

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
Septuagesima  
Matthew 20:1-16  
February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012

The principle of fairness is one of the standards which people use in their dealings with each other. We want to be treated fairly, and so we do our best to treat others in a fair, evenhanded way.

When we work, we expect to be paid fairly. When someone does something bad, we expect them to eventually “get what’s coming to them” – that’s fair. When beneficiaries are dividing inherited assets, when a food pantry is doling out canned goods to the needy, or when mom is dishing out ice-cream, we expect equal portions. That’s fair.

Since we live with this standard of fairness in everyday life, it is no wonder that we apply that principle of fairness when it comes to our expectations of the way God deals with people. We’ve heard it said, “God helps those who help themselves.” This is an excuse for our initiative and drive to succeed. It’s easy to regard success and money as a reward which God gives to those who work hard. When it comes to applying this principle of fairness to God, we expect Him to prosper the good and bring disaster on the evil.

There is just one problem... our principle of fairness doesn’t apply at all to the ways of God. Almighty God is not an American. He doesn’t often behave the way we would expect Him to behave. He doesn’t treat people according to the principle of fairness as defined by you, the American, of your generation, living in this century.

How many times have we said, “It’s not fair,” or “Life is not fair,” or, “God is not fair?” Well, all three of those statements are correct. Those who by human standards deserve nothing from God, like Tax Collectors, thieves and harlots, get it all as they are invited by Jesus to repent and believe – to eat at His table and receive His precious gifts. And on the other hand, those who have a comfortable living, a plethora of friends – those who the Scriptures might say are the Kings and Pharisees among us are rejected by God because they turn their backs on the Messiah and His message. The rain falls equally on the fields of the believer and unbeliever. No one has ever proven that the faithful live longer, happier or healthier lives than the faithless. God is not fair the way we would define “fairness”.

In the parable before us today our immediate reaction might be the same as those who heard it. God is not fair. That is true, God is not fair... but that’s not the point. The point of the story is that God equally gives His goodness to all people. It’s about the generosity of God. The kingdom is open to all believers regardless of pedigree. It’s for the educated and the illiterate, the rich and the poor, the wise and the foolish. Each is loved equally by God and invited to inherit eternal life. That doesn’t sound fair. God’s not fair.

Our idea of fairness is based on the work ethic which says, “You get what you deserve.” God works on the principle of grace which says, “You get what you *don’t* deserve.” God is not fair – thank God. Thank God that God is not fair. You have a gift for which you have not worked. It has been earned and merited by our Savior Jesus. If God were fair, we would get what we really deserve for our unfaithfulness in times when He has called us to be faithful... for us ignoring our neighbor when they need our help... for our cheating and lying and stealing... and yes I include all of you in all of these. Our sins merit God’s eternal wrath. Our sins deserve nothing that God freely gives. Thank God that God is not fair.

As is often the case, this parable is misnamed. Like the parable of the prodigal (or lost) son which should be called the parable of the merciful Father, or the parable of the unjust judge which should be called the persistent widow, the name of this parable should reflect the actions of the employer and not the workers. Instead of calling it the workers in the vineyard it

should be called the generous employer. The focus is on the abundant gift-giver. When payroll is handed out, each finds the same amount of pay regardless of his hours.

Unfair? Perhaps it was from the point of view of the worker. But the owner of the vineyard did nothing wrong. He paid what he promised. The money was his to use as he wished.

What seems to be the problem? It's not the "fair wage" part. God is not fair when it comes to giving us what we really deserve. He always gives what He promises to give. You see, the problem is our own envy, greed and jealousy.

We might think that it would be awful to be that envious or jealous – yet these things are no stranger to us. A recent study showed how "being plugged in" to social media and "connected" to our friends, and those who are not so much friends that we call friends, has caused many different people to be envious and jealous over others more than ever before. We hear and see about the good things that are happening to people – the cute things their pets are doing, the vacations they are taking or the accomplishments of their children. We get jealous or envious – even depressed – because our life doesn't seem to have such good things happening to us. In today's electronic age information is right at our fingertips. There is more access to the stuff that worries us and causes us concern. The devil is good at using your jealousy, your envy, your discouragements, your ideas of what is fair or not – from your neighbor or from God – to make you feel bad about yourself, your loved ones, your life, your school or work, and yes, even your God. These are the things that cause us to blame others over all that is wrong – especially blaming God for being unfair to you. You think you deserve better. You think you deserve more. Are you so sure?

Only as we live in and with Christ do we rejoice over the blessings that are given to us and to others – undeserved. In Christ we are aware of our own unworthiness and not so focused on the unworthiness of others. In Christ we are receivers in every way of a God who, thank God, is not fair in giving us what we deserve. Instead, the Father gave up His perfect Son as the perfect sacrifice for your perfect forgiveness of sins. If anything is unfair it would have to be what God was willing to do for you. And now, giving an undeserved gift – and especially the gift of His only begotten Son – is not be underestimated... though sometimes we take it for granted. Through His unending generosity we are saved from our sins and now we are on the road to eternal life in Him. Our Savior rose from the dead to give life – eternal life – to you and me and all believers. We don't deserve it, merit it, buy it, beg or steal it. Eternal life is ours as a gift by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

It's true, God doesn't treat people according to our standards – what is fair and what is not fair. Thank God. The goodness of God is far above and beyond any system we might dream up and call fair. His loving kindness is offered freely to everyone. Why grumble at His generosity? There is no need indeed. All of us need every bit of what God offers to us freely. Thank God, God gives us underserved gifts – the full amount – all that is promised – all that we will ever need.

Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.