

*The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.*

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**Proper 20, Year A**  
**Matthew 20:1-16**

### "That's Fair!"

If you follow any code of football, you will know that it's the season for the finals - and usually there is also a 'best and fairest' medal count. During the medal count, fans watch in suspense as points are tallied up, match-by-match, until finally a winner is declared. Occasionally there is some big news in the weeks leading up to the medal count when the favourite for the 'best and fairest' medal is penalized by the tribunal for rough conduct and is rubbed out of contention for the medal. "It's not fair!" the fans will complain.

If that's not fair, then try and imagine the complaints there would be if a footballer who had played only a few games at the end of the season was also awarded top points and the 'best and fairest' medal. "It's not fair!" the fans would complain. The 'best and fairest' medal is awarded on the basis of a match-by-match accumulation of points. You have to play the games – and play well in all the games – to get the prize.

That may be a situation very much like Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard. In Jesus parable, workers were hired at different times during the day and therefore expected to be paid for the hours they worked, but when pay time came, all the workers received the same amount. The ones who had worked only one hour received as much as those who had worked all day in the heat of the sun.

It is not surprising that they accused the boss of being unfair. These workers were operating with the common assumption that people must get what they deserve; the wages must match the work. At one stage, even Jesus had said to his disciples, "*A worker should be given his pay*" (Luke 10:7), but here is the same Jesus telling a story that seems totally unfair. He's using it as an example of how the Heavenly Father rewards people who come into his kingdom at different stages of their life. He rewards them all with the same gift, regardless of their time in his kingdom.

Hearing such things may appeal to our inner sense of justice, especially in matters where our own welfare is concerned. We see it in children when they compare what they have received with what others have received and say, "That's not fair!" We see it in adults who cast an envious eye over what others have and say, either openly or inwardly, "That's not fair!"

Maybe you've felt it also in your life as a Child of God. Hearing this parable may even invoke feelings of "That's not fair!" How fair is it to think of a person who has lived a wicked or wayward life, making a deathbed repentance and receiving the same gifts from God as the faithful church member who has 'borne the heat of the day', serving God all his life, sacrificing himself, taking up his cross and following Jesus? "How come he gets the same reward?" you may ask. "That's not fair!"

To understand Jesus parable properly we need to see beyond what seems to be the *injustice* of God and understand that it is also a parable about the **generosity** or amazing **grace** of God which is available to all people.

If we human beings really want to take up the matter of the **justice of God**, then we're in for a rude shock. If God really did what was fair or just, no one would receive any reward for God. We are all sinners and

*none of us deserve his love*, his forgiveness or his gift of eternal life. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Rom.3:23). What we rightly or justly deserve is his punishment, not his reward. If we're interested in justice, that would be fair.

But God is interested in more than justice. He is also very loving and generous. That's why he sent his only Son Jesus Christ to live a perfectly good life in our place and to die, also in our place, for our sins. Jesus did that to satisfy the demands of God's justice. He did it so we could be 'justified', put back into a right relationship with God. I don't think too many Christians would say, "That's not fair!" to that.

That's because *everything we receive from God is a gift*. The spiritual blessings we receive are never to be considered a *wage*, but a *free gift*. As Paul also wrote to the Romans: The only **wage** we deserve is **death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Rom.6:23). We have received God's gift of love, forgiveness and eternal life, not because we have worked for it, but because God is so generous. It is not something we earn like 'best and fairest medal' points, or wages.

In Jesus' parable, the employer said that he gave the workers whom he had hired last the same amount because he **wanted to** and because he had a **right to** do as he wished with his own money. In God's kingdom, he gives all people his love, forgiveness, and eternal life simply because he is generous. He **wants to** and **has a right to** hand out his grace and love as freely as he wishes.

No one in God's kingdom should ever need to feel cheated because they have worked harder for their spiritual blessings than another. Instead we should learn to rejoice that God's love and forgiveness is great enough to give even the worst of sinners who have lived the wickedest of lives, the gift of eternal life. We should learn to rejoice that God's gifts of forgiveness, life and eternal salvation are available to all who are led to trust in Jesus, right up 'til their dying breath. We should learn to rejoice because we have received those gifts, even though we don't deserve them.

It is good news that the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for sinners was big enough to save the worst of sinners in the latest of deathbed repentances. Like the angels in heaven, we should learn to rejoice at their salvation rather than falling into the trap of thinking, "That's not fair!"

Whether we were baptised as an infant and led a faithful Christian life for 80 years or more, or whether we repent on our deathbed after a shameful life, we still have reason to rejoice in the generosity of God and in his gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Just as the workers hired first had agreed on their reward when hired (v.13), we who become Christians early in our life also know what Christ offers us. At the end of our life he gives us no less than he had promised and he will give us no more because he has promised us all he has to give. He has held nothing back.

So, instead of feeling, "That's not fair!" or seeing the Christian life as some sort of medal count, let's learn to rejoice, first of all, in what Christ has promised us in our baptismal covenant right at the beginning of our Christian life: his free gift of forgiveness, new life and eternal salvation. Let's treasure and nurture that gift as we 'bear the heat of the day' - offering our lives as living sacrifices in service of God and others.

Let's also learn to rejoice that God's love is generous enough, and Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is big enough, to offer that love and forgiveness to anyone who turns away from their sin and puts their trust in Jesus, at whatever stage in their life.

It wasn't really fair that Jesus, who did no wrong, should have been punished for what we did, but he did it for us. Now he gives freely and generously of his love and forgiveness to all who turn from sin and put

their trust in him. I think we all have to admit, "That's fair!" and praise God for his glorious grace. Amen.

*And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.*