

September 21, 2008

Messiah

Pentecost 19 - A

Matthew 20:1-16

“Grace is Never Fair”

Introduction

1. “It’s not fair!” – How many parents have heard these words before?
2. “Life’s not fair!” – How many children have heard these words before?
3. But look at the world in which we live – doesn’t it seem that at times we almost have the right to say “It’s not fair?!”
 - a. Are multiple hurricanes ravages homes, land, and businesses FAIR?
 - b. Is getting your email account hacked into and publishing it on the Internet FAIR?
 - c. Is having AIG and other corporate businesses going under and American tax dollars bailing them out FAIR?
4. And then there’s the whole faith thing – we spend our lives as Christians, we give much of our hard-earned dollars to the Church, we take the public ridicule of defending the faith
 - a. And then we are told that people who have only believed for a short time, who have obviously committed greater sins than us (so we think), or who didn’t suffer as much in life as we did – will also go to heaven?
 - b. It’s not fair! – we think
 - c. And in the parable today – Jesus is, in essence is saying, “Grace is never fair!”

I. Just a little background information in understanding this parable...

- A. This parable comes toward the end of a long day of teaching
 - a. Back in chapter 19 – we are told, “And Pharisees came up to him and tested him...”
 - b. Over 400 years, this legalistic group of Jews had developed, and now their teachings was the prevalent Jewish thought of the day
- B. The Pharisees believed that the Jews were the favored and ONLY group of people who were in God’s favor
 - a. Think of this group when John the Baptist was preaching to them, calling them to repentance
 - b. The Pharisees barked back, “We have Abraham as our father – we don’t need to repent”
 - c. The common Jewish thought was that they were a shoo-in for eternal life, *not only* because they were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...
 - d. But because they lived outward lives of good works - and yet Jesus identifies their hearts as evil, and the only laws the Pharisees were keeping were their own, not God’s
- C. And so, when Jesus comes and preaches the Gospel, calling sinners, and prostitutes, and tax collectors, and EVEN GENTILES to the kingdom of God –

the Pharisees were appalled! – even calling Jesus a blasphemer – a liar against God!

- a. It is now to this legalistic, self-righteous, man-centered thinking that Jesus speaks this parable in Matthew, chapter 20

II. Jesus said, “The Kingdom of Heaven IS LIKE... a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard”

- A. Now remember – Israel believed themselves, and themselves ONLY to be the “vineyard” of God
 - a. Throughout the Old Testament – God calls Israel “His Vineyard”
 - b. So, when the Pharisees hear this parable begin with a master and his vineyard – their ears are perked up – they know Jesus is talking about them

- B. The workday would have started at 6:00am and ended at 6:00pm
 - a. This was harvest time for the grapes – there was a small window of prime harvest for grapes – even fluctuating within a day’s time
 - b. In Jesus’ day – men would be standing around the market place waiting for someone to give them a job so they could feed their families that day
 - c. In this parable – the master comes to the market place and hires a number of workers to harvest his grapes – at 6am
 - i. The master promises to pay the workers a denarius – which was a very fair wage for a day’s work in Jesus’ day
 - ii. This was a fair and honest pay
 - d. When the master sees he needs more people to gather in his grapes that day, he goes to the market place, and there are still men standing around at 9am –
 - i. he hires them with the promise, “Whatever is right I will give you”
 - ii. The master had a good reputation, and the workers knew they would be paid fairly
 - e. If the grapes hung on the vine too long they became too sweet, thus losing their market price – and so the master realizes he needs more workers that very day
 - i. Again he goes to the market place, at 12 noon this time, and then again at 3pm – and hires more workers
 - ii. He says the same “Whatever is right I will give you”
 - iii. More than likely – these workers realized they would not get a full day’s wage, but at least something was better than nothing, and they could buy a little food for their family that day
 - f. And then finally, because this master has to get his grapes in that very day – he goes and hires yet another group of workers to work the final hour of the day
 - i. This time – the master says nothing about what he will give them
 - ii. The workers, no doubt, felt they could at least earn a very little amount, or maybe the master would give them an advance if they agreed to work for him again the next day

- iii. While this is a made-up story, this is how it would have worked in Jesus' day
- iv. The Pharisees are not alarmed up to this point about what they are hearing
- v. The Pharisees were probably wondering, "where is he going with this?"- how is He going to condemn us this time?

C. But they soon catch on!

- a. Now it's paytime at the end of the day
- b. It was normal for workers to get paid at the end of each day – because then the workers would go to the open market and buy food for the evening meal
- c. In the parable – the workers who worked only 1 hour get paid first – He gives them a denarius – a denarius
 - i. though he made no promises – this is what he did promise the first worker – who started at 6am
 - ii. No doubt – if this were real life – these workers would have been overjoyed with such generosity – getting a whole day's pay for only working one hour!
- d. And when the other workers came forward – the ones hired at 3pm, and noon, and 9am – they also each received a denarius – also very generous
- e. And then it came time for the workers who began at the beginning of the day – working from 6 in the morning until 6 in the evening
 - i. Though they may have been a bit curious with the all these workers receiving the same pay for different amount of hours of work...
 - ii. No doubt, even though the master had been very generous with these workers...
 - iii. Surely he would be even more generous with these working the longest – right?
 - iv. But when they held out their hands, they were given a denarius – just what they were promised!

