

9/20/26 *God is not Fair* by Sam Belcher

Many of you know this about me already, but some don't...I'm a triplet. Two sisters, one me, all born on the same day to my little 5 foot 2 mom, God bless her. The three of us just turned 30, actually, earlier this month, but I want to take us back to when we were three little 5 or 6 year olds, squabbling and fighting as all siblings do. Siblings of all ages fight, of course, and everyone wants to get their way in an argument. Sometimes a parent, serving as judge and jury, will let the older kid have their way since they've "earned it", or perhaps the younger child will win because they're "just a baby". But with triplets? My parents had to be more creative. They created a system called "First Days", where on a rotating three-day schedule, myself and my sisters would get a First Day. When it was your First Day, you got to, well, do everything that matters to a five year old First. You'd get the best seat in the car, the choice of what movie to watch, the favored cushion on the couch, and of course the chance to push the buttons in any elevator we happened across. This system, I imagine, saved my parents at least a little headache from having to deal with the near-constant battle cry that every child exclaims when their sibling gets their way...

"It's...not...FAIR!"

It's not fair. Even at our youngest ages, we have an innate sense of fairness and justice that gets violated when we see others being treated more favorably or having some advantage over us. It doesn't go away as an adult, either. And that's a GOOD thing! This sense of fairness helps us stand up for those being bullied or mistreated, it causes us to advocate for equal pay and fair labor laws, and it keeps our eyes open in situations of corruption and self-enrichment. Our desire to make sure that we and our neighbors are treated fairly has driven a lot of important political and cultural change over the years. So what do we do with this parable where those who worked for one hour receive the same reward as those who worked all day long? It's not a fair story at all...and perhaps that's the point. God is not fair.

As with many passages, especially in the Gospels, it's helpful for us to look at what comes before and after our particular selection in order to understand more of what we're reading. Immediately before this passage, we have the famous moment when a rich young ruler approaches Jesus and asks him what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus tells him to follow the commandments, which he says that he does, and so Jesus offers an additional command: sell your possessions and give that money to the poor. The disciples are astonished that this rich man will have trouble entering the kingdom of heaven, for this was a time when riches were more explicitly seen as a blessing of God's favor and a sign of morality. They question Jesus about how this could be possible, and he offers them the same statement that closes our parable today: The last will be first and the first will be last. There is a thematic thread of power structure and importance that weaves its way through these stories, and continues on after as well, for just moments after today's parable, we have James and John jostling to sit at Jesus's right and left hand when he comes into power. Jesus is trying his hardest to instill in the disciples that to be great is to be a servant, and a gracious God is better than a fair one.

But that's a hard pill to swallow, both then and now.

Do we want God to be fair? Our knee-jerk answer is likely “yes”, after all we’re taught from a young age to value fairness and to hold it as a virtue. We want to treat people fairly, regardless of their background or appearance. We want to reward people for their work fairly... “honest pay for honest work”, isn’t that how the saying goes? So surely a fair God is a God who doesn’t discriminate and is thoughtful in how he doles out rewards and punishments.

The only problem is the Bible doesn’t give us a picture of a fair God.

God chooses a particular group of people, the Israelites, to be his witnesses and receive his covenant. Was that fair to the other peoples of the ancient middle east? God allows the life of Job, a man of outstanding and upright moral character, to be destroyed and tested. Was that fair? Jesus brought three disciples up on the mountain to watch his Transfiguration, leaving the other nine at the bottom of the hill. Do you think they grumbled to themselves about how this wasn’t fair? Knowing the disciples, it’s likely! Our understanding of fairness may not be quite the same as God’s, or perhaps our elevation of fairness over all else is not how God views virtue.

In our parable, the vineyard owner, widely interpreted to be the God-figure in the story, sets out early in the morning to hire workers for an honest wage. It’s an analogy, and the set up of the story plays into the expectation that hard work will be rewarded. After all, the prosperity Gospel existed far before the likes of Joel Osteen and Kenneth Copeland, and so even the first century listener would predict the analogy thusly: God hires us, his workers, to do good works and follow commands, and in return he has promised us a wage of blessings, both temporal and eternal. It’s an easy to understand arrangement, we do things for God, God does things for us. And the more work we do, the greater the reward should be, right? Matthew wrote and framed much of his Gospel to a Jewish audience, and these early readers would likely view themselves as the earliest vineyard workers; they’ve been following God’s laws and commandments since they were born! As God’s chosen people, it’s only right and fair that they get a greater reward. Jesus has a way of subverting our expectations, though. The story doesn’t end with fair compensation.

And don’t we, too, view ourselves as those earliest vineyard workers? For most of us, we’ve been following the ways and teachings of Jesus our entire lives. We show up to church, we treat others kindly, we give time and money, we even consider ourselves to be “better” or “truer” Christians than THAT group of so-called believers, so surely we’re the ones truly working hardest at this vineyard. Surely we deserve to be rewarded in this life and in the life to come.

