

## **A Fair Wage**

September 24, 2017

### Matthew 20: 1-16

*<sup>1</sup>As Jesus was telling what the kingdom of heaven would be like, he said: Early one morning a man went out to hire some workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After he had agreed to pay them the usual amount for a day's work, he sent them off to his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> About nine that morning, the man saw some other people standing in the market with nothing to do. <sup>4</sup> He said he would pay them what was fair, if they would work in his vineyard. <sup>5</sup> So they went. At noon and again about three in the afternoon he returned to the market. And each time he made the same agreement with others who were loafing around with nothing to do.*

*<sup>6</sup> Finally, about five in the afternoon the man went back and found some others standing there. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" <sup>7</sup> "Because no one has hired us," they answered. Then he told them to go work in his vineyard.*

*<sup>8</sup> That evening the owner of the vineyard told the man in charge of the workers to call them in and give them their money. He also told the man to begin with the ones who were hired last. <sup>9</sup> When the workers arrived, the ones who had been hired at five in the afternoon were given a full day's pay. <sup>10</sup> The workers who had been hired first thought they would be given more than the others. But when they were given the same, <sup>11</sup> they began complaining to the owner of the vineyard. <sup>12</sup> They said, "The ones who were hired last worked for only one hour. But you paid them the same that you did us. And we worked in the hot sun all day long!"*

*<sup>13</sup> The owner answered one of them, "Friend, I didn't cheat you. I paid you exactly what we agreed on. <sup>14</sup> Take your money now and go! What business is it of yours if I want to pay them the same that I paid you? <sup>15</sup> Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Why should you be jealous, if I want to be generous?" <sup>16</sup> Jesus then said, "So it is. Everyone who is now first will be last, and everyone who is last will be first."*



Last week we continued our "No Fair" series by looking at "The Math of Forgiveness". Peter asked how many times he should forgive someone who wrongs him? Peter wanted it

defined. In the end, we learned that if we desire forgiveness, we need to be people who give forgiveness and bring reconciliation to all of our relationships. We began the series with Jesus' instructions on how to fight like a Christian. Today we conclude the series as we look at the reality of God's kingdom. Today we will challenge our idea of what is "fair" by looking at what we consider fair and at what God considers fair. Let us pray.

To begin we need some information to help us understand the context of Jesus' story about the harvest. During most of the year a small crew could run the whole operation. They could tend to the watering and weeding and such. But when the moment of harvest time came, the small crew needed help. To put this into our context, think of branding time - when all the ranchers gather at a neighbor's place to get the job done. Then they gather the next weekend someone else's place.





One day the harvest begins in the vineyard. The vineyard owner is soon notified by his foreman that they need more workers. So, he heads to town at 9:00 in the morning in search of more help. He offers those standing there a “fair wage” to work for the day and they hop into the cart and head off to the vineyard. But at about 11:45 the foreman finds the owner again and says, “We need more workers”. So, at noon the owner finds more workers in the market and again agrees to pay them a fair wage. They load into the cart and head out into the fields to harvest grapes. Funny thing, again at 3:00 and then again at 5:00 the owner finds himself back in the market, hauling more workers out to his vineyard. Each time he makes the same agreement – come work in my vineyard and I will pay you a fair wage. Each worker agrees to the same deal.



In the minds of the first workers, those hired at 9:00, they begin the day thinking they will get a denarius – the usual “fair wage” for a full day’s labor. Most were just standing around in the market, so most would probably, in fact, be happy to have had the chance to earn some money that day. If we were in their shoes, we too would have thought the same way. And the workers who started later would assume they would get less than a denarius because they



worked less than a full day. Again, we too would have thought the same way. We think this way because it is what we think of as “fair”. It is just how the world works.

But things are not always fair, are they? For eighteen of the twenty summers that I taught middle school in Rapid City, I partnered with Greg, a fellow teacher, to run a small construction business. I will never forget one of our early jobs. That first year we were hired to pour a driveway. It was about 20 feet wide and 25 feet long – a pretty standard two-car driveway. We figured a couple days to dig it out and form it and a half day to pour and finish it. So we submitted our bid and were hired. We showed up on a Monday with our shovels and picks and wheelbarrows and form boards, ready to get at it. By lunchtime, we had chipped away about a half a wheelbarrow of dirt and rock. We sat there at lunch, too tired to eat our lunches, and stared at each other, quickly realizing that we were in deep, deep trouble. At this pace we would have the driveway dug out and formed in about four weeks. So we made a phone call and picked up the Bobcat later that afternoon. Yes, we did get done in the two and a half days, but the Bobcat was not in our budget. We lost money on the job. When we were paid for our labors, at first we were both mad, thinking that this was just not fair. They knew we had to get a Bobcat to do the job. And they did not pay us one penny more than our bid was for. And they should not have either. But, needless to say, I can relate to all the unhappy workers in the parable.

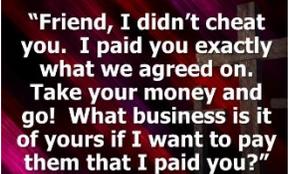


At 6:00 the work day draws to a close. All the workers make their way to where the foreman is so that they can receive their "fair wage". But then something unusual happens.

Normally the workers who worked the longest get paid first. This time the owner has those hired at 5:00 go to the front of the line and he sends the ones who

began way back at 9:00 to the end of the line. The foreman begins by paying those who came to work at 5:00 a denarius – a full day’s wages. Imagine their joy at receiving such pay! Word buzzes down the line and soon the 9:00 workers hear that the 5:00 workers got a whole denarius. I imagine they were pretty eager to see what they were going to be paid. After all, they had worked all day, bearing the full heat of the day. But the 3:00 workers get a denarius. The noon workers get a denarius too. By the time the 9:00 workers get to the foreman, I bet they were pretty worked up. They could see what they were going to be paid. But flash back to 9:00. They were pretty happy to have the opportunity to earn a day’s wages that day. At 8:45 their day had looked pretty bleak. Another day with nothing to show for it. Another day of unemployment.

