

Matthew 20:1-16: Who Cares About Being Fair?

By Michael B. Brown

Thirty years...but Michael Brown still remembers quitting jayvee basketball. He had slaved four years hoping for a starting spot. It was his turn. He had earned it. Then came a walk-on, fresh from varsity football season. He wasn't a basketball junkie. He hadn't suffered through preseason conditioning drills and scrimmages. He just waltzed into practice midseason and suddenly was given a jersey and a place in the starting five. Michael was asked to come off the bench and give him a bit of rest from time to time.

It just didn't seem fair. So Michael quit. He regretted it later, but he was not going to be anybody's doormat. Was the other fellow a better player than him? Was it the coach's right to play whoever he chose? Hey, don't bother with the facts! Fair is fair.

In the corporate world, the world of politics, and even the church, "fair" is not always the definitive policy. Sometimes seniority doesn't count for much. Nepotism counts. Or talent. Once in a while the boss is even motivated by grace.

The early birds in Christ's parable thought the pay scale was unfair. They worked from sunup but were paid no more than the lazy scoundrels who showed up an hour before quitting time. So they took their case to the labor relations board, which immediately filed a class action complaint against the corporate CEO.

His response was honest and logical: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?" (v. 13).

In other words, "Your contract has not been violated. I paid exactly what you asked for." "But what of those other guys," they countered, "who worked only one hour? They're getting as much as we are. It's not

fair!" The vineyard owner answered, "I choose to give to this last as I give to you" (v. 14). In other words, "It's my money. I can do with it as I like."

Admittedly, that attitude may not be palatable to labor unions, but I like the feel of it theologically. You see, I don't want what I deserve. I'm not like those workers who began at dawn. I've not kept all the laws and observed all the ordinances. Have you? Before you say, "Yes," remember that there are over six hundred laws in the Old Testament. I find it tough just managing the Ten Commandments. Six hundred are absolutely overwhelming.

I have coveted. Maybe you've never looked at someone else's sports car or summer home and thought, I wish it were mine. Most of us have. I have borne false witness. Even little white lies count, you know. "Son, grab the phone, and tell them I'm not home." "Why, you haven't aged at all." My parents

would have contended that I did not always honor them properly.

Adultery and murder? No. "Thou shalt not steal?" Well, I have borrowed a few sermon ideas and illustrations without asking permission first.

The point is, in one way or another most of us show up about quitting time. Very few are sinless Law abiders. Very few are spiritually spotless.

Thus, I don't want justice. I want mercy. I don't want fairness. I want grace. I don't want to play by the books. I want an Employer with a soft heart who doles out wages even to those of us who showed up around sundown.

And that's what this parable promises: a God who gives us not what we may deserve, but in love, what we need. And that is the meaning of good news!

Let us pray...

O God,

**from your providing hand even the dissatisfied and
grumbling receive what they need for their lives.**

Teach us your ways of justice

and lead us to practice your generosity,

so that we may live a life worthy of the gospel

make known through your Son Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen.