

August 23, 2020

“Jesus The Storyteller: He Got How Much?”

[Matthew 20:1-16](#)

Who was it in your life that got off easy when it came to working hard?

Or who is it now?

Was/is it a brother or sister?

A co-worker?

A classmate in one of your study groups?

You might describe this particular person as lazy, or spoiled, or undisciplined, or manipulative (or all of the above). What I need you to do right now is identify a person who fits this description. Do you have a particular person in mind?

Now I want to ask: How do you feel about that person? Can you identify some of what you feel around him or her? Is it frustration or bitterness or anger or disrespect? Let's go a little deeper, why do you feel that way?

When we work hard for the boss, or the teacher, or our moms & dads . . . or GOD – and the people around us don't pull their share of the load – it gets under our skin, doesn't it? What makes it even worse is when these people get the same recognition as we do (or even more recognition!); a raise or a promotion or a better grade or an award . . . even salvation. Whenever this happens, from the time we're young until our dying days, we cry out with the same three words: ***“It's not fair!”***

This parable of Jesus gets under our skin more than most. ***Do you know why?***

Because it doesn't seem fair that all the workers get paid the same. But more than our feelings on fair wages, we don't like this parable because we don't understand or always like the implications of God's grace. We don't! **We don't like it when others get what they don't deserve.**

I keep it no secret that I was a very flaky student in college. I was originally thinking it was my last two years of college, but it was really all four; and my last semester of high school after I was already accepted to college. I'm talking really flaky: not attending one particular class for three straight weeks (I don't think I bought the book for that one either); falling asleep in class; taking Pool Management even though I wasn't a Recreation major (I just needed the credits). I could go on and on. It didn't help when my friend Greg, already in seminary, told me that grades weren't the only thing that was important to get into seminary. They wanted to see that you also had ministry experience and a sense of call. He guaranteed me that I only needed to get a 3.2 GPA in college. So that's the bar I raised for myself.

Here's the thing. In May of 1987, I walked across a stage at California State University in Long Beach and received the same diploma that all the other students earned, even though many of them worked WAY harder and longer than I did. Funny thing is, it didn't bother me at all. I was grateful to have made it and never once thought I should tear off 30% of the document, hand it back to the administration, and tell them I didn't work as hard as others. But I'm sure if those who knew I was a flake – or if they knew how flaky I was – heard my name called, they'd be tempted to declare I didn't deserve the same thing they received.

We don't like it when others get what they don't deserve. And that's why we don't really care for this parable. Think about the story Jesus tells. From a pure, common-sense economic perspective, we're tempted to say *“This is the worst business plan ever! It encourages laziness and irresponsibility.*

Tom Hansen – First Presbyterian Church of Grand Junction, CO

It just won't work in the long run because people won't grow professionally or personally if they keep getting off the hook – if they keep getting what they don't deserve."

We could also say the same thing about God's grace: *"this is the worst religious plan ever! It encourages spiritual laziness and irresponsibility. It just won't work in the long run because people won't grow in faith if they keep getting off the hook."*

Typically, we don't like to see people get off the hook . . . **unless WE ARE ON THE HOOK or someone we love is!** And then our opinion on the matter changes drastically.

Why is it that when we work hard for Christ, like the all-day workers, we resent God's generosity for the "Johnny-come-latelys" – the ones who get what they clearly haven't earned?

Does it bother you that, in God's Kingdom, people don't always get what they deserve – and they get what they don't deserve?

Let's look at the story again:

1) The owner of the estate goes out early in the morning to look for workers/laborers. Makes sense. I'm with you so far, Jesus. 2) He makes an agreement to pay them the normal "daily wage" – called a denarius. They have a clear promise and guarantee for the day's work. 3) A little later that morning the landowner is heading to Home Depot or Lowe's and sees some guys standing around. He also hires them, but only promises to pay them "fairly" at the end of the day. Apparently, this is enough assurance for them & off they go to work. 4) He does the same thing at noon and 3 o'clock. The assumption is that he makes the same promise to pay the workers fairly. 5) But there's always more work on this man's farm. So when he's back through town for the last time that evening, he's still looking to hire any willing workers. He's shocked to find a few still standing around and asks them what the deal is. Their answer lets us in on the fact that they don't necessarily like "doing nothing" – it's just that nobody has given them a chance and invited them to serve. 6) So, off they go to work as the sun begins to set on the horizon. Did you notice that the landowner doesn't even promise to pay them fairly? They're just glad to get the work.

Then Jesus gets to the punch line. It's time for everyone to get paid and the foreman starts by paying the workers who started last. Now this is where things start falling apart. Knowing what's about to happen, **why** would you want the people who've been working all day to be around to find out what the "Johnny-come-latelys" are getting paid for their little bit of work?

Why not pay the early workers first and get them out of there to avoid the awkwardness?

Maybe it's because Jesus wants the awkwardness dealt with. He wants us to be aware of our dislike for the way things are. And, just in case we miss the way things are, Jesus makes it clear before and after this story how things are.

In Matthew 19:30 – the last verse before chapter 20 – Jesus says, "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." And at the end of the parable He says, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:16) Jesus really wants to make a point here at how backward and awkward the ways of His Father's Kingdom are. If you and I are looking for something sensible, then we better look for something other than God's ways and His grace. His Kingdom defies logic and sensibility. It is the exact opposite of the way we've come to understand life -- which is precisely what Jesus wants His listeners to wrestle with and squirm over it!

