

MATTHEW 20:1-16

WHAT'S FAIR ABOUT THAT?¹

“The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So, they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘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 heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 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?’ So, the last will be first, and the first last.”²

It's getting dark; it is obvious that she is nervous and worried by the way she is pacing. She has swept the dirt floor several times and rearranged the rugs. She keeps staring into the darkness. It is growing late, and she begins to pray, “O LORD, my God, where is my Joseph? Where is he, LORD? It is getting late and I know he didn't find work today. I went to the marketplace and I saw him still standing there late in the afternoon. O LORD, where is he? Has something happened to him, or is he too ashamed to come home again empty handed?”

Her prayer is broken by a tug on her dress. It's her five-year-old daughter, Elizabeth. Little Elizabeth asks, “Mama, where is Daddy? Why has Daddy not come home yet? Is he bringing us something to eat? Mama, I'm hungry.” At that moment the door burst open and Joseph shouts, “Hello, Lizzy! How's my big girl?” Grabbing his wife, he kisses her and nearly laughs, “Hello, Honey!” She is startled, confused—she certainly wasn't expecting this. He's not drunk, but he is certainly acting strangely, not at all like a man dejected by failure.

“Prepare the table,” he almost shouts. “We are going to have a feast! Look! I brought bread; we can have it with the cheese I've brought. I have figs! And for the two women in my life, there is a little bit of honey!”

Confusion marks Rebecca's face as she questions what she is witnessing. “Joseph, where did you get this food? I know you didn't work. I went past the marketplace and I saw you standing there late in the day.”

¹ Several decades past Gary Carver preached a sermon entitled “Grumbling About Generosity,” which served as the inspiration for this message; some illustrations from that message have been used in this message. Carver's message can still be found at <https://www.preaching.com/sermons-topics/grace-grumbling-about-generosity-matthew-201-16/>, accessed 5 March 2018

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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He grins broadly as he says, “The most amazing thing happened today. I was standing in the marketplace waiting for someone—anyone—to come hire me. The day was getting late and many others had given up. Some had found work even in the middle of the day; there were just a few of us left standing there. I just couldn't come home empty-handed again. I couldn't stand another night just lying in bed, knowing that my girls had not eaten. The growling of my empty stomach could not drown out Lizzy's words, ‘Daddy, I'm hungry.’

“I was almost ready to give up when around the eleventh hour the most unusual thing happened. A man came up and he yelled to us, asking why we weren't working. Several of us said, ‘No one has hired us.’ He said, ‘I'll hire you! Come on and work!’

“I knew it was late and there wouldn't be much in the few minutes of work; but I decided that a few pennies were better than nothing, so I went and worked in his vineyard. There were people there who had been working a long time. You could tell they were tired and hot and dusty. The few of us that went at the end of the day worked for only an hour.

“Then the owner of the orchard called all of us to receive our pay. And here's the most exciting part—he paid us first, the ones who had only worked an hour, not those who had worked three hours or six hours or nine hours or twelve hours. This is what totally blew us away—he paid us as though we had worked the entire day? We worked one single hour and we were paid for an entire day!”

“I couldn't believe what had happened. Oh, yeah, I was overjoyed! I was ecstatic! I ran to the marketplace and bought all of this food. Doesn't it look good? Isn't it wonderful? We shall have a feast tonight.”

Rebecca's eyes were filling with tears and her mouth had broken into a broad grin. “Joseph, that is almost unbelievable!”

Then Joseph spoke again. “There's more. You see, as I was purchasing this food, I heard some of the workers who had worked longer than those of us who were hired at the last. They were grumbling. They made it obvious that they were disgusted, angry, even downright mad. Some of them recognised me and glared. I didn't say anything; I mean, what could I say? I just gathered the food I had bought and came on home. I couldn't wait to get home and share this good fortune with you and Lizzy. Now, let's recline at the table and thank God for the favour He has shown us. God is so good.”

