

The Unfairness of God
Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

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This is a test, for fourth graders. It is designed to help children determine what is fair and unfair. We're going to see today if you are as smart as a fourth grader. Are you ready? Here's the first question.

In Betty's game, players take turns tossing two dimes. If two heads or two tails come up, Player One gets one point. If a head and a tail come up, Player Two gets one point. Is this game fair or unfair?

All right, all you smart people, what do you think? Is it fair or unfair? It is fair because the coins have the same chance of falling on heads or tails.

Here's another. Since you struggled with that one, this one is a little easier.

In Patty's game, two players take turns pulling a marble out of a box. There are three blue marbles and two red marbles. Player One gets one point for each blue marble and Player Two gets one point for each red marble. Is the game fair or unfair?

It's unfair, right? The player pulling the blue marbles has a greater chance because there is one more blue marble than red marbles.

Okay, you're going to have to visualize this one.

The letters from the word "vacation" are written on separate cards and placed in a box. Tom chooses a card without looking. He scores one point for a vowel. Sue scores one point if it is a consonant. Is the game fair or unfair?

It's fair because there is the same number of vowels and consonants in the word "vacation."

Okay, here's the big one. Are you ready? You work all day in a vineyard. It is hot, dusty, backbreaking work. You take a few brief breaks for water and thirty minutes for lunch. Otherwise you are doing the job you were hired to do. One hour before the end of the workday another laborer joins you. It's still hot, dusty, backbreaking work. But he works only one hour. You've worked the entire day. When paychecks are distributed, you are both paid the same amount. Is it fair or unfair?

It surely seems unfair, doesn't it? It doesn't even take a fourth grader to recognize that. Yet Jesus told a parable in which he said that God and the Kingdom of God are just like that. It is a puzzling parable about the unfairness of God. We call this story the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. I think you all will agree that it doesn't make sound economic policy, but it is pretty good theology. As with most of the parables, Jesus likely told this story in response to a question or perhaps a criticism. Many think that some group criticized Jesus with a question something like this:

Jesus, why do you allow tax collectors and prostitutes and other sinners to be your followers?

Good question. So perhaps in response to a criticism like that, Jesus told this story. It begins early in the morning, 6 a.m., when a landowner goes to the market to hire day laborers to bring in his harvest. In this case, the harvest is his vineyard, grapes. He agrees to pay the laborers "the usual daily wage," what your translation may call a denarius, a day's wage for a laborer. The laborers, thinking this is fair, agree to the verbal contract and head off to the vineyard.

It was a long workday back then—from 6 a.m. till 6 p.m. The customary practice was for the landowner to pay his day laborers at the end of each day. Day laborers were often somewhat desperate and needed the money to feed their family that evening.

Here's what happened next. At 9 a.m., three hours into the workday, Jesus said that the landowner goes back to the market, sees other workers standing idly, and contracts with them too. However, notice that the verbal contract is different this time. He doesn't agree to pay them "the usual daily wage." He says instead, "I will pay you whatever is right." The implication is that he will be fair, but their pay will be less than the usual daily wage because it's already three hours into the workday.

Jesus said that the landowner goes back again at noon and then at 3 p.m. and does the same thing. Then at 5 o'clock in the afternoon, one hour before quitting time, he goes one more time and finds yet other workers standing idly in the marketplace. And even at that late hour, perhaps because the work was so urgent, he sends them too to gather his grape harvest.

I love how this story ends. At the end of the workday, he calls all the workers in from the vineyard to pay them. Some have been working all day long, some part of the day, and some only one hour. Notice that he begins payment with the ones who started work latest in the day. Guess what he paid them? They worked one hour, and he pays them a denarius, the *daily* wage for a laborer. Surely they weren't expecting that. They hadn't work a full day, yet they got a full day's wage.

So what do you think the ones who started their workday at 6 a.m. were thinking? They're probably thinking, "Well, if he pays them a full day's wage for only one hour of work, then he's probably going to pay us three or four times that, maybe more. Why, that would only be fair."

When the landowner gets to the ones who began their workday at 6 a.m., notice what happens. He pays them a denarius, the same amount as those who worked only one hour. Jesus said that those workers grumbled. I bet they did! It wasn't fair, was it? They had been out there all day. It was hot, dusty, backbreaking work. They had worked from sun up to sun down. They had a right to grumble, didn't they? By paying the others the same as he paid them, he was making the others equal to the ones who had worked all day. That just wasn't fair.

The landowner reminds those who are grumbling that they agreed to a verbal contract to work the full day for the usual daily wage, and that is what they got. That was fair. Then he says this. This is where we begin to see a picture of God and the Kingdom of God. He says that it is his choice and his alone to be generous, and that they should not begrudge his decision to be generous.

Jesus ended this parable with these profound words:

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Here's something to ponder. I wonder if Jesus' own apostles were the critics whose question prompted this parable? At the end of the previous chapter, Peter asked this question, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

Here's what I think happened. Peter and the other apostles were with Jesus from the beginning—from sun up to sun down. They had sacrificed. They did the hot, dusty, backbreaking work. Then late in the day others began to follow Jesus. Maybe some were tax collectors. They certainly would have resonated with Jesus' teachings about forgiveness. Maybe some were prostitutes. My goodness, they certainly needed his message of love. Maybe there were all kinds of sinners falling in with Peter and the other apostles. And Peter and the others observed that these sinners were being welcomed by Jesus and given equal treatment. So they asked their question, "Jesus, why do you allow tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners to be your followers?" So Jesus told this story to say that that is the way it is with God and the Kingdom of God. God's actions towards us are not driven by what is fair. Rather, God's actions are driven by grace, God's amazing generosity.

Now here's the real test for us, and it's not for fourth graders. When you and I come to this puzzling parable today, we have to find who we are in this story. Who are you? Are you the sinner? Are you the one who hasn't really earned a place among God's people? You know what you did. You feel terrible shame about it. In the core of your being, you don't need anyone to tell you. You know that you are a sinner, and you carry this existential feeling of unworthiness—desperation. If so, I've got good news for you. God chooses to be generous towards you. God welcomes you into his vineyard, not because you have earned it but because God is gracious.

Or maybe you are like the apostles and me, and you identify with the workers who started at 6 a.m. You've been doing this work for decades. You've been faithful. You've helped pay the bills. And now the sinners have arrived, and they're being treated like equals. You and I must guard against pride, self-righteousness, because it is true. God is not fair. God is gracious. That is the nature of God and the Kingdom of God.

So let us labor together, all of us. Let us labor together in this vineyard of God because the work is urgent. And let us be thankful that God is more gracious than fair.

Closing Prayer

Lord, thank you. Thank you that your generosity is greater than your fairness. Use us all to do your vineyard's work. Amen.