There's a rabbinic parable that sounds awfully familiar to the parable Jesus tells here in Matthew 20. It's found in the Jerusalem Talmud and Jesus most certainly knew it. It's about a king who hires a bunch of laborers. One, in particular, was so skilled and industrious that the king pulled him out of the work duty after two hours on the job, asking him to visit and walk with him for the rest of the day – observing all of the others as they labored. At the end of the day, everyone got paid the same amount. Of course, those who worked all day were furious. To which the king replied, “This man is so skilled that he did more work in two hours than any of you did all day.” (from Dale Bruner's *Matthew: The Christbook and The Churchbook*)

Oh, okay. That story makes sense to us and still fits the 'you get what you work for.' Nobody questioned this little parable – it went along predictable and understandable lines of thought. But Jesus doesn't want us hear something predictable and sensible like that story, so he changes it a bit. He wants us to squirm, and ask: “What do you mean they get the same thing? That doesn't seem right or fair!”

To this objection of theirs (and ours) Jesus responds directly:

Have I broken my promise to you? Didn't you agree to this amount?

Is it somehow wrong for me to use my money (grace) the way I want, and with whom I want?

Jesus puts it like this: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:15)

Does God's generosity to others – especially those who seem so undeserving of it – bother you?

Does it bother you that a thief on a cross next to Jesus gets into God's family at the eleventh hour?

That salvation comes to the home of a tax man named Zacchaeus?

That the wayward Prodigal Son gets to have a party when he gets home?

It doesn't seem quite right, does it? It's not fair!

Why do we respond like this? Why can't we have more joy when God gives some people His grace and they get what they don't deserve?

Maybe it's because we've lost our focus. Maybe it's because we're more worried about fairness than we are about the ways of God's Kingdom and His grace.

Earl Palmer makes this observation about the parable in his book, Laughter in Heaven: “*The all-day workers shifted their eyes away from seeing the joy of their own security and of their established relationship as laborers in the owner's vineyard; they have instead focused their attention toward the very narrow matter of wage equity. Their concentration upon the question of rewards and payment has caused them to forget the joy of their own employment and the privilege that has long been theirs to have been a longer time in fellowship with such a generous owner and employer.*” Did you notice that they didn't say to the owner, “I'm glad you found them later in the day. Now they know how wonderful you are to work with and how generous you are. I hope they come back and work with us tomorrow”?

Have we forgotten God's generosity to us? Have we missed the fact that we've gotten some thing(s) we didn't deserve either? Or NOT gotten things we DID deserve!?

I was driving home with another staff member from a Presbytery youth ministry meeting. It's about two hours from Spokane down to Lewiston, Idaho, and we were making good time through the rolling hills and wheat fields. Then we got detoured through a little town. I was going pretty fast. Maybe twice the

speed limit. And just as I went over a crest into the road and approached what was barely a Main Street, there he was. A police officer in a car facing me. I didn't even wait for his lights to go on and just pulled over. Busted. I apologized immediately. He asked for my license and registration. Our staff member had worked for an insurance company during college and knew this was going to be costly and raise my insurance rates. He came back and told me it would be \$300+ for going 25 over the speed limit AND that it would be doubled for speeding in a school zone. And then . . . he told me he was going to give me a break (I thought that meant he wouldn't double it) . . . that he would let me off with a warning. I was shocked AND SO HAPPY. I didn't get what I deserved . . . and I was SO grateful! Jesus says so many important things – about us and God – in this parable. Including what needs to change in us.

Where do you see yourself in this story?

Because we're in church (or on a church website), there is a statistical probability that many of us see ourselves in this parable as the early/earlier workers. Many of us have been at this following Jesus and serving in the Church stuff for a long time. Which means we're in danger of something that C.S. Lewis labels "The Great Sin" in his book *Mere Christianity*. It's often subtle, but we may actually start to think that God owes us more: more of His love, blessing, and presence.

Do we really want to go there, claiming our early worker status? Do we really want to start lobbying hard for what we deserve for all our hard work? What do you and I really deserve?

Separation from God; judgment; the consequences of our sin; alienation from the Father.

But in Jesus Christ, what do we get?

Forgiveness; unconditional love; adoption into God's forever family; reconciliation; freedom; blessing, truth; living water. In Jesus, you and I get what we don't deserve.

And more than what we deserve or don't deserve . . . more than locating ourselves in this parable and discovering more about the reality of and potential for pride in us . . . what does this parable tell us about Christ Himself? What does this tell us about the heart of God and His willingness to lay it all on the line for everyone? That He is generous and sacrificial . . . to and for us!

What did Jesus deserve?

Glory; a long and blessed life; respect; uninterrupted union with His Father; being worshipped and adored by all.

But what did He get?

Humiliation; brutality; pain and sorrow; injustice and betrayal; suffering and death.

Jesus didn't get what He deserved SO THAT we could get what we don't deserve. That's the way it works in God's Kingdom. It may be bad business but, thank God, He uses the currency of love instead of cash.

Thank God we don't get what we deserve; and thank God we get what we don't deserve. Thank God we get Jesus! Or should I say, thank God . . . Jesus gets us!

[See Small Group/Personal Reflection Questions on next page]

Questions for Personal Reflection or Small Group Discussion

1. Reread the passage again; out loud if possible. What are the one or two things you see, notice, hear, and feel? What do you notice about God? Others? Yourself?
2. From a work ethic standpoint, which of the work groups (early arrivals – latecomers) do you identify with? How about from a spiritual/faith perspective?
3. How often and in what ways do you tend to fixate on fairness and forget the component of joy and gratitude? What effect does that have on you personally?
4. Are you "envious" that God is so "generous" to others? Do you feel like He's not very generous with you? If so, when do you feel like this; and why do you feel like this?
5. What is your main takeaway from this story?
6. What does this parable of Jesus teach us about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?