Again, confusion seemed to mark Rebecca's face, and she asked, “Joseph, may I have a question?”

“Yes, dear?”

“I'm curious, why are there just three loaves instead of the customary four? And are my eyes deceiving me, it looks like someone has cut off half of the cheese.”

“Ah, you're very observant. I didn't think you would mind, but on the way home I remembered the widow, Sarah. I knew she didn't have much, and she might even be doing without food. So, I stopped by her house and gave her some of the bread and cheese.”

Wiping moisture that suddenly clouded her eyes, Rebecca responded, “Oh my dear, kind Joseph, my sweet, generous Joseph, you know that such kindness is more than alright. Let's bow and give thanks to the Lord who has shown us such favour.”

I doubt that you have ever heard this parable in this way. You must admit, Jesus' parable is a strange story. It's really strange; we could never account for such an experience, could we? Things just don't work this way in our world. Try telling a story like that to the CRA? Can you imagine what a union would do with something like this? What would a good attorney do with this? For that matter, what would a church do with a story like this?

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE... Take notice of the manner in which Jesus begins the parable? He began by saying, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." Jesus wants His disciples to realise that though they live in this physical world, they are citizens of an unseen world. Though unseen, that world for which we are destined as disciples of the Risen Saviour is very real. For this reason, the Apostle to the Gentiles has reminded Christians, "Our citizenship is in heaven" [**PHILIPPIANS 3:20**]. So, it is that in this instance, Jesus is stating an essential truth, illustrating that truth by comparing it to something the disciples can understand. He is telling them a parable. This is a common technique Jesus used when He wanted to communicate divine truth.

For many of the professed people of God, the Kingdom of Heaven is associated with some distant, unreal condition that has no correlation with the present life. Perhaps you are one who wonders what is meant when Jesus speaks of the "Kingdom of Heaven." Perhaps you question whether the Kingdom of Heaven is a reality, or think it is a dream that can't be defined. I see that Jesus spoke of "the Kingdom of Heaven" at least thirty-one times in Matthew's Gospel. Interestingly, the term "Kingdom of Heaven" does not occur in any other Gospel account. Clearly, this is an important kingdom; Christians should know what Jesus meant. The term "Kingdom of God" occurs at least fifty-two times in the Gospels. This particular term is found most frequently in Luke's Gospel.

This leads me to ask whether there should be a distinction between the two terms, between the "Kingdom of Heaven" and the "Kingdom of God." Also, we should understand what our relationship as Christians is to the "Kingdom of Heaven" or the "Kingdom of God." Some scholars try to make a great distinction between the two terms, but I don't see a difference. Each of the Evangelists presents a view of Jesus that is distinct. John presents Jesus as *the Son of God*; he reveals Jesus' power and the signs He performed as evidence of His divine nature. That is John's perspective that was guided by the Spirit of God as he presented his Gospel. Doctor Luke emphasises Jesus as *the Son of Man*. If I want to know something of the humanity of Jesus, Luke is the Gospel I would read. Mark emphasises Jesus as *the Servant of the Holy One*. Readers of Mark's Gospel are almost breathless as they read through the Gospel he wrote. Mark presents us with a vignette of Jesus at work and barely pauses to catch his breath before he rushes to the next event. Finally, Matthew is presenting Jesus as *the King of the Jews*. Jesus is the One sent to sit on David's throne.

Since Matthew emphasises Jesus as King of the Jews, it makes sense that he would appropriate the concept of the Kingdom of Heaven as the particular kingdom Jesus was building. Matthew, also identified as Levi in Scripture, was likely from the tribe of Levi. He would likely have had knowledge of the Law, even though he had become a tax collector. As a Levite, it is reasonable to assume that Matthew had more than a passing acquaintance with the Law; therefore, he would be alert to the promise of the Anointed One coming to reign. Hence, it is natural that he would have a desire to see the Kingdom of Heaven brought in.

