Is It Fair?

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*"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. **2** After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. **3** When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; **4** and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. **5** When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. **6** And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' **7** They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' **8** When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' **9** When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. **10** Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. **11** And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, **12** 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.' **13** But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? **14** Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. **15** Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' **16** So the last will be first, and the first will be last"* (Matthew 20:1-16).

1. Life is Not Fair

Do you think "life is fair?" In 2017, 29% of Americans said that life is generally fair, down from 38% the previous year. What about those who say "life should be fair?" Among Americans, roughly 55% of people say that "life should be fair." This tells us that almost half of people believe that life does not meet their expectations when it comes to fairness.

What does the term "fair" mean? Fairness is to be "free from bias, dishonesty or injustice." Being fair often means being just. Are we treated fairly by others without prejudice based on race, gender, nationality, age, or social status? Do we treat people fairly without these kinds of bias? Despite our best efforts, many people in our country experience some kind of unjust treatment. We find this kind of unfair treatment in the Bible as well.

2. The Vineyard Workers

In Matthew 20:1 and the following, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven with the vineyard owner. Early in the morning around 6 am, the landowner goes out to hire laborers to work in his vineyard for the day. The workers agree to be paid one denarius for a day. At about 9 am, the landowner goes out to hire more workers. He does not tell them how much he would pay. The owner hires more laborers at noon and at 3 pm. He goes out even at 5 pm, one hour before the end of the day.

When it comes time to pay the workers, the owner begins paying people who worked one hour and gives each one denarius. Those who worked the whole day expected to get paid more, but this didn't happen.

The workers begin to grumble for receiving the same as those who worked only one hour. The owner argues that he paid everyone what they agreed to be paid. The owner reminds the workers that he has the right to do whatever he chooses with his money and they should not complain about his generosity to those who only labored for one hour.

3. Is It Fair?

How would you feel if you were one of the workers that worked all day? The workers complained, "***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***" (verse 12). Some of them worked 6, 9, or 12 hours. They felt it was not fair to be paid the same as those who worked only one hour.

The workers' reactions seem reasonable. What then does the parable teach us? The parable isn't about fair wages, but rather, Jesus is teaching his disciples how to live with others in the kingdom of heaven.

Leviticus 19:9-10 says, "***When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest.*** [10] ***You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God***."

God reminds the landlords of the time and us that we should be thankful for our harvest and acknowledge that God has blessed us by sharing some of our harvest with the poor. This decree undercuts the human temptation towards greed. By sharing our harvest with others, we reflect God's mercy and concern for the poor.

4. Generosity of the Landowner

In the parable, why does the landowner go out several times to get workers? Does he need all the workers? Probably not. We see in verse 6, the owner asks the workers, "***why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "because no one has hired us***."

It's likely that no one hired the workers because they were small and weak. These workers would have been treated poorly because of their appearance. However, the landowner knows that these people need to feed their family. The landowner may not need them, but he wants to give them an opportunity to work so that their families would not be hungry.

5. The First and the Last

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is found only in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's Gospel was written for the Jews. The Jews would have likely been proud and see themselves as the workers that worked all day.

Yet at the end of the parable, Jesus says, "***the last will be first, and the first will be last***." People interpret the meaning of this saying differently. But I believe that Jesus says this statement to convey the same message as he does in Matthew 20:26 & 27, ***"whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, [27] and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave."***

Jesus teaches the disciples that they are not those who are self-centered or seek fairness for their own sake. Rather, Jesus' disciples are those who seek the justice of others. Jesus' mission was to serve others and to give his life for God's people. As followers of Jesus, we are called to the same mission.

If we complain to God and say, "it is not fair," we are like the first son in the story of prodigal son. The older brother says to his father. ***"Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. [30] But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'*** (Luke 15:29) The older son complains to his father instead of being grateful for his brother's return.

6. Conclusion

Micah 6:8 says, "***to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God***." The Prophet Micah tells us that God wants us to do three things: 1) to be fair in our dealings with others, 2) to carry through on our commitments to meet others' needs, and 3) to have fellowship with the

Lord without arrogance. Although people focus on all kinds of ways to please God, God wants us to simply be just, merciful, and to walk humbly with him.

7. Application

There are many people who would shout, “this is not fair!” when thinking about our current situation. Blacks in the US, ethnic minorities, widows, orphans, the homeless, and other marginalized people all have more than enough reasons to feel this way.

Who are these people to us? These people were created by God. They are God’s people. They are our brothers and sisters. God loves these people and reminds us that he loves them just like he loves us. And God wants us to love even our enemies.

Matthew 5:44-45, ***I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous***. God makes the sun rise not only on the good but also on the evil and provides rain for the just and unjust as well. God’s love and mercy is beyond our imagination.

There may always be a reason to complain about not being treated fairly. We might ask God, “Is it fair” when we are mistreated?” God would tell us not to seek our own justice, but to strive for the justice of others so that they can experience God’s generous love. Do we deserve God’s salvation? Our salvation is from God’s generosity and His favor. May many people experience God’s generosity and His favor through us. Amen.