

Sunday, September 20, 2026

Proper 20A | 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 20:1-16

Grace Over Fairness.

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,
amen.*

“Made them Equal to Us!”

My friends,

“That’s not fair!”

“Life isn’t fair!”

If you had a quarter
for every time
you heard those words
growing up,
how rich would you be?

The workers

in Jesus’ parable
are upset.

They think it isn’t fair.

Everyone has been given
the same silver coin.

But they have worked unequal hours.

*“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.” (Matthew 20:12)

In other words, “It’s not **fair!**”

As bad as we are at fairness,

fairness is engraved
into our hearts.

It's human instinct.

We feel our efforts
and merits

should be recognized
and rewarded.

We compare what everyone gets.

We **know**

if Susie takes
the biggest piece of pie.

We compare our work
with the work of others.

We measure
what others deserve.

We demand we get
what we deserve.

People should get
what they **earn**.

But

that's not the way
of the Kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven
has a different accounting.

We are not paid
according
to our accounting.

We are paid
according
to our Master's goodness.

We are paid
according
to His promise.

According
to His generosity.

And we will see
that

that is far better for us.

And far better than "fair."

I. Our Sinful Accounting: “We Have Borne the Burden”

However,

my friends,
The complainers
in the parable
aren't there yet.
They raise their ledger
against the master.
They have worked the full day.
They have carried the burden.
They have endured the scorching heat.

And then

they watch those hired **last**
receive the promised denarius.
*“Now when those hired first came,
they thought they would receive more,
but each of them
also received a denarius.”*

And that's where we roll out **fairness**.

Most often,
it's when **we**
expect **more**.

But here's the problem:

These workers aren't looking
for **generosity**.
They aren't looking
at what was **promised**.
They are looking
at self-perceived **merit**.

They want their accomplishments noticed.

Their sacrifice distinguished.
Their effort rewarded.

Instead of looking to the master,
 they watch their fellow workers.
“These last only worked one hour!”
 In the cool of the day!
 When the work was mostly done!
 While **we** have *“borne
 the burden of the day
 and the scorching heat.”*
 “They have not done
 as much as we have!”

Often,
 fairness isn't all
 that we are after.
 We want **our** fairness.
 Seeing others receive blessings
 can feel like our loss.
 A denarius **was** enough—
until they saw **others**
 who had done **less**
 receive the same.

We can become envious of grace.

Goodness toward others
 can seem unfair to us.
 We can resent another sinner
 receiving the same mercy as us.
 This happens:
 When we value our efforts
 more than others.
 When we magnify others' faults
 while overlooking our own.
 When we look sideways
 rather than to Christ.
 When vocation becomes a merit ledger.
 When the Christian life becomes a competition.

All this

reveals a heart operating
by **works**.

It is a heart
in danger
of rejecting grace.

Because
when we demand
to be dealt with
according to our merits,
we are in trouble.

For “*by works of the law no one will be justified.*” (Galatians 2:16)

And

“by grace

*you have been saved
through faith...*

*not as a result of works,
so that no one may boast.*” (Ephesians 2:8–9)

**Our instinct is to bring a ledger
to God;
the Gospel will show us
that God does not deal with us
according to our ledger.**

II. The Master’s Generosity: “Do You Begrudge My Generosity?”

My friends,

God’s kingdom does not run
on wages.

The kingdom runs
on the Gospel promise.

The kingdom runs
on generosity.

This parable is not

about earning a silver coin.

It is about the master’s generosity.

The master is seeking workers
 for his vineyard.
 Again and again
 throughout the day,
 he goes out.
 He finds those
 whom no one has hired.
 And he brings them
 into the vineyard.
 He is the one
 who initiates.
 He seeks the workers.
 He calls them
 to the vineyard.
 He provides the work.
 He provides the coin.