Jesus compared the Kingdom of Heaven to a wealthy land owner who hires men to work in his vineyard. He went down to 7-11© and hired some day workers to harvest his grapes. They agreed on a wage and they went to work. Later in the morning, he passed by the place where the labourers hung out and saw a group standing idle. He said to them, "You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you." He hired others three hours later, and he hired still others three hours after that. All worked on the strength of his promise to do whatever was right. Near the end of the day, the eleventh hour, he made one last trip into town and hired more men who were standing idle because no one had hired them. "You go into my vineyard!"

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At last, the day ended, the men could draw their wages and go home to wives and children. They would have enough to put food on the table for another day or two, enough, perhaps, to provide for a scrap of cloth to patch torn clothing. Some of the men had worked the entire day; they had put in twelve hours of work in the vineyard. Others had laboured for nine hours, still near a full day of work at that time. Still others worked only six hours, and some had put in only three hours. Finally, there were those individuals who had only worked for one hour. The land owner began to settle accounts, beginning with those whom he hired last. Those watching noted that he paid them a denarius—that was a full-day's wage. Then, those who worked for three hours also received a denarius, a full wage. Likewise, those who worked six hours and nine hours also received the same wage. At last, those who worked the entire day, a full twelve hours, were paid the going rate of a denarius [see **MATTHEW 20:1-10**].

When the landowner paid the men whom he had hired, those who had worked the whole day began to grumble. Their argument may appear reasonable from our twisted idea of fairness. “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 heat” [**MATTHEW 20:12**]. Again, the complaint appears favourable because we still hold the world's view of life in our own lives.

The land owner responded to their gripe, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 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” [**MATTHEW 20:13-15**].

Jesus concluded the parable with a commentary, “The last will be first, and the first last” [**MATTHEW 20:16**]. Focus on the fact that the landowner honoured his agreement with those who worked twelve hours—they got exactly what they contracted for. The landowner was generous and kind to those who only worked an hour. He didn't want them to go home empty handed to a hungry family. Those who were hired later in the day were clearly told that the landowner would give them “whatever is right.” They didn't agree to a wage; they agreed to work, trusting that the landowner would be fair. Was he fair? He was not only fair, he was generous; and there were many who complained about his generosity.

I have posted on a hand loading forum for a number of years. When I first began posting, I made the acquaintance of a gracious woman who was exceptionally generous. She and her husband were very successful in the business world. They used their wealth to bless many people. When the tsunami struck Japan a few years back, she sent at her own expense hundreds of thousands of dollars of relief supplies to be distributed. It so happened that she had given gifts to a number of people she had come to know on that forum where we were posting. She was attacked, not because she was generous, but because she didn't give the complainers gifts. Those grumblers were like the workers complaining that the land owner wasn't fair. What they were complaining about was that they could not dictate how the landowner distributed his own wealth. They were complaining because they wanted to be arbiters of what would be distributed and in what manner!

Those who got what they contracted for sound like contemporary social justice warriors—they think they can dictate to the owners of companies how they are to market their products, who the company can support and how the company can advertise. It is a forgotten rule in this day that those who own get to determine how they will run their own companies. We live in a day when protests are allowed to determine policy. It requires no investment of moneys, no investment of labour, no investment of thought to change the world for modern activists. All that is required is a willingness to be stirred up by some story, whether true or not.

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Here is the greater tragedy still, the same willingness to concede to the loudest voice appears to determine doctrine among the people of God. Too often, ungodly men and women, intent on making the congregation sensitive to the latest social need, are willing to stifle the teaching of the Word in order to promote some pet point of view. Terrible though that is, what is more terrible still, is that these religious SJWs are convinced that they are doing God's work! It is bad enough when a politician promotes the slaughter of the unborn as doing God's work, but when the assembly of the righteous is unable any longer to discern the mind of God and embrace evil, they may well be beyond redemption.

