

That's not fair! How often we hear that complaint; how often we speak it ourselves. Why does she get two cookies, while I only get one? Why does he get to cut to the front, while I wait in line? We all have a sense of fairness, especially when we think that we are being treated unfairly.

Today's parable tells us: God is not fair...and that's a good thing! Today's parable tells us: God is generous and merciful, and we live by His mercy and generosity. Let us first consider the parable, and then see a warning, a truth, and a comfort from Jesus' words.

In Matthew's gospel, this parable is spoken in response to the rich young man, and to the apostle Peter. The rich young man comes to Jesus, boasting of how he had kept the law. Very good, Jesus says, you lack just one thing: sell all that you have and give to the poor, then come, follow me. Jesus showed the young man that his god was really money and greed, and therefore his boasting of keeping the law was in vain.

Peter's eye catches the opportunity presented as the rich young man leaves, saddened by Jesus' words. Lord, Peter says, what about us? We've left families and houses to follow you—what do we get? You will have your reward, Jesus tells him, as will all who leave families and homes for my sake. But, Jesus warns, be careful! Many who are first will be last, and the last first. Be careful, Jesus warns, that you do not think too highly of the rewards you have earned, and so focus on your own deeds that you lose the reward or look down on others. To illustrate this, Jesus tells the parable.

There is a master, an owner of a vineyard, hiring laborers for the day. It is a scene straight out of the economy and work-a-day world of Jesus' time. The day-laborers gather in the market, waiting to be hired for the day. The master goes out as the day begins, early in the

morning. Six o'clock our time was the first hour by their reckoning. He hires laborers for the day, agreeing to pay them a denarius, a Greek coin that is literally "a day's wages." It is a fair contract: a day's pay for a day's work.

The master returns at the third hour, at 9, and hires more laborers for his vineyard. I'll give you whatever is right, he tells them. He does the same at noon and at 3. Then at 5 o'clock, at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, the master returns one more time. There is only one hour of work left now; the day is almost over. Yet still he hires more laborers and sends them into his vineyard. This last group is a curious hire: such a thing was not done, for obvious reasons. What's the point, with only an hour left in the day? It is already a sign of the master's generosity. He hires men who would otherwise end the day, having earned nothing, probably hungry, since they would have no means to buy food. The master's hire is a mark of his generosity, as he provides for these laborers also.

Then the day ends, and it is time to pay the workers. Remember, the master told the last groups—those hired at 5, at 3, at noon, and at 9, that he would pay them whatever is right. What is right for them? we wonder. The last go first. Those hired at five are paid a denarius, a day's wages for an hour's work. A generous wage, to be sure. Then the workers hired at three are paid the same: a denarius; those hired at noon receive the same, as do those hired at nine. Now the first workers, those hired at six, come forward to be paid. They expect—logically—to be paid more. It's only fair; they worked longer. Yet they too are paid the same: a denarius, a day's wages, exactly what they agreed to.

You can predict their reaction; put yourself in their shoes: That's not fair. We worked the longest; we bore the burden and the heat of the day; why do these others get paid as much as we

do? Haven't we earned more than this? They file their complaint with the master: this is not fair.

The master will have none of it. I've done you no wrong, he says. You agreed to work for this very wage, and it is a fair wage. You are only upset because I have been generous to others—that's why you are not content with your wage. Don't be upset, he tells them: why should you be upset at my generosity? Am I not allowed to do what I please with what belongs to me?

What does this parable mean? This is not a lesson on how to run a business. This is a parable about the kingdom of heaven. It tells us that this is a kingdom of grace and mercy. The master is Jesus, God Himself. He gives rewards to His people that are not earned. His kingdom is made up not of servants who earn His grace and favor by their good deeds; His kingdom is made up of servants who receive the free gifts of life and salvation given by Jesus out of His generosity and mercy. That means you: you live by the generosity of the master, the love and grace of Jesus, who gives you the reward of life, even though you have not earned it.

From this parable, let us consider a warning, a truth, and a comfort. First, the warning. Jesus speaks the parable as a warning that we do not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. There are some who are first who will be last, Jesus warns: be careful that this is not you! Watch out, lest you feel superior to others, and feel cheated when they receive the same reward as you. Have you looked around at others, and thought how you have worked longer and harder than they have, and wondered how much greater your reward will be? Have you thought cheated that they will inherit the same life, when their life is not as pious, not as devoted, not as good as yours? If so, be careful. God's kingdom is not about climbing your way to the top by your good

deeds. It is receiving His grace and mercy and the rewards He gives to you—rewards that are ALL given out of God’s forgiving love and mercy to us poor, unworthy sinners.

And it goes without saying, but should be said anyways: This is not an excuse for idleness in God’s kingdom. Note how the master sends ALL the servants into the vineyard to work. God calls all of us to be faithful to our callings, regardless of what those callings are; to work and serve in His vineyard, to use our abilities to serve His church.

There is a truth proclaimed by the parable: Before God, we are all equal. In this world there are mighty and weak, great and small, rich and poor. But before God, those differences disappear. He treats us all the same. We have the same Lord who cleanses us in the same baptismal waters, speaks the same word of condemnation and forgiveness, shows the same redeeming love to each and every member of His kingdom. One’s work, one’s calling does not earn him a higher place before God. He values us all the same. From the eldest in our midst, who has labored in Christ’s kingdom from birth, to the youngest; to Connor, who will be/has been baptized here this morning. Before God, we are all the same: sinners cleansed by Christ’s blood, redeemed to live with Him forever, sent into this world to serve others out of love for our Lord. Oh, the service may vary, but the reward is the same: Eternal life, membership in Christ’s kingdom, forgiveness. May that free you to serve in whatever calling the Lord gives to you. Great or small, honored or insignificant, in the Lord’s eyes, the work you do out of love for Him is great and precious.

Finally, there is a comfort in this parable. Our God is generous and merciful. He does not treat us as we deserve—thanks be to God! He is rich and generous in bestowing His gifts on us men. He showers us with love, with forgiveness, with life and salvation. In this mercy, grace, and generosity alone do we find our hope for life. Here alone may we find forgiveness. That

grace, that mercy come to us by the merits of Christ our Savior, not by our own merits. It was Christ who labored, Christ who bore the full load of the struggle to defeat sin and Satan, Christ who died on the cross that we might be freed from sin and death. In his love, He now freely gives these blessings to us undeserving sinners.

Yes, God is generous and merciful. He does not treat us as we deserve. Mindful of this parable, may we not complain that we are being slighted; instead, may we rejoice that God sees and loves us all the same; may we take comfort in his mercy and generosity. Amen.