

September 20, 2026

Matthew 20:1-16 “That’s Not Fair!”

I’ve been told that I have an over-inflated sense of fairness. I’ve also been told by the same person that I don’t even know what fairness means. If you haven’t figured it out, that person is Mary, my beloved wife of 38 years. See, I grew up as an only child in a two-parent home. Mary grew up as the youngest of five siblings in a multi-parent, multi-house, multi-dynamic environment. And she has a much different understanding of fairness than I do.

I have also been told that my understanding of a standard-sized Hershey bar is defective. I see it as a singular entity. My answer to the question, “Do you want a Hershey bar?” is “Yes. Indeed I do.” Mary says, “So how many squares does a standard size Hershey bar have?” Oh, I don’t know ... eight? “No,” she says. “There are twelve.” Oh, okay twelve. “Do you want to know why I know there are exactly 12 squares in a standard Hershey Bar?” I don’t know. Do I want to? “Maybe not, but you, Mister Onlychild, are going to hear it anyway.”

And, I learned that when there are families with multiple children, not everybody gets their own Hershey bar. Maybe there’s only one Hershey bar. Mary said, “Tell me, is that an odd or even number?” I panic because I feel like these are becoming trick questions. “The answer is even. So here’s a story problem for you Mr. Onlychild – If you have 12 squares and five kids, how many squares does each kid get? You know. To be ‘fair’ since that’s such an important concept for you.” I may not be good at math, but I knew the answer to that one. Two and a half! Each kid gets two and a half squares! She said, “You would think that wouldn’t you? No, the answer to ‘what is twelve divided by five’ is two point *four*. Now how do you divide 12 squares of crumbly chocolate into the amount needed to be fair? And for a bonus challenge, you are in the back two seats of a moving station wagon.” Well, I suppose you break the squares off the candy bar, and then you break the individual squares in two. “That’s cute Mr. Onlychild. And yes, indeed that *is* what you do.

But no matter how hard you try to make it even – or ‘fair’ as you call it, someone gets the largest portion, and someone gets the smallest portion. So what do you think the one who has the biggest portion ...” Yeah, but who measures that? “Shh! Are you interrupting me Mr. Onlychild? At least one among the five siblings will measure. And what do you suppose the one who has the largest portion will do? And I’ll give you a hint – it rhymes with ‘goat.’” Ummm gloat? “Very good. And what do you suppose the one with the smallest portion will do?” Oh! Tattle.

Which brings us back full circle to the gospel of Matthew, where two weeks ago we learned about tattling, and last week we learned about forgiveness, and this week we get to learn about what my Old Testament professor at Northwest Christian College used to call “the ‘F’ word.” And yes, my friends, that word is “fair.”

In the passage that Kathy read earlier, Jesus tells a parable about an unusual payday at an unnamed vineyard to illustrate what the Kingdom of heaven is like. The owner gathers some seasonal workers together and negotiates a wage for a day’s work in the vineyard. Then he sends them out to work. For an undisclosed reason, the owner of the vineyard goes to the marketplace and sees some men who weren’t doing anything, so he said, “You guys go to the vineyard to work and I’ll pay you what’s right.” And they did. Then he went out again at noon and again at three, and found other potential laborers standing idle and told them to go to the vineyard and they’d be “paid what’s right.” Then at five o’clock he went out again and saw some more folks standing idle. He said, “Why are you here?” The guys said, “Because nobody hired us.” And the Landowner said, “Well you’re hired – go out into the vineyard and work!” And they did.

At the end of the day, the owner of the vineyard gathers up the workers to pay them. When the workers who had only been there since five came forward, he gave them a full day’s wage. Some of the other workers thought, “Wow! He paid those guys what he said he’d pay us for a full-day’s work! That must mean he’s going to pay us a lot more!” But then

everyone who worked that day, no matter how many hours they worked, were paid the same amount.” And Jesus said, “they grumbled against the landowner and made their case as to why they thought this wasn’t fair.” And then the landowner said – “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” Then Jesus spoke these famous words, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Wait a minute! That’s not the way things are supposed to work! And some of us may be thinking, “Wait! That’s not fair! Doesn’t 2 Thessalonians 3:10 say something like, ‘If you don’t work, you don’t eat?’” Eh, sort of. Except that’s not what’s happening here. Every one of these people showed up looking for work. It’s just that some weren’t chosen until five o’clock. Okay, fine! But it’s *still* not fair! It’s scandalous for someone who worked three hours to get paid the same as someone who worked twelve!