WHO WAS CHEATED? It seems natural for us to imagine that those who worked the longest would think that the land owner should pay on a graduated scale. In their mind, and likely in our mind as well, there should be "fairness," and the workers are the ones who determine what is "fair." We conduct our affairs in that manner, so God should act in the same way we act, shouldn't He? The appropriate response would be to ask if we actually conduct our affairs in that manner we want to be treated.

We're pretty good at taking care of Number One; we do a pretty fair job of watching out for ourselves. We learn how to promote our own interests from the earliest age. Even as children we place ourselves at the centre of our lives. Our parents doted on us in earlier years, and if we grew up as Millennials, as Gen-Xers or even as Baby Boomers, we were spoiled—yes, spoiled! We grew up with more toys than we could ever play with. We didn't know what it was to go without. We see images of people in distant lands forced to scavenge for wood to cook their meager meals, and we simply cannot connect. We see images of infants with swollen bellies crying as a vulture waits for the opportunity to dine, and the picture is surreal.

I conducted my doctoral studies on biochemical transitions observed in the body during conditions of kwashiorkor and marasmus. The studies compelled me to be informed of what starvation, protein-calorie malnutrition in scientific terminology, looked like. I was startled to discover that vast numbers of children, especially in what are commonly called third-world countries, would die from these conditions. I learned that multitudes go to bed hungry each night and awaken with that same hunger gnawing at their bellies. Later, I learned that such devastating hunger happens even in rich nations such as the United States and Canada—children can quite literally starve in the midst of plenty. As a Boomer, I never really connected with this need.

When my middle daughter, Rochelle, served as a missionary in Africa, the missionaries were robbed as they were walking home one evening. A man grabbed the physician's purse before running into the dark night. Later, when they were forced to evacuate because of the revolution in the Congo, she was able to carry only a knapsack with some clothing in it. Everything else in the house was looted; nothing was left for the missionaries. Her comment on that night was telling. "Dad, I couldn't resent the looters taking our goods. The people had nothing, and our clothing would be almost priceless for those people." We who live in Canada know so little of true poverty.

I've told you how during my graduate studies, we invited a couple of young men studying in Dallas to share our Thanksgiving meal one year. They were from another nation, one that we think of as third-world. Our meal was quite small as we didn't have much money. It consisted of a small toupie ham, yams, vegetables and rolls. From our perspective, the meal was meagre, but the young men saw things differently. The eldest of the two, with tears in his eyes, was moved to say he couldn't believe how wealthy we were. He said he could never imagine so much food in his own land.

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After the meal, we sat at the table enjoying one another's company. The young men spoke of their homes and of the life they had known during their childhoods in that distant nation. Their memories were a revelation to Lynda and me. A statement one of the men made left an indelible impression on either of us. The young man spoke of the poverty which he had known as he was growing up; he told us that his family saved the rice sacks, carefully folding them and storing them. After all, one could never tell when they might need the cloth to cover their nakedness. This one statement compelled us to realise just how incredibly blessed we were. We thought we were poor; but we didn't realise how truly wealthy we were.

In the parable Jesus told, we should ask, "Who was cheated? Was anyone cheated?" Because God treated all equally, it would be pretty difficult to argue that God was unfair. We hear the words, but we are not always convinced when we hear, "God shows no partiality" [ROMANS 2:11]. Paul's affirmation echoes that of Peter, who wrote, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" [ACTS 10:34-35]. Showing partiality, showing favouritism is sinful in the sight of God [see JUDE 16; JAMES 2:9], and God does not sin. There is no hint of partiality, no suggestion of favouritism, in the parable Jesus told. What is obvious is that there is a challenge for those hearing the parable to see matters from God's perspective.

