

“So unfair... is it?” Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So, the last will be first, and the first last.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

The parable that we read today is simply brilliant. It brings to our attention two realities that we struggle to grasp. One is our sinfulness and the other is God’s incredible grace. So, we are up for a real treat as we reflect on what Jesus teaches us about the Kingdom of God.

Let us see how this parable unpleasantly unveils our sinful nature and how it reveals God’s shocking and even offensive grace. But first we need to step a bit back and see why was Jesus telling this parable, what had happened before?

It all begun with Jesus’ famous conversation with the rich young man, who wanted to inherit the eternal life. That was to him that Jesus said that if he wanted to be perfect then he needed to sell everything that belonged to him, give it to the poor, and then – to follow Jesus.

When the young lad went away sorrowful, Jesus commented on how difficult it was for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God, virtually impossible. That was the disciples’ turn to be astonished: “But then who can be saved?”

To which Jesus replied: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” So, God will take care of this. But Peter just didn’t want to leave such an important matter in God’s hands alone, so he asks about what should we do, and how much is enough to get in the good books with our Father.

“See, we have left everything and followed you, is that enough?” And then in response Jesus tells this brilliant parable. Remember, similarly we read about Jesus answering with the parable also the last week. On forgiveness.

Peter asked the question, and Jesus answered with the parable. Now again Jesus uses the parable to challenge our fallen human way of thinking and to help us to see things the way that we as Christians should see them, to see the big and beautiful picture as the Word of God reveals it.

First, Jesus masterfully illustrates the unescapable reality of our sinfulness. The beauty is that this parable doesn’t so much speak about our sinfulness as it actually helps us to experience it. How? When it connects our feelings with the feelings of the people in the parable.

How did you feel when you heard that the last workers, who had only worked one hour, received the same amount as those who had toiled under the scorching sun the whole day? It felt unfair, didn’t it? Imagine it being done to you!

But those are our ignorant and self-centred hearts complaining; and this is one of the signs of our profound corruption. We struggle to be grateful. We struggle to be content. All the time we want to compare ourselves with others.

Famous Christian writer C. S. Lewis wonderfully described this phenomenon. He wrote that we don’t want just to succeed, we want to succeed more than the next person. We don’t want just to be good, we want to be better than the next person. We don’t look at the gifts of our generous Creator and rejoice in them, we continually compare what gifts others have received.

We see it all around us in so many different ways. We as Christians are by no means spared from this sickness. Imagine someone who has led a very irresponsible life. They were bullies in school. They slept around and partied like there was no tomorrow.

Perhaps they ruined your relationships, perhaps, hurt someone very close to you. They were irresponsible in their work, maybe you had to suffer from their laziness or mistakes, and so on.

You, on the other hand, were reasonably good Christian your entire life, you know – didn’t kill anyone, didn’t steal much, tried to honour your marriage, celebrating Sundays, serving on different rosters, giving your offerings, etc. And one day you see that person, that person! joining your congregation. Suddenly, after all they have done, now they have decided to become Christians?!

And everyone rejoices that they are there, but you know what kind of people they are. And then they die and go to Paradise... How do you feel? I think we could say it as a choir, with the workers in the vineyard: “That is not fair!”

Let’s try to learn how to see this situation as Christians. Our problem is that we can’t see our beginning and our end, where we started and what our ultimate

destination is, and that distorts our perception. We mainly focus on ourselves, right now and right here. That's what our sin does, it turns us towards ourselves, and hinders seeing the big, true and beautiful picture of how things are.

Okay, our beginnings. Or we can say the early morning for us as workers who are waiting in the marketplace. The early morning of our life-day. We are without job, without promise, without any assurance, waiting...

Or we could say that in the morning of our lives we are dead in our sins, without any hope for life with our God, and there is nothing in us that would make our Master to come and to hire us, or to bring us into His vineyard, His Kingdom.

He comes looking for us though, and in His grace, He hires us, He calls us, He brings us into His vineyard and promises to take care of us. If that happens early in our life, that is not something that we have merited. If someone is born in a Christian family, this is by no means their accomplishment.

As the life-day goes on, the gracious Master keeps coming and looking for workers. Some are called later in the day, some already in afternoon, some only in late evening. But they all are called only by His grace, for He wants them to do well. He wants to bless them with what He has.

If we have been blessed to be born in Christian families, if we have been blessed to be used by our Lord more than others, to work in His vineyard longer hours, if He has accomplished through us more than through others, those are His gifts to us, those are not our merits, not something we can boast about. That is something we should be humbly grateful for.

See, when we are clear about our starting point, we can see that no one would be able to do anything except by the grace of our Master. That should take all our boasting and comparing ourselves with others away.

God's Kingdom is not about fairness, at least not in this sense. It is about God's undeserved grace and mercy. Different people receive it at different times, and if anything, we should feel that it may not be fair, that we have been blessed to be embraced in God's family earlier than others.

Now about our end, about our ultimate destination. We may complain and feel unhappy about others because we have done more than they; we have been more committed and involved, and now... all are up for the same reward.

The problem is that we don't realize the grandeur of our reward. We simply can't comprehend the scope of what our Father and our Master Jesus has prepared for us. There is no proportionality between what we have done in this life and what our Lord has prepared for us.

Jesus alludes to it briefly saying that everyone who follows Him will receive hundredfold whatever they have left for His sake, and most important – will inherit eternal life. The point of that promise is not to show how we can calculate

what wages to expect in the age to come. The point is to proclaim to us the Good, the Great News, that everyone who only accepts God's gracious invitation, whenever that happens, whatever they have done before that, will receive something that surpasses our imagination.

Something so beautiful and overwhelming that cannot be put in human words. Something that will make us to forget what has been in a blink of an eye. Think about Jesus' commitment to us, about what He was willing to undergo and endure for you. Now He has all the power and authority in His hands.

And now He has gone to prepare a place for us, for you. Just think about this... we know His attitude towards us, we know His limitless power, and now He is using it to surprise us, to bring us joy and happiness.

We will see the Lord of all creation. We will see Jesus Christ in His divine glory and – we will be made like Him. Whatever that means... and whatever that means, it is infinitely more that we could ever dare to dream about, and infinitely more that we would ever deserve. That is our ultimate destination.

Once we see our beginning and our end, where we come from, or where our gracious God picks us up from, and where He in His abundant grace and mercy is leading us, I hope, it becomes clear that this is not our doing, not a bit, and that our feelings of unfairness and mutual comparison are totally misplaced.

That is Jesus encouraging message to us. Let the Word and the Spirit open our eyes to see this life and this world as Jesus reveals it to us. So that we may bow down in awe and wonder for His undeserved grace and mercy, rejoicing in overflowing gratitude – for your Master has found you, He has called you, and now you are one of His.

Here, among God's chosen ones, there is no place for envy, or boasting, or the sense of superiority, nor for guilt and shame. Now you are in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of undeserved grace and mercy.

Remember Jesus words: "You didn't choose me, I chose you!" Indeed, He chose you, He has called you, and He has promise that nothing in this world will be able to separate you from His love and commitment.

May the Holy Spirit help us to fix our eyes on our Master, on His wonderful mercies and on the heavenly hope that we all share.

Amen.