

# AN UNFAIR GOD

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Series: The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...

Matthew 20:1-16

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Allow me to begin with a confession. Deathbed confessions annoy me. Now and then we hear about persons on death row, some who have spent a lifetime causing mayhem and destruction and sorrow, murdering innocent people and leaving a wake of grieving families, friends and communities. Then suddenly they announce that they have found Jesus and they can go to their executions peacefully knowing they are saved. Seriously? Where is divine justice in that? Forget mass murderers for a second. I'm even thinking of those who go through life lying and cheating, being mean and disrespectful to others, scoundrels in the truest sense of the word, and then just before taking their last breath, confess their sins and ask Jesus to save them. I have to be honest and say I struggle with that. Are we to believe that those who have willingly led unrighteous lives show up at the feet of Christ at the last minute and dance through the pearly gates with those who have been faithful and devout for all of their years? It feels to me like there is something wrong with that.

I suspect that is not the way I am supposed to feel. Actually, I am pretty sure that is not how I am supposed to feel. All right, I know that is not the way I am supposed to feel. For one thing, it means that I have made the judgment that, though not perfect, I am righteous enough to deserve heaven and someone else is not. This is usurping a divine prerogative and is the very attitude held by the Pharisees that most irritated Jesus. Worry about the log in your own eye and not the speck in someone else's eye, Jesus kept saying. It also puts restrictions on God's love and grace. If God, out of unconditional love and amazing grace, chooses to offer salvation to someone, who are we to say that is not right? I get this. I do. So why does it annoy me?

It is annoying, and I am sure not just for me, because it goes against a core value held by most – fairness. We like things to be fair. I grew up with two brothers. My parents applied a rule that was in place for as long as I can remember. If it was time to cut a pie or pizza or cake or anything else that was to be divided, one would do the cutting and then the others would choose their pieces first. Whoever was cutting knew that the other two would choose the largest portion for themselves. Consequently, we all became quite skilled in cutting exact portions. No rulers or scales were necessary. No piece was even the tiniest bit larger than another. We made sure it was fair. In school, fights would occasionally break out and most took it as something to be expected. But if someone was starting a fight with someone else much smaller or weaker, or several ganged up on one, that was a problem because it was not a fair fight. Most professional sports teams now use instant replay to assist the referees to make sure the call is correct, so it will be fair. I don't see that helping a lot, but there it is. Affirmative Action is back on the dockets of courts. The argument from both sides centers on fairness. Some say it is not fair that someone

more qualified on paper than another is denied admission or a position while the less qualified applicant is accepted based on race or ethnicity or gender or disability or whatever. That's not fair. Others argue that applicants can never be equal because some have access to better schools, better nutrition, better supports, and it is not fair to keep those who have not had that access from ever having a chance. We do not like it when the boss's kid, who may be incompetent, is promoted while the capable, faithful, hardworking employee is passed over. We may be satisfied with our pay until we discover someone else doing the exact same job is paid more. That's not fair. Don't ever ask the person sitting next to you on a plane how much he paid for his ticket. You may find out you paid a lot more and what you thought was a good price suddenly feels terribly unfair. We like things to be fair. Fairness is a core value.

It is not a value, however, in the kingdom of heaven. Mark tells us that Jesus began his ministry by walking through Galilee announcing, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven has come near." He spent the rest of his ministry trying to describe and demonstrate what the kingdom of heaven is. That was not easy. It is hard to describe to others that which they have not experienced. Describe a mountain to someone who has never been anywhere but the Great Plains. It was additionally hard for Jesus because the values and the rules in God's kingdom do not always match those of our world. Getting people to embrace the kingdom of heaven required getting people to see and to think in different ways.

One of the ways he did this was by telling parables. Instead of trying to give a definition, he would say, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." and then he would make a comparison to something we do know about, or he would tell a story. We will be talking about these sayings and stories over the next few weeks. Today our lesson is one of the kingdom of heaven is like parables, and it challenges the core value of fairness, the primacy of fairness.

It is a simple story. A landowner goes to the marketplace where workers hoping to be hired for the day gathered, and he hired some to work in his fields that day with the promise of a standard day's wage, a denarius, or a dollar. He went back at nine and hired more and at noon and hired more, and at three and again at five. None of these later hires were working the full day so he promised only to pay what was right. At the end of the day they lined up to be paid, starting with those who came at five to those who had worked the whole day. He paid those who came late a dollar, the standard wage for the entire day. They were pretty pumped, but not as pumped as those who had been there since sunrise. They were thinking, if he is paying those who worked a few hours a dollar, imagine what we will get paid. They were already thinking of ways to spend the bonus they anticipated. It turned out, though, that he also paid them a dollar.

Are your fairness meters ringing? Theirs were. They worked in the fields all day and were paid the same as those who only worked a few hours! That's not right. The all-day workers were ticked and complained. "These last worked only one hour, and you have them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." Many absolutely agree with the workers and thus have trouble with this parable.

The owner did not see the problem. They had agreed to work for a day's wage and he had paid them a day's wage. He fulfilled the agreement. What is unfair about that? He chose to

be generous with the others. It was his money and that was his prerogative. Why should others be envious of his generosity?

Why, indeed? The workers would answer because his generosity was not fair. But really, is fairness truly the most important thing? What is fair anyway? We tend to look at others and see what they have that we do not and think it is not fair. The irony is they are looking at us and seeing what we have that they do not and thinking it is not fair. I don't think it is fair that some athletes literally make more in one game than I will make my entire career. They may not think it fair that I have a spectacular marriage while they are on their third or fourth relationship. I might begrudge someone's notoriety while they begrudge my health. You can spin this out in hundreds of thousands of ways.

This is the problem with fairness. It puts us over and against each other instead of filling us with a desire for the welfare of all. Our happiness and contentment comes only from comparison with others instead of being based on our own blessings. Instead of the workers being incensed that they were not paid more than those who worked less, they could have given a word of thanks that they were hired that day, meaning they had money to buy food for the family that day. They could have been thankful they were healthy enough to work, that they were chosen to work, and that there was work to be done. Even better, they could have been glad that the boss was generous with others because it meant that those picked to work later could eat that day also. In the parable, no one paid a day's wage for an hour's work tried to give the money back. It was a great and needed gift for them and they rejoiced. Others could and should have rejoiced with them instead of grumbling they deserved more.

This is what we need to understand. As much as fairness is a value, we also value love and grace and here's the thing: love and grace are never fair. As someone walks toward execution for terrible crimes, some may be thinking, "Good, now they will get what they deserve," but somewhere there is a mother or brother or friend or person of deep faith praying God, forgive him or her. Lord, he has been haunted by demons his whole life. Lord, she had such a horrible childhood and never recovered. Lord have mercy. Because of love, no parent who has a child who has gotten into terrible trouble wants that child to get what he or she deserves, what is fair.

Well, God is our parent and a God of love, and God acts out of that love, and that grace, not out of the legality of fairness. You might recall that in the story of Jonah, Jonah, against his will, preached repentance to the Ninevites, a nasty group of people hated by the Israelites. They responded, repented and God spared them. Jonah was furious because he wanted God to annihilate them. He sat under a shade plant pouting. God caused the plant to wither, further aggravating Jonah. God then says, you are angry that you lost a shade plant, yet you don't care about me losing hundreds of thousands of my children.

God is motivated by love, not fairness. God is a God of grace, and grace is not fair, it is gracious, and that is the point. It is a point we should celebrate, not resist. I know I do, because honestly, I do not want God to treat me fairly. I am far from perfect and am less perfect than I even think. Please, Lord, do not give me what I deserve. Do not treat me fairly. Treat me graciously. We would all be wise to speak that prayer.

Additionally, and this is my last thought. If we are living righteous lives and being just as faithful as we are able to be, it is a joyous thing, not a punishment or a burden. It is ridiculous to think that if I didn't have to worry about getting into heaven, I could live however I wanted; but, no, I have to keep my nose to the grindstone so I can get my reward. Come on. Heaven is not a reward, it is a gift, and living in the ways of God is a blessing, not punishment. The workers who only had to work an hour were not lucky that they only had to work an hour. It was sad that they were stuck in the marketplace waiting for work when no one wanted them and were joyous that they were finally hired.

Do we really think that if we are somehow more righteous than others, or have been righteous for a longer time that we should get a better room in heaven, or more amenities, or some upgrades? How do you upgrade paradise? Do we think those late to the gate should be excluded? Why would we keep them out? God gives us absolutely everything that God has promised. There is no reason to resent those who come late to the field.

But hey, that's how it is in this world. We think that latecomers getting paid the same is not fair. That's how it is in this world. It is not, however, how it is in the kingdom of heaven. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who paid everyone the same, no matter how long they worked. It wasn't fair. It was love-motivated and gracious. And that's the difference.

Thank you for being an unfair God, O Lord. Amen.