Let us step into the owner’s shoes for a moment. He had paid each worker what he agreed to pay each worker. Who knows, maybe the harvest would not have been completed if not for those 5:00 workers. As the 9:00 workers grumble to him, he replies, *“Friend, I didn’t cheat you. I paid you exactly what we agreed on. Take your money now and go! What business is it of yours if I want to pay them the same that I paid you?”* All of this is exactly true. Sometimes the truth does not make us feel any better. I do not think it helped the 9:00 workers much. It did not help so much with Greg and I and our driveway.



“Friend, I didn’t cheat you. I paid you exactly what we agreed on. Take your money and go! What business is it of yours if I want to pay them that I paid you?”

This parable, of course, is not simply about paying a worker his fair wage. This parable is, after all, about the kingdom of God. Last week I spoke of God’s

economy when I spoke of God's unlimited, undeserved grace that we each can receive. We deserve consequences or punishment for our sins but instead we receive grace and mercy and forgiveness. It is a forgiveness that at times we struggle to understand and, at times, struggle to give to others. But it is a math



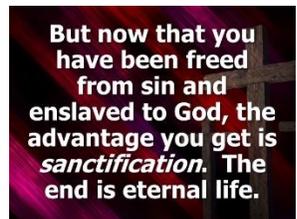
or economy that we like. We are A-OK with receiving God's mercy and grace and forgiveness. In fact, most of us are alright with others receiving God's mercy and grace and forgiveness. To a degree. At some point, though, we begin

to apply the logic of the vineyard workers to the extension of God's mercy and grace and forgiveness. Like Peter, we ask how many times, Lord? And like our ideas on forgiveness, sometimes we want to limit just who can receive this mercy and grace and forgiveness. We ask – who, "them" too Lord? Really?

In Luke 23, we find the story of the thief on the cross. We recall that on that last day, there were two criminals on crosses - *"one on his right and one on his left."* Both were there because they deserved to be there. Both had committed crimes worthy of crucifixion. One of the criminals kept railing at Jesus, saying at one point, *"Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* But the other criminal said to him, *"Don't you fear God? Aren't you getting the same punishment as this man? We got what was coming to us, but he didn't do anything wrong"*. Then, in the final moments of his life, he said to Jesus, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"*. In verse 43, Jesus replies, *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise"*. In the final moments, as he was about to draw his last breath, the thief finds mercy and grace and forgiveness. He finds salvation and eternal life.

This is the picture of a “fair wage” in God’s eyes. No matter when one asks for salvation – whether as a young middle school student or as an inmate on death row for a heinous crime – God is overjoyed to offer the gift of salvation. We see this over and over in the scriptures. King David repents of his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah and God welcomes him right back. Saul kills and imprisons hundreds of Christians but Jesus intervenes and Paul emerges to become one of the greatest apostles of the early church. These are but two examples of many found in scripture. In our own personal lives, we experience the gift of salvation over and over and over as well.

In Romans Six we read, *"But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus*



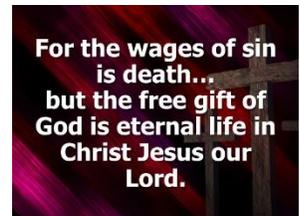
*our Lord"*. Once we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, we are freed from the chains of sin. We no longer must live under the burden of guilt or shame caused by our sin. Once we repent and ask for forgiveness we are set free from the bonds of sin and death. We give our allegiance to God and we enter the process of sanctification. Sanctification is what John Wesley called our “journey to perfection” and it is the idea that each day we grow closer to Christ. The original Greek word that was translated to ‘sanctification’ means “holiness”. Therefore, the process of sanctification is to become ‘more holy’. In the end this leads us to eternal life.

Verse 23 from Romans 6 begins with, "*For the wages of sin is death*". In our minds and in our world, this would be how the secular culture would see 'fair'. Society functions this way in regard to our secular laws and norms. If we speed, we deserve a ticket. If we steal, we deserve to pay restitution. If we break any law or violate any norm, there is usually a punishment or a consequence. We may get a 'warning' the first time, but that does not last long. Soon enough one finds there is a price to pay. This is how the world's economy works.



In our parable, those 9:00 workers were operating under the norms of the day. They were expecting to be rewarded for their long day of labor. The 5:00 workers got what we were promised and more – a fair wage. "Imagine what we will get!", I'm sure those 9:00 workers thought. But when they receive the pay they agreed upon, that denarius feels like an insult. They grumble, "this is not fair!!" Jesus closes our parable by saying, "*So it is. Everyone who is now first will be last, and everyone who is last will be first.*" It is an upside-down economy that God operates in. He uses the weak to defeat the strong, the least likely to lead the way. He forgives even the greatest sinner. He forgives even you and me.

Romans 6, verse 23, continues on: "*but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*". The free gift. This is the 'fair wage' that God pays us sinners. Eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.



**GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) When have you struggled with someone else receiving the 'free gift' of forgiveness and salvation from God? Why did you struggle with it?
- 2) Think of the many times that God has forgiven you over and over and over. Spend a few minutes in prayer thanking God for His forgiveness.
- 3) How can you extend God's 'fair wage' to those in your life and in our community or society who need to experience God's forgiveness?