God doesn't just stop content with those who've been called to faith and come to work in his vineyard. No, God keeps going out to call people.

Career fairs were held at Iowa State this week. Students dressed up, printed off resumes, and practiced their elevator pitches so they could talk to companies and hopefully find an internship or a job. They tried to put their best foot forward, give the best first impression, to earn a chance at a better life.

How blessed we are that God doesn't work that way! We don't need to dress up in a suit or tie, because God sees us clothed with Christ. We don't need to prepare our own resumes because they would fall too short. Instead, we present Jesus' resume as our own. We don't need a good elevator pitch for God to hire us. Instead, God equips those he calls to do that tasks he has prepared for them to do. We don't need to worry about giving God a good first impression, because he sees us as we are, and loves us anyway.

God isn't fair, but that's a good thing. God is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God calls people of all abilities at all times and in all places to work in his vineyard, and the reward is the same. Be glad you don't get what you deserve. Instead, rejoice God gives graciously and abundantly. God's not fair, but God is good.

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