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“Well, I guess I have to buy a minivan.” His wife had just given birth to their third child, and what with the car seat laws, they all couldn’t fit into the Chevy that had served them well for eight years. So, off to the car lots. He and his wife looked at all sorts of vehicles, some in good shape, some not so much. Some had high mileage, and some had low mileage. All of them had different prices. He and his wife had to decide which one. What was a fair price for the minivan they needed? They balanced price and condition, and came up with a vehicle at a price that seemed fair to them.

All of us have a mental balance in our heads. Not just when we need to buy a new car, but in all areas of our lives. What’s fair when it comes to our salary and the division of work at home? What’s fair when it comes to our friendships? How much do we give to others and how much do we expect from them? This sense of fairness is a valuable thing to have as we live in this world, but it can get in the way of our spiritual lives.

It did in Peter’s case. So our Lord today gives us a parable to answer the question of “**WHAT’S FAIR?**” in God’s kingdom. There’s what we think, and there’s what God gives. So, let’s go to the Word.

### ***Part One: What we think***

The key to this section of Scripture is found in the very first words. Jesus says “***The kingdom of heaven is like.***” Ah, a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It seems as if the disciples - Peter in particular - needed some instruction on the differences between the kingdoms of this earth and the kingdom of heaven. In the previous verses Jesus had told a rich young man to sell everything he had and give it to the poor. In essence, Jesus told him that money got in the way of his faith, so get rid of it. Faith in Christ is more important than the cash in your pocket.

This floored Peter. He asked Jesus this question: “***We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?***” You mean there’s no payoff for following you? No hope of financial security? What are we working for, why are we following you if there’s no payoff? What’s the benefit of following you?

Things are different in the kingdom of heaven, where Christ rules in a person’s heart. The point of this parable is that paradise is not a reward for your work, but a free gift from our gracious Lord. It doesn’t matter how hard or how long we work in God’s kingdom, spreading the Gospel and supporting others who do. God will give eternal life to whom He chooses. Our efforts have nothing to do with our gift of eternity.

This isn’t the way we think, is it? We are conditioned by our world to think you get what you work for. If you work more, you get paid more. Let’s look at the parable, shall we? <sup>9</sup> “***The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius.*** <sup>10</sup> ***So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.*** <sup>11</sup> ***When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.*** <sup>12</sup> ***These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’***

Is that fair? Not according to us. There should be equal pay for equal work. Why should someone who worked less than we did get the same reward? It rankles us, doesn’t it? It’s not fair! Did you ever do a group project in school? You had a group of classmates, maybe 4 or 5, working on a project. 2 did most of the work, 2 did some of it, and there was always one person who just blew off the whole thing. All of you got the same grade. How did you feel? Or, maybe you did a group project at work and only one person got the credit for all the hard work the group did. How did you feel? It’s not fair!

That sense of fairness - getting what you deserve - so often leaks into our spiritual lives as well. Just like Peter, we feel we deserve more from the Lord because we follow Him. We are tempted to think that we deserve more from the Lord (either here or in heaven) because we’ve followed Him for so long. We’ve borne the “***heat of the day.***” We gave of our time and money to spread the news of the Gospel. We’ve taught Sunday School, or served on the church council. We’ve gone door to door or volunteered our time to clean the church. We’ve taught our children to know their Savior and tried hard to tell our neighbors about Jesus.

We've worked hard for Jesus!

And, we've also suffered for Him. We've been ridiculed because we follow His will in our lives. Perhaps we've lost friends or promotions because we lived as He wants us to live. There's a former member who worked at one of the mills in town who read his Bible on his lunch break. His co-workers sniggered and made jokes under their breath whenever he did this. After a year or two, he sat alone at a table every day, eating his lunch and reading the Word. He suffered for his faith. Do you think he deserved a better reward from Jesus? What's fair? Our human hearts say we deserve more because we worked hard and long, and suffered so much for following our Lord. We deserve a reward here on earth, or at least a better spot in heaven. That's only fair, isn't it?

But let me ask you this: Do we deserve anything at all?

### ***Part Two: What God gives***

It's good for us to be honest with ourselves. Are we the kind of person that always loves the Lord with all our heart and loves our neighbor as ourselves? There are times we get irritated with our loved ones. Times when we react in anger to someone else's opinion. We are so easy to judge, so easy to criticize, so easy to condemn others. It's so easy to "forget" to pray, to read God's Word, to live as God demands we live. Let's face it. None of us live in a way that deserves God's gift of eternal life. None of us.

God gives eternity with Him to those whom He has chosen. He freely and fully gives His gift! It doesn't depend on how good a Christian that person might become. It doesn't depend on how long that person works in His kingdom. It doesn't depend on how much that person suffers for the Lord. He gives eternal life to the person who comes to faith on his death bed, like the thief on the cross. He gives eternal life to someone who works hard for Him all the days of his life, like Elijah and Abraham. He gives faith when He chooses to give faith. He is extremely generous, isn't He? His generosity flows from His heart, not from our efforts.

Jesus died for the sins of the entire world, not just for the good people of this planet. God gives His gift of paradise when and where He chooses. Is that fair? We battle that thought, don't we?

Billy Ray was a good ol' boy. When he was younger, he could party as hard as the next guy. He had gone through three wives, two parole officers and a liver. He was known as the best cusser in two counties. When he got drunk, it took three police officers to subdue him. But something happened after his granddaughter was killed. He started reading the Bible and even coming to church. Oh, he stood in the back and left before the rest of the congregation did, but he was there. He had several long talks with the pastor and was baptized privately. About two years after his granddaughter's death, Billy Ray's heart just stopped. The members of the church were just shocked when their pastor had a Christian funeral for Billy Ray. "How dare you bury that evil man! Don't you know what he did in his life?" "Yes," the pastor replied, "but you don't know what Christ did in his heart."

What's fair? Don't grumble that others are blessed with faith at the end of life. Sure, they get the same gift as you - the gift of paradise. But you've been blessed to serve God more than they. Rejoice that you served God for years, not just a few months. Rejoice that God gave you the talents to serve Him all those years. Rejoice that God gave you the opportunities to work in His harvest field. All of these are gifts from God to you! Give Him the glory and praise Him for His gifts to serve! By your efforts you give honor and praise to Him. Don't grumble that others get into heaven after believing just a short time. Rejoice that you have the honor of serving Him for a lifetime.

And don't forget to be thankful that God is generous to you. He gave you what you didn't earn. He gave you heaven. He called you into His kingdom of grace. We don't deserve one bit of His love, but He gives it to us freely, fully and perfectly. Thank Him that He's not fair in the way we think fairness ought to be. Thank Him that He is generous, loving and forgiving.

The next time you need to buy a car or negotiate for a raise, you'll use that mental balance in your head to determine what's fair. That's a good thing to have! But when it comes to your life as a Christian, don't use your mental balance. Use God's.

AMEN