D. You can begin to see the Pharisees getting a little uncomfortable with this story as Jesus continues...

- a. When the workers who worked the longest received their pay they began to grumble – and they were thinking, "This just is not fair!"
- b. These workers said, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching, middle east 120 degree afternoon scorching sun!"
- c. But the master replied, "Friend, I am doing YOU no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?"
 - i. You see – the master certainly did not cheat the ones starting at 6am – that was a good wage for a day's work, and that's what they were promised!

- ii. Those who started at 6am were upset because they thought – if those who worked less received a denarius, we who have done more, because we deserve more, should receive more!
- iii. But the master says, “Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to ME? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

III. Do you see why the Pharisees and the whole Jewish establishment would have been angry at this parable?

- A. The Pharisees knew Jesus identified them as the workers who worked from 6am
 - a. They were the children of Abraham, God called them His Israelite nation, He redeemed them as His children by delivering them out of Egypt, leading them through the wilderness, and giving them a land flowing with milk and honey
- B. But the Pharisees were not stupid – they knew who those “other workers” were...
 - a. Those hired at 9 and noon, and 3 were those who came to be believers later: prostitutes and Tax collectors who came to believe, those with leprosy and the demon-possessed who came to believe – Jesus was now including them in the kingdom of God
- C. And even more than that – those who were hired at 5 in the afternoon – they were the Gentiles, the non-Jews!
 - a. The Syrophenican woman, the Samaritan Woman at the well, the centurion’s son, and later all those non-Jews to whom St. Paul and the other apostles proclaimed the Gospel, and these Gentiles came to believe
 - b. And to the Pharisaic, Jewish mind, the thought was, “How dare this Jesus say these “sinners” and “Gentiles” be allowed into the kingdom of God with the same rights and privileges as “us Jews”...
 - c. “We have been God’s people long before them! We are better than them! We do more good works than them! We are holier than them! We give more money to the temple than them! We are more connected to Abraham and King David than them! We pray in public more than them! Our outward show is better than them!”
 - d. These Pharisees would have drawn probably 2 conclusions from Jesus’ parable
 - i. First – this Jesus is a lunatic, a sinner, and a blasphemer
 - ii. Second – they would have thought, what Jesus is teaching here in this parable JUST IS NOT FAIR!
 - iii. The Pharisees believed they should receive greater favor with God, a higher place in heaven than anyone else because of their own good works, their outward deeds, they show of holiness – and they thought it was all because of THEM, THEMSELVES, centered on what they have done!

IV. What does this parable say to you and me?

- A. I know we have many things on our minds, things we think are the MOST IMPORTANT – things that consume our day and affect our earthly lives
 - a. I know the presidential race is important, and our hearts and belief systems are wrapped up in it
 - b. I know our family life is important – the activities of our children, planning for retirement, paying our mortgage
 - c. I know the economic status of our nation is important – And how Fannie May, Freddie Mac, AIG, WaMu – how all these have immediate impact on our lives
 - d. I know how important the acts of nature are – a drought, a flood, a hurricane
 - e. And I know how the things in life often seem so unfair:
 - i. How evil seems to win over good
 - ii. How we work hard and not seem to get ahead
 - iii. How we try to be healthy, and yet we get sick

- B. But there is ONE THING that is more important than anything else in the entire world – and it would seem that it is MOST UNFAIR!
 - a. **GOD'S GRACE** would seem most unfair
 - b. God never complains, He wouldn't
 - c. God is not crying "FOUL" – rather He cries, "FORGIVEN!"

- C. The unfairness is this: while all people deserve nothing but God's wrath and punishment (Jew and Gentile alike) – Christ takes the wrath and punishment of our sins into His own flesh and gives us life eternal
 - a. It isn't fair that Jesus died on the cross - but it is by that cross we are forgiven
 - b. It isn't fair that Jesus shed His blood – but it is by His blood we are washed clean
 - c. It isn't fair that Jesus was rejected by the Father – but it is by that rejection that we are received into the kingdom of God
 - d. It isn't fair that any Jew should go to heaven, it isn't fair that any prostitute or tax collector should go to heaven, it isn't fair that any Gentile should go to heaven, it isn't fair that ANY OF US should go to heaven!
 - e. **But that's the point – God's grace is never fair! – but it is good!**

- D. God's grace is so generous!
 - a. The person who comes to believe in the last hour of life receives the generous grace of God!
 - b. The person who believes from the time of his infant baptism receives the generous grace of God!
 - c. The person who was called by God in the Old Testament, coming from the ancestry of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – receives the generous grace of God

- d. Whenever we are forgiven, saved, adopted into the kingdom of God, given eternal life → IT IS ALWAYS GRACE! IT IS ALWAYS GRACE!

Conclusion

1. It's very difficult for the mind to grasp the idea that salvation is ALWAYS by the grace of God – never our work, ancestry, deeds, motives, or money
2. Grace is always the gift of God flowing from the Cross of Jesus Christ → His Work, His deed, and the price He paid with His own blood
3. This parable – and the Christian faith – is not about how long we believed, how much we did, how much we did for the church, or how much we suffered for the Gospel
4. This parable – and the Christian faith – is about Jesus Christ – how much He did, How he made us members of the Holy Christian Church through His d/r, and how He suffered to forgive our sins and to give us eternal life in heaven
5. To the world, to the Pharisee, to the self-righteous – they would say “It's not fair”
6. And God says, “My grace is never fair” – but it is very good. Amen.