

We Depend on His Generosity

Proper 20

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Matt. 20:1-16

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“That’s not fair!” How often in life have you heard that statement? Whether it be from a sibling’s mouth, a relative’s mouth, a friend’s mouth, a coworker’s mouth, or even your own. Perhaps you even thought or said that statement recently.

But I wonder what your basis for comparison is. Fair compared to what? Fair compared to your neighbor’s life? You never know; your neighbor may have it worse than you, but is just very good at hiding it. You can’t use Facebook or other multimedia as your resource. Most people only put the best events of their lives on there.

Or are you thinking of fair compared to the lives of television characters? That’s all make believe. That’s all how someone thinks life should look. And where does their basis for the quote-unquote “perfect life” come from? From the Scriptures? Or, more likely, from their own imaginations?

So again, fair compared to what? Do you want fair based on the amount of work you put in? That’s what the people in our Gospel text for today desired. They wanted to be paid in accordance with how much work they had put in. But God shows them and us that He gives us all that we need. And He does this out of His great generosity.

Verse 1

Jesus told a parable, saying, “‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.’”

Just in these verses, we are given some important thoughts to consider. For one thing, these first laborers that the master of the vineyard came across were not working when he found them. They had no right to work the vineyard without his asking them. But out of his generosity, the master asks them to work it.

Second, the master and these workers agree to the payment of a denarius a day. A denarius at that time was a day’s wages. So the master was giving them all that they needed. He wasn’t offering to pay them significantly under a day’s wages, though he could have since they had no money and no room to argue. But he also didn’t agree with them for more than a denarius a day. As Jesus said, “‘After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them...’”

Now as Jesus said, this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven. It is an earthly story with a spiritual meaning. In this parable, then, the master is God, and the laborers are us. God reaches out to us with His generosity, giving us a denarius a day, that is, giving us all that we need—not because we deserve it or have any say in the matter, but because of His great generosity.

In God, we move, and live, and find our purpose. We depend on Him for everything. This is what we confess in the First Article. And He takes care of us with “his fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in (us).”

We know this, and we are content with it, until we start looking around.

Verse 2

Jesus continued, “And going out about the third hour (the master) saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, “You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.” So they went out. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour...”

After the first group, the master selects other workers from time to time throughout the day to go out and work in his vineyard. To each of these he promises to pay what is fair. These workers are just as eager to have something to do as the ones the master found first, and they go right to work.

As we already know, these workers will be paid just the same as those hired first. Then those who were hired first will expect more payment—even though they had already agreed to the denarius—and would get upset when that is all that they receive. In life, this would be against the law, but remember, this is a parable, an earthly story with spiritual significance.

When we read this story with earthly eyes, we only think of how “unfair” we might think that the master is being. But is he really being “unfair?” Didn’t the first workers agree to the denarius? He is instead being generous—very generous—to those hired last, so that they could get what they needed for the day, even though they had only worked for the last hour.

To think only of the payment, though, is being earthly. It is setting our minds on the things of this life rather than the things of God. Is our focus supposed to be on the reward or on getting to work in God’s kingdom?

After all, we have no right to work in God’s kingdom. We were born in sin. We had no money to make a living and God didn’t owe us anything, just like the master of the vineyard. God, in *His* great mercy and generosity, chose to give us the opportunity to work for Him. The workers had been idle in the marketplace—not putting out applications or seeking out where they may find work—but the master chose to give them the privilege to work for him. In the same way, we didn’t seek God out; He sought us out.

Verse 3

And God’s generosity is not just for us—it is for all who will come to faith in Jesus. God can do with His riches what He desires; and He desires to give according to what His Son wants.

Jesus came to earth to live as a human being, and to die on the cross in your place. He did this because He knows that’s what you needed. He is now in heaven mediating to the Father on your behalf, because that’s what you need. And God continues to give all that you need for this body and life and the next for the sake of His Son.

You didn’t start out deserving to receive what you needed from God, and you certainly didn’t start out deserving to work in God’s kingdom. At the same time, you needed it. You needed to be saved and to receive the good things of God, the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments.

The kingdom doesn’t depend on you; you depend on it, and God’s great generosity. Thanks be to God that He supplies it not based on your deserving it, but out of grace for the sake of His Son.

It may seem “unfair” for God to give you what you don’t deserve, but in a way, it still is. What was fair according to God’s will was for you to die for your sins. But in the great exchange, Jesus offered Himself, His own death, for your sake. He took the death you rightly deserved and He gave you eternal life. So the punishment of the Law was fulfilled fairly, and you receive heaven fairly—not because you deserved it, but because Jesus deserved it and gave it to you.

So for Jesus’ sake, you are permitted to work in the kingdom of heaven; and for His sake you will be saved eternally. The wages are like numbers in “Whose Line is it Anyway”—they don’t matter. What matters is that you have an eternity of joy ahead of you because of God’s great generosity found in His Son Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.