It’s important for us to see that the landowner hasn’t been *unfair*. That’s not the scandal. The scandal is that *the landowner was generous*. And that raises a question that we don’t always want to confront: Do we really want fairness, or do we just want to make sure that we get more than someone else. Then the landowner added another twist to the story – He asked the grumbling workers point-blank: “Are you envious because I’m generous?” Think about how you would feel if someone said that to you when you’re just trying to point out what you think is an obvious injustice. It almost sounds like gloating!

The workers’ understanding of fairness is comparative. “I worked more than they did, therefore I should get more.” But the Landowner’s understanding seems to be, “What does each person need? *Am I free to be generous?*”

Here’s a little detail in this story that I think is easy to overlook. When the landowner finds that last group standing around at five o’clock, he asks them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” And they answer,

“Because no one has hired us.” Notice what they *did not* say. They didn’t say, “Because we didn't feel like working.” Or, “Because we slept until noon.” Or, “Because we'd rather stand around and let everybody else do the work.” Not, they say, **“Nobody hired us.”** Maybe they weren't as strong as the workers who were chosen first. Maybe they were older. Maybe they had some kind of disability. Maybe they just didn't look like the people you would choose first when you needed a hard day’s work in a vineyard. We don't know. And because Jesus doesn't tell us, we shouldn't pretend that we *do* know.

What we *do* know is this: at five o'clock, they're still there. They haven't gone home. They're still hoping somebody will give them a chance to work. And here's something else we know. At the end of the day, they still have to eat. Their *families* still have to eat. That's when the question of fairness starts getting complicated. Because the workers who started early are doing the math the way Mary and her siblings did with that Hershey bar. Twelve squares. Five kids. Somebody gets a little more. Somebody gets a little less. **Measure it. Compare it. Make sure nobody got more than I did.** But the landowner isn't dividing a Hershey bar. He's looking at people. And the workers are asking, **“How much did I earn compared with him?”** But the landowner seems to be asking, **“What does this person need at the end of the day?”** And those are two very different ways of understanding fairness.

Let’s be clear on this -- Jesus isn't giving his disciples a lesson in payroll management. He's telling them what the **kingdom of heaven is like**. And apparently, in God's kingdom, grace isn't distributed according to our calculations. And that's where this parable starts bothering religious people. Because most of us are perfectly happy with grace—as long as nobody else gets more of it than we think they deserve. We like the idea that God is generous with *us*. We sing about amazing grace. We gather around this Table every Sunday because we believe God's love is a gift. We know we haven't earned our place here.

But then somebody else walks into the vineyard at five o'clock. Somebody who hasn't put in the years we have. Somebody who hasn't made the sacrifices we've made. Somebody who hasn't followed the rules, written or unwritten, for as long as we have. Somebody whose life looks very different from ours. And suddenly we're measuring the Hershey bar. "Wait a minute, those people got what I got? No fair!"

Last week Peter wanted to count how many times he had to forgive. This week the workers want to count how many hours everybody worked. Peter was keeping score. The workers are keeping score. And Jesus keeps telling stories where grace ruins the math. Maybe God's idea of fairness isn't making absolutely certain that nobody gets one crumb more than somebody else. Maybe sometimes God's fairness looks scandalously like generosity. And maybe the question Jesus leaves us with isn't, "Did everybody get exactly what they deserved?" Maybe it's, "Why does somebody else's generosity bother us so much when it costs us nothing?"

Now, none of this means fairness doesn't matter. There are real injustices in this world. There are people who are exploited, cheated, mistreated and denied what they need. Scripture has plenty to say about that. But those are sermons for another day. That's not what's happening in this vineyard. **Nobody has been cheated.** The workers who started in the morning received exactly what the landowner promised them. Their complaint isn't, "You didn't give us enough." Their complaint is, "**You gave *them* too much.**"

And maybe that's the distinction Jesus wants us to notice. There's a difference between looking at my neighbor and saying, "**They don't have enough,**" and looking at my neighbor and saying, "**They got as much as I did.**" One is concerned about my neighbor. The other is concerned about me.

Maybe that's what "Mister Onlychild" still has to learn about fairness. If I'm staring at your piece of the Hershey bar trying to determine whether

yours is a millimeter bigger than mine, I may completely miss the fact that **I have chocolate in my hand.** The workers had a day's wage in their hands. Exactly what they had agreed to work for. They could have gone home grateful. Instead, they stood around grumbling because somebody else got chocolate too. And Jesus asks, “**Are you envious because I am generous?**” Maybe the invitation of this parable is really pretty simple: **Stop measuring everybody else's piece.** Give thanks for what you've received. And when somebody who has been standing around all day waiting finally gets invited into the vineyard—**rejoice that there's enough grace for them too.**