Did the vineyard belong to the landowner? He could engage whom he desired to work in his vineyard. He was not obligated to anyone he hired, other than to pay what he had promised. Did the landowner have power over his own wealth? It would be unreasonable to imagine that those who did not manage his wealth could direct how he was to distribute what was his. That brings us back to the question, who was cheated? The obvious answer is that no one was cheated. Those who agreed to work received what was promised. Those who worked the entire day received what they were promised. Those who were engaged at the third hour were told that the landowner would give them "whatever is right." Surely, no one would argue that he did not act in a fair manner with them. Those hired in the sixth hour were likewise promised "whatever is right," and they had received fair compensation. Those who were engaged at the eleventh hour had no promise, but they received a wage indicative of a full-day's work. Who was cheated? The obvious answer is that not one of those who worked was cheated, each one was treated fairly.

What we witness in Jesus' telling of this parable is that those who agreed to work are projecting their expectations on the landowner. Those hired at the end of the day could not have been expecting much, but they received a great deal from the perspective of how long they worked. An incident that occurred during Jesus' ministry illustrates this particular point.

Jesus had accepted an invitation to dine with a Pharisee. When the Master entered the house and reclined at table, a woman, a notorious sinner, entered into the house and stood behind the Master. She began to weep as she stood there. She was standing close enough that her tears were falling onto Jesus' feet. It would seem that she was embarrassed at what was happening, so without thinking, she knelt down, unloosed her hair and began to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair.

The Pharisee observed all this without comment; but that doesn't mean he wasn't thinking! His thoughts, evident to the Creator of all things, were hypercritical of Jesus. The Pharisee was thinking, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner" [LUKE 7:39].

Knowing what the man was thinking, Jesus said, "Simon, I have something to say to you" [LUKE 7:40a]. Simon, for that was the Pharisee's name, responded, coolly, never imagining that he was about to be exposed, answered, "Say it, Teacher."

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This is the parable Jesus told. “A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more” [LUKE 7:41-42]?

The answer was obvious, even to a Pharisee. So, Simon answered Jesus’ question, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt” [LUKE 7:43a]. Jesus commended the Pharisee for his astute observation, “You have judged rightly.”

Had Jesus stopped there, I suppose Simon would have been spared what was coming. However, the Master continued, He was addressing Simon’s critical spirit, “Turning toward the woman [Jesus] said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.’ And he said to [the woman], ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this, who even forgives sins?’ And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’” [LUKE 7:44-50].

Take special note of Jesus’ words: “He who is forgiven little, loves little.” Those workers hired at the end of the day had much for which to thank God. Those who had laboured throughout the entire day had just as much to be thankful for, but they didn’t feel the weight of gratitude that those who were not expecting much would have felt.

SEEING MATTERS FROM GOD’S PERSPECTIVE — In the middle of this parable is the landowner. The inclusion of this individual might seem rather peculiar. I don’t imagine that any of us have any difficulty concluding that we are meant to understand that the landowner represents God. By introducing this landowner, Jesus has shown us an angle concerning God’s character that many of us aren’t expecting. This landowner is unpredictable; He is generous to a fault. He doesn’t treat those whom He retains to work for him as we would treat them. We are all about fairness, about equality, especially when it comes to our own service. The landowner, however, will do with his money what he wants to do because he can; he doesn’t ask anyone’s permission and he isn’t in the least concerned that his actions may offend others who happen to think differently.

We would be justified in asking just why the Master would tell this particular parable? In order to answer that question, it will be helpful to remind ourselves what was taking place immediately before Jesus delivered the parable. You will no doubt remember that Matthew tells us that a man rushed up to Jesus asking, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life” [MATTHEW 19:16b]? This man was recognised as possessing wealth; he was a man with position. Perhaps his clothing or his demeanor spoke of his wealth and position. He wanted to be Jesus’ disciple, but he was unclear on what the rules would be in order to be included as a disciple.