Isn't this like our God?
 He calls us into His vineyard.
 But not to earn salvation!
 He calls us
 to join Him
 in His loving work.
 Ephesians Chapter Six says,
*"For by grace
 you have been saved
 through faith...
 not a result of works..."*
 And then:
*"We are His workmanship,
 created
 in Christ Jesus
 for good works,
 which God prepared beforehand."*
 Saved by grace,
 we can then walk
 in the good works He has prepared.

Then comes the end of the day.

The master gathers the workers.
 Beginning with the last,
 each receives the same denarius.
 The denarius is not earned
 according to hours worked.
 Not according
 to burden borne.
 Not according
 to scorching heat endured.
 The end-of-day payment rests
 on grace.

The master **promised** a denarius.

And they receive
 what he promised
 because they belong
 to his vineyard.
 Not because they worked.
 They receive according
 to his generosity.

When the first workers complain,
 the master answers:

*“Friend,
 I am doing you no wrong.
 Did you not agree
 with me
 for a denarius?”*
 And then:
“Or do you begrudge my generosity?”
 Literally:
*“Is your eye evil
 because I am good?”*

We receive

what we receive
 because God is good.
 Not because of our merits.

This is not injustice.

It is not indifference to sin.

It is **grace**.

Undeserved favour.

If we insist

on getting

what we earn,

we are in trouble.

“For the wages of sin is death.”

However,

if we permit God

to be generous:

“the free gift

of God

is eternal life

in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

God graciously does not pay us

what our sins deserve.

He does not regard us

in proportion

to our performance.

Instead,

He gives us **Christ**.

III. Christ's Accounting: “Made Equal to Us.”

My friends,

The workers hired first complain:

“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.” (Matthew 20:12)

Here's the great gospel irony.

God **does** make sinners equal.

But not by lowering His standard.

Nor by overlooking sin.

But by giving Christ to sinners.

The truth is,

God has made
us sinners equal
to Christ.

God has made us equal
to Christ's efforts.

"For our sake

[God] made Him

to be sin

who knew no sin,

so that in Him

we might become

God's righteousness." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

At the eleventh hour,

when God looks at us,

He sees His beloved Son,

Jesus Christ.

Because on the cross,

Jesus took our place.

He exchanged our sin

for His righteousness.

Our disobedience

for His obedience.

He suffered

for our comfort.

Jesus is the True Worker.

Jesus' obedience is perfect.

His love is flawless.

He never wasted

an hour on the clock.

He never had a selfish motive.

He never failed

to love God

with all His heart

and with all His strength.

And He never failed

to love His neighbour

as Himself.

For you,

Jesus bore the scorching heat.

For you,

He bore the burden of the day.

In the Garden of Gethsemane,

He sweated drops of blood

for you.

Under Pontius Pilate,

He was beaten,

mocked and whipped

for you.

He was nailed to a cross

for you.

And on that cross

He bore the burden

of your sin.

He bore the burden

of God's flaming-hot anger

against your sin.

*“Surely He has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed Him stricken,
smitten by God,
and afflicted.
But He was pierced
for our transgressions;*

*He was crushed
for our iniquities;
upon Him
was the penalty
that brought us peace,
and with His wounds
we are healed.
All we like sheep
have gone astray;
we have turned
—every one—
to His own way;*

*and the Lord has laid
on Him
the iniquity of us all...
Out of the anguish of His soul
He shall see
and be satisfied;
...the righteous one,
my servant,
[shall] make many
to be accounted righteous,
for He shall bear
their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:4–6,11)*

Yes,

Jesus has borne
the burden of the day
and the scorching heat.
And we sinners
are given **His** wages.

We are justified

before God
by Christ's work.
His effort is our salvation.
His merit is ours.
We come into the vineyard
at the last hour.
And God gives us Christ's coin.

“You have made them equal to us.”

The latecomer receives the full Christ.
The lifelong Christian receives the full Christ.
The baptized child receives the full Christ.
The deathbed convert receives the full Christ.
Because Christ has done
all the work.
All the coins are His.
And He is generous.