So when reality hits, and the meanest, surliest Christians we know go unchecked in their aggression, ruining the name of Jesus for others...

Or when predatory businesses and billionaires keep making bank while we struggle to pay the bills...

Or when the best people in our lives get struck by disaster, disease, or death, while some truly nasty people walk around unscathed...

Don’t you just want to scream “it’s...not...FAIR!”?

This parable challenges us because it goes against how we often think the world SHOULD operate. Everything else in our lives, from our jobs to our relationships, operates from the perspective of hard work equals hard reward. Even if we see what Jesus is trying to do here,

guiding us toward a God who's full of grace, we squirm because we're not sure if we believe that everyone deserves such "gracious" treatment. Especially in the financial and work-based context that this story is framed in. "Honest pay for honest work" makes sense to us, and entire swaths of cultural and political discourse have arisen around those that are deemed to not earn their keep. "Kids these days don't want to work", "boomers are pulling up the ladder behind them", "immigrants are taking my tax dollars", "the upper class isn't paying their fair share", "Californians are RUINING the Tennessee I worked so hard to build!". We are immersed in a world that tells us to fight for what we think is ours and lash out at those that have been given a perceived unfair advantage. And here is Jesus, telling us the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Jesus isn't being fair here. That's not how he operates. Early in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, he says "you have heard that it was said: eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I tell you: do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them the left as well. If someone sues you and tries to take your cloak, give them your jacket as well. If someone forces you to go with them one mile, go with them two miles." It's an upside-down Gospel, a message of submission and grace over retaliation and fairness. It's one of the hardest truths to wrestle with, in the teachings of Jesus, but it reflects how God treats and deals with us. Time and time again, we break our covenants with God and refuse to love his creation as he has commanded us. We're greedy, envious, angry, lustful, idolatrous, and violent. A fair God would throw up his hands and refuse to work with us again, as we've broken our side of the contract. But a gracious God invites us to the table again and again, regardless of how badly or how often we mess up. If we all got the wage that we deserved, we'd all be penniless. The question that the vineyard owner poses to the grumbling workers is the same one that God poses to us today: "are you envious because I'm generous?" When we receive God's grace, it's easy. When we have to extend that same grace to others...not so much.

I like to think that this parable really came true for the disciples later on in their lives, when Paul came to them and became a disciple himself. Here was a guy who had dedicated time and energy to the persecution of the believers: litigating against them, imprisoning them, and even overseeing their death. Yet, after one roadside conversion experience and a sharp word from God, he shows up on the disciples' doorstep ready to lead the missionary charge and write half of the New Testament. Peter, John, and company must surely have been upset by this development, for many reasons, one of which being this guy hasn't earned his keep. He's a 5 PM worker, earning the same wages of life in Christ as these faithful disciples who went through hell and high water with Jesus. God is generously gracious with Paul...and it's not fair!

Who could walk through those doors right now, sit down like they own the place, and evoke a sense of jealousy or offense in you? Is it a believer of a different denomination or religion, and they have no right to come into this storied congregation and spread outside beliefs? Is it someone who spends their days exploiting others for profit or typing scathing comments on social media? Is it a politician, whether on the ballot or not this fall, who you'd rather give a tongue lashing to than work the fields of God with them? Perhaps it's someone who hurt you, deeply, and while you might be able to reconcile the fact that God forgives them, you yourself are by no means ready to.

It's easy to talk about working the fields together when we're picturing people who are repentant. Less so when they are still actively harming you or others. C.S. Lewis's famous work "The Great Divorce" crafts a clever and imaginative allegory of life in heaven, hell, and the realms in between. In one vignette, the narrator witnesses a condemned ghost, named the Big Man, face a redeemed murderer named Lem who used to work for him. The Big Man complains that he's been stuck down in Hell, all the while Lem, despite killing someone, is experiencing Heaven. The Big Man believes that he lived an honest and good enough life and that there must be some clerical afterlife mistake going on. Lem gently tells him "You weren't a decent man and you didn't do your best. None of us were and none of us did. Lord bless you, it doesn't matter." Lem has accepted the charity of grace...but the Big Man leaves grumbling, unwilling to see himself as equal to such a sinner as this.

Salvation is not decided by us. Blessings and good riches in this life are not decided by us. God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and his irresistible grace is extended to those who've followed the Gospel from day one and those who reject it outright. It's upside-down, it's uneconomic, it's unfair. But thank God it's the system that we operate under.

Through grace, the work of the kingdom of God is not a labor burden placed on us to perform, but an invitation into an others-centered life. Jesus has called us from the sidelines to work the fields of a world in need, and such a task is better done with grateful and generous hearts than envious eyes and complaining mouths. May our gratitude for grace eclipse our desire to pinch pennies or play the comparison game with our neighbors, who are just as undeserving of God's grace as we are.

May it be so. Amen.