

### Matthew 20:1-16 (NIV84)

<sup>1</sup> “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> “About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup> He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ <sup>5</sup> So they went. “He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. <sup>6</sup> About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. 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. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup> “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ <sup>9</sup> “The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came, and each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. <sup>12</sup> ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ <sup>13</sup> “But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’ <sup>14</sup> Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. <sup>15</sup> Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ <sup>16</sup> “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

## It Isn't Fair!

“It isn’t fair!” These are familiar words to parents, especially if you have more than one child. It often seems that no matter how hard you try, one or more of your kids will feel that the others are getting special favors. The idea of “not fair” seems hardwired into human beings.

C.S. Lewis once suggested that way to prove to a moral relativist that there is such a thing as right and wrong would be to cheat them. Right away they would object: “It’s not fair!” They would appeal to an objective moral code in spite of themselves.

The context of this parable is disciples’ dismay at Jesus’ treatment of a “rich young ruler.” This well-connected young man had come to Jesus and asked how he could gain eternal life. Jesus answered him, “Keep all the commandments.” “I’ve kept them all!” the young man answered. Jesus responded, “Go and sell everything you have and give your money to the poor.” The Bible records that the man “went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”

This was a real shock to the disciples. If a rich man couldn’t be saved, who could? You see they were raised to believe that each person God what they deserved in life. Rich

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people were blessed by God. Poor people were cursed. Sickness was a punishment for sin. You could almost call this common idea the “Prosperity Law.” This is reflected in all the comments of Job’s friends on what a terrible sinner he must have been.

If a rich man couldn’t be saved, who could? Tevye, the father in *Fiddler on the Roof*, sings a famous song: “If I were a rich man...” His wife responds that riches are a curse. So Tevye looks up to heaven and says, “Curse me, Master of the Universe, curse me!” That was pretty typical of Jews in Jesus’ day, too.

Peter, in his usual way, shouts out: “We have left everything to follow you!” Jesus answers him carefully. Yes, He says, you will have a great reward. But be careful — you don’t understand very much about this. “The first shall be last and the last shall be first...”

Then he tells the parable. At 7am, a landowner went to town square to get day laborers. In midmorning he came back and picked up some more. The same in mid-afternoon. And finally at the end of the day, he picked up another group.

At sunset, he gave them their pay. Everyone was paid the same! The 11-hour guys were understandably angry. “It isn’t fair!” The landowner answered that he can be as generous as he wants.

What a thud this is! If you admit it, it is very irritating! This is our economic system turned upside down. Jesus is making a simple but very difficult point: **God’s grace is not given out according to what we deserve.**

A large, prosperous evangelical church in London had planted three churches in the inner city. On the first Sunday of the year all four churches met together for communion. The new churches had all kinds of people, converted thieves, drug dealers, and so on.

The pastor noticed a former burglar kneeling at the communion rail right beside a judge from the high court of England. The former burglar had been sentenced to 7 years in prison by that same judge back when he sat on the criminal bench. Neither one seemed aware of the other.

After church the judge and the pastor were walking home together. The judge said, “Did you notice who was kneeling next to me at the communion rail this morning?” The pastor nodded. The judge went on, “What a miracle of grace!” The pastor again nodded. “His conversion was a true miracle,” he said. “Oh, you’re referring to the former criminal,” said the judge, “But I was referring to myself. When that man came out of jail he had nothing. When he felt Jesus inviting him to receive forgiveness and eternal life, he knew how much he needed the Lord.

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“As for me, I was born into privilege. I went to the right church and to the right schools. I was taught to be a gentleman whose word was his bond. All I needed to do was to go to church, take communion, and be respectable. Pastor, nothing but the amazing grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on the same level as that burglar, needing forgiveness just as much. It took so much grace for God to forgive my spiritual pride and self-deception, to cause me to admit I was just as needy as that burglar I sent to jail.”

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The Gospel still goes against the grain today. We live in a world of laws. We have to, to keep evil from taking over everything. Business, school, even church — these worlds have laws and standards. You have to measure up in some way. You have to follow the rules. If you don't you normally receive the consequences: you get fired, or get fined, or whatever.

But when we come into another place, at the foot of the cross, before the face of Jesus, that's another world. Performance doesn't matter here. No one's righteousness is worth anything here. There's only mercy, only grace. And it's tame for everyone.

But isn't there a reward? Jesus promised that we will receive great rewards in heaven. But we don't understand how God figures this out. It's hidden in the mystery of Christ. “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first...”

Addie Mathison died last week. She was a wonderful woman, wild and crazy! She and her husband, Luther, farmed together in North Dakota. But then they felt the call to the mission field. Marcia and I knew them in seminary back in the 70's. What fun they were! After graduation Lu and Addie went to the mission field in Africa, where Lu worked for many years as an agricultural missionary, helping the farmers farm better.

I visited them once, in Yaguoua, Cameroon. Addie, who was deeply beloved by the African women, was her same old self. After dinner she suddenly said, “Let's go on our Disneyland ride!” I just looked at her. So she and Lu took me down to the river, where we boarded a flat boat and were poled across to Chad. It was my only visit to Chad. I didn't see any crocodiles on that ride, but the boat did sway a lot.

A number of years ago Lu and Addie retired. They had very little. There was no golf in Florida for them. Lu took a tiny church in North Dakota. He volunteered in the community, and eventually got a part time job with the county agriculture. Addie's funeral was last weekend. I hope there was a large crowd. But I know this: It's not her goodbye that really matters, it is her welcome up in heaven.

After serving as a Presbyterian missionary for 40 years in Africa, and burying his wife there, Henry C. Morrison finally had to return to America because of sickness. As the

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great ocean liner docked on the West Side of Manhattan, Morrison heard a big crowd and a brass band. Unbeknownst to him down in third class, former President Teddy Roosevelt was also on that boat, returning from safari in Arica. As Morrison watched the crowd swarm around the former President, he couldn't help but feel resentment. There was no one there to welcome him. Then, he said later, an inner voice whispered in his heart: "You're not home yet."