By Faith

we all receive
the same Saviour.
The same forgiveness.
The same eternal life.
Purchased
by the works
of Christ.

IV. A New Way of Seeing: “Because I am Generous.”

My friends,

Receiving God’s generosity
gives us a new way
of seeing.
We’re not working
for wages.
We’re doing good works
because we belong
to Christ.
His generosity fills our hearts
with love and thanksgiving.
This is a labour
of love.

Christ calls us

into His vineyard.
Through our various vocations,
we bear His love
into the world.
*“For by grace
you have been saved
through faith...
not a result of works...
For we are His workmanship,
created
in Christ Jesus
for good works, which God prepared beforehand.”*

Because He is generous,
 we see good works as a gift.
 Service is a gift.
 Every opportunity
 to love God
 by loving our neighbour
 is a gift.

You work
 in His vineyard:
 Not earning salvation.
 Not securing favour.
 Not competing
 for status.
 You work
 because God is good
 and generous.
 You work
 because **God's worker is who you are.**

St. Paul writes:
*"For we are God's fellow workers.
 You are God's field, God's building."*
 That's a wild statement.
 The Almighty Creator
 of the universe
 makes us His coworkers!

He works **with** you.
 He works **through** you.
 He works **in** you.
 You are His field.
 You are His fellow workers.
 And God uses your vocation
 to love your neighbour.

He calls us

to take part
in His saving acts.

To be partners
in His plan.

That's why

*"whatever you do,
in word or deed,
do everything
in the name of the Lord Jesus,*

giving thanks

to God the Father

through Him." (Colossians 3:17)

He uses your mouth
to speak His truth.

Your hands
to serve.

Your generosity
to provide.

Your encouragement
to strengthen.

And especially,

He uses His Church
to proclaim His Gospel.

*"And how can they believe
in the One
of whom they have not heard?
How are they to hear
without someone preaching?"*

Through this congregation,
God preaches His life-giving Word.
He gives His forgiving Word
in the Sacraments.

And His love flows
through you
to the people around you
as you:
*“Speak to one another
with psalms, hymns
and spiritual songs.
Singing and making music
in your heart
to the Lord,
always giving thanks
to God the Father
for everything,
in the name of
our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (Ephesians 5:19–20)

So we work
in God’s vineyard
as His fellow workers.
Not to earn salvation—
we are already saved.
Not to secure favour—
Christ has already secured it.
Not for status—
we already have Christ’s righteousness.
We serve in love of God
and neighbour.
We serve in thanksgiving
to God in Jesus’ name.

And so we rejoice
when others receive grace.
Another sinner forgiven.
Another person restored.
Another worker called.
Another Christian blessed.
That is Christ’s generosity—not our loss.

Life under grace is:

Receiving.

Giving.

Serving.

Rejoicing.

Conclusion: “The Last Will Be First”

My friends,

It isn't fair.

By our accounting,

we should get

what we have earned.

We should get

what we deserve.

“The wages of sin is death.”

But instead,

what does God do?

He runs His kingdom

on **His** accounting.

He looks at us and asks:

“What has Christ done?

What does Christ deserve?”

And He gathers us

into His vineyard.

“The last will be the first,

and the first last.”

Jesus is the first,

and He took last place for us.

Therefore,

The undeserving are forgiven.

The sinners are the righteous

in Christ.

The worker is welcomed

into the vineyard—

even at the last moment.

And the payment?
Not proportionate
to our merit.
But rather equal
to Christ's merit.
Salvation is Christ's gift.
God's gift is eternal life
in Jesus.

Not our effort,
but His.
Not our fairness—
but His grace.

Therefore,
Take your eyes
off the ledger.
Take your evil eye
of comparison
off of your fellow workers.
Put your eyes
on Christ.
And in gratitude,
be faithful in His vineyard.

In His generosity,
Jesus has made us all equal
to His effort.

*The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and
minds in Christ Jesus, amen.*