

Is God Fair or Just?

Could you imagine this morning's parable if it were set in the United States today? I wonder what the labor unions would say about it. Would the union members who got paid too much lodge a complaint with the union that they received too much pay? Would those who agreed to work for the going rate lodge a complaint that the others got paid too much and they should get more than what they agreed to? Would the union call to reopen negotiations with the landowner to make sure everyone got paid for the time the workers actually worked? Would the workers start to make sure they would get hired last so they get a full day's pay for only working one hour? Would the National Labor Relations Board get involved and levy a fine against the landowner for not being fair? Would advocacy groups for workers' rights get involved and demand better working conditions for the workers? Would the TV news organizations try to go undercover on the premise that the landowner must be trying to hide something and keeping the workers quiet by overpaying them? How soon do you think the late-night ads from the lawyers would start to run looking for all those workers who did not get more than they deserve? The more I think about it, if this parable were set in the U.S. today, the landowner would eventually shut down his operations and move his business offshore.

But that is the danger when we use images from our world, based upon our perceptions to try to describe things in God's world, from God's perception. Analogies using things we are familiar with usually fall short in some way. Maybe that is why Jesus used many different parables to describe the Kingdom of God. Maybe each parable gives us a glimpse of one part of the Kingdom. Maybe we need to meld all these images together into one. The result may still not be a comprehensive representation but more of a mosaic of different aspects of the Kingdom. In short, we could say that the Kingdom in all its fullness is each of these individual images yet much more. It is like

several people who are blindfolded standing around an elephant. As a person feels the part of the elephant that is within arm's reach of them, they can describe that part of the elephant but none of them can adequately and completely describe the elephant on their own. When you put all their descriptions together then there is a better idea of what the elephant looks like.

We may wonder why we need to know what the Kingdom of God looks like. What good does it do to be talking about where we go after we die? How can we hear a word of hope for today's world in something that is abstract and attainable only after we die? If we recall the words Jesus proclaimed at the start of His public ministry, after His baptism by John the Baptist and His temptations in the wilderness, then we get a glimpse of why it is important to have an image of the Kingdom of God. These words are "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." This brings a sense of immediacy to the Kingdom. All of a sudden heaven is not some far off place accessible only by crossing the threshold of death. Heaven is now close, breaking into our world, coming here and there is no stopping it. The only thing we are called to do is to repent, to change our ways and conform to the ways of God.

Today's parable gives us one glimpse of what these ways are. We are invited to look at the parable from the landowner's or God's point of view rather than from our perspective. Our perspective tells us that this situation is not fair, that those who do more should make more. Those who do little or no work should not make as much as those who work hard. We get upset when coworkers come in late, leave early, take extra-long lunch breaks, run the company football pool, check all the sports scores on the internet, find the latest gossip going around work and maybe find one hour in the day to actually do some work. We get incensed when these kinds of workers get as much of a raise as everyone else, especially those of us who have to pick up the work slack

created by them not doing their jobs. We believe in an honest day's pay for an honest day's work.

However, when we look at the parable from God's perspective, from the landowner's perspective, we get a different picture. If you were the landowner, you would have an idea how many workers you needed to get that day's job done. We aren't told why the landowner had to get additional workers throughout the day. Maybe they weren't doing the amount of work that was expected of them. Maybe the landowner needed to have a certain amount of work done to fulfill his orders for the day and it became apparent that those first workers could not meet that amount. Maybe the landowner found that the harvest was actually greater than he expected and the produce had to be picked that day before it went bad. We also are not told how hard the later workers worked. Maybe they actually picked as much or more than the first workers. When they were hired, the landowner did not specify how much they would get, just that it would be "right." Maybe they thought if they worked hard and actually did a full day's labor, then they would get a full day's pay.

Whatever the actual reason, the landowner was gracious with paying his workers. It was no hardship to him to give all the workers the same pay. If we remember that this is just a glimpse of the Kingdom, then we can more easily see the generosity of the landowner. The lesson we can learn is that no matter when we become a worker for God, there is always enough grace and mercy so that we can have a full share in the Kingdom. God has enough grace and mercy for everybody and God gives this grace freely. It may not sound fair, but it is merciful.

Thinking of the concept of fairness reminds me of when I was younger and there was one piece of dessert left and two of us kids wanted a piece. The first few times it happened, the older sibling would divide the dessert and dish it out, usually dividing it in their favor. My dad, seeing how this wasn't fair, had one of us divide the dessert and

then the other one would pick which part they wanted. This made sure that neither one got the "bigger half." That is fairness. In God's Kingdom, however, He shows us mercy, giving us not what we deserve, but giving us grace and forgiveness. Instead of getting what would be our fair share, "the equal half," somehow God gives us all a "full piece," a "full share." Isn't it good that God is like this and gives us grace according to His mercy and not according to what we think is fair?

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/OlvBfobTODA>

Service: <https://youtu.be/FbdRFVQhgDk>