

# Grace is Not Fair

## *Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time*

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I am sure we could all tell our own version and experience of this parable. We know people who, in our not-so-humble opinion, neither earned nor deserved what they got: a job, a promotion, a raise, recognition, happiness, and success. That we worked longer and tried harder seemed to make no difference. Often, we view the world, ourselves, and others through the lens of fairness rather than grace, the exact opposite of how God views the world and our lives.

We've been taught from an early age that fairness matters. Watch a bunch of children play, and it won't be long before you hear someone say, "That's not fair!" So, it wasn't fair the night my grandmother gave me twelve lima beans, and my sister got only eight. That I counted the beans on our plates and that I still remember that night suggests how deeply ingrained within us is the concept of fairness. Maybe it's just me, but I don't think so. I am willing to bet that you, too, in some way, have counted lima beans!

It's not just children. Adults want fairness, too. Too often, however, justice rather than love, acceptance, mercy, forgiveness, or generosity is how we act and judge another person or life circumstances.

We like fairness because it gives us some assurance of order, predictability, control, and hierarchy, even if it is a false assurance. Justice is based on what you deserve, how hard you work