Jesus drew the man out by reminding him of the commandments, the Ten Words. The young man eagerly asserted that he had kept all these from the earliest days of his youth. “Well,” Jesus responded, “if you really want to be perfect, sell everything you own, give the proceeds to the poor, and then come, follow Me” [see MATTHEW 19:17-21]. You will remember how the young man responded. The Word informs us, “When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” [MATTHEW 19:22]. The young man was spiritually impoverished. The great tragedy is that he knew he was spiritually impoverished; that is why he had approached Jesus in the first place. However, he was compelled to confront the tragic fact that he didn’t possess his wealth—his wealth possessed him!

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This interaction provided the perfect teachable moment for instructing His disciples. “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” [MATTHEW 19:23, 24].

Of course, much as is true for us to this day, the disciples were flummoxed by what Jesus said. Wide-eyed, they responded, “Who then can be saved” [MATTHEW 19:25b]? These men were locked in on the idea that rich people could be saved because they were rich. In fact, they wondered, “If a rich man can’t get into Heaven, who can get into Heaven?” These disciples equated wealth with God’s blessing; and if God had blessed someone, surely that meant that He would accept them into Heaven! The disciples were focused on the wrong thing—they were looking at the blessing and not the One who blessed. Therefore, Jesus redirected their gaze, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” [MATTHEW 19:26].

We think that way without giving the matter a second thought. Rich people are blessed. Those are the people we want in our church and seated on our various congregational boards. Powerful leaders are blessed. We want those powerful individuals to give guidance in our churches. People who are recognised by the world are precisely the sort of people we want to serve as elders and as deacons or directing the affairs of the churches. We’ve seen this scenario played out so frequently that it is almost a caricature of the Faith. A famous individual, perhaps an athlete or some star in B-grade films professes to be a Christian, and we promote them as a spokesperson for the Faith. However, should an unknown individual be saved, we have no difficulty saying to them, “‘You stand over there,’ or, ‘Sit down at my feet,’” [JAMES 2:3b].

Peter, I have to love impetuous Peter, Peter could not contain himself when Jesus spoke about the difficulty of rich people getting into Heaven. “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have” [MATTHEW 19:27]? “What’s in this for us? We’ve made some pretty great sacrifices. What are we getting out of this?” The implication of his question was that surely the disciples could expect some great rewards.

Peter was trying to make certain that he wasn’t forgotten. Just like James and John using their mother to curry favour in the coming Kingdom [see MATTHEW 20:20-23], Peter was trying to make certain that he got a good reward. I’ve pointed out the foolishness of James and John trying to promote themselves, but Peter may have been the first to promote himself in an attempt at securing a better place in the Kingdom!

Like us, Simon Peter framed his approach to the Lord in order to position himself in the best possible light. We read that his words, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have” [MATTHEW 19:27]? It is as though he said, “Uh, Lord, we gave up everything just to follow You. I’m certain we have a lot coming, right?” Just like the other disciples, Peter wanted to make certain that Number One was looked after. Peter wanted to make certain that all those good things that come to those favoured by God would accrue to his account. He wanted to be great in the eyes of those who were around him.

Jesus said there would be rewards, and the rewards promised would be beyond anything any of us might ever imagine! “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” [MATTHEW 19:28, 29]. However, these rewards are not going to be given out as we would give them. He added this statement, “Many who are first will be last, and the last first” [MATTHEW 19:30]. The disciples didn’t see that coming.

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Here's the question that must be asked of each one who listens to the message this day. Where do you see yourself in Jesus' parable? There are people listening today who would say they are one-hour workers. How could you ever compare yourself to a missionary who left the comfort of Canada to live a life of deprivation in order to tell others of the Saviour? How could you ever compare yourself to an evangelist who boldly presents the message of life as the light of God floods into darkened corners of the world? You could never hope to compare yourself to a noted pastor or to a Bible teacher who instructs multitudes each week. How could you ever compare yourself to a bi-vocational pastor doing the best he can with little training, labouring in a small congregation, never making enough money to get ahead. When his ministry ends at last, the man doesn't have enough for retirement. Because he lived in a parsonage most of his life, he may not even own a home. How can you stand with such a self-sacrificing individual?

Again, think of that mother who single-handedly, either because of the death of her husband or because her husband focused on his own desires, is raising her children all by herself. She sacrifices and works and does without to see that her children get things that you and I take for granted. How do we measure up against people like that? We don't!

I was raised by a dad who toiled without the help of a wife to raise two boys. He prayed for his sons daily; he named them before God each night. Many nights I went to bed listening to my dad as he knelt by his bed, pleading with God for his boys. I suspect that he died with a prayer on his lips for his sons. How can I compare to that sort of commitment? I can't! I have great respect for those who must raise their children without the help of a spouse, and my respect is greater still when that individual continues to serve the Living God.

Sometimes we see ourselves as the twelve-hour worker. If asked, we will tell you that we've been in this work all day long. We worked hard and we're tired—No, we're exhausted! We grew up in the church and we've never known anything but the Faith. We worked in the nursery for thirty years; we have changed more diapers than Gerber! We have worked in Vacation Bible School in the hottest part of the day; we served cookies and Kool-Aid to so many children that we've lost count. We've listened to more dry, dusty sermons than anyone should endure. We've given sacrificially; and every time the church had a special program we found a way to give even more. We've served on every committee in the church. We have been there every time the door has opened and sometimes we have dragged our children screaming and hollering to the church. We've done it all! We've been there; we've been the pillars of the church! We sometimes wonder whether the church could last very long if we were not there.

Then one day, here they come, strolling into the church with their tank tops, cut offs and flip-flops, their hair unkempt and sporting a scruffy beard. They are saying, "YOLO! Let's turn on to Jesus!" And they turn on to Jesus. They never listened to any of those long dry, boring sermons; they never worked in Vacation Bible School; they didn't change all those diapers or wipe those runny noses. They think **JOHN 3:16** is a rest room on the third floor. They don't know a benediction from an introit. They know nothing! They respond to Christ in faith and they are going to get the same thing we are? Wait a minute! Is that fair?

Listen to me—we have a choice. We can either be gracious and thankful for what God has given to us or we can gripe and complain and grumble that God has been gracious to others. Sometimes it is hard for us to rejoice about God's goodness to someone else. It is difficult to be happy because God has been good to someone else—probably someone that we don't think is as deserving as are we. It is difficult when we work twelve hours in the long hot sun and we get paid the very same thing as that person who worked only one hour. It is sometimes hard for us to celebrate the goodness of God when His goodness is extended to someone else.

MATTHEW 20:1-16
WHAT'S FAIR ABOUT THAT?

I realise that some people, even some who call themselves Christian, are just miserable. These sorry souls have made up their minds that they will be miserable in their outlook, miserable in their demeanour, miserable in their lives—their face is frozen in a permanent frown. Their lack of joy has become the manifestation of who they are; worse yet—they like it that way! For them, it feels good to be miserable; they are uncomfortable if they experience joy.

“You’re looking bright today!” “Not really, my lumbago is getting me down and my porridge was overcooked this morning and...” Well, you get the picture. They are determined not to enjoy anything; rather, they are determined to let you know how terrible they feel. If you want to enjoy your day, avoid them like the plague! They’ll do all they can to drag you down. It is almost as though they enjoy being miserable and making others miserable with them. Here’s the thing, if you focus on God’s generosity to another, forgetting that He has been generous to you, you will shortly become a grumpy old saint, sitting and soaking in your misery, dragging down anyone who comes near you.

Alternatively, you can determine to focus on God and His grace, rejoicing that He is generous, rejoicing that he is unlike any person you’ve ever known. You can focus on God’s character, exulting in His mercy and His goodness toward us, marvelling that He included you in His mercy. I know this is what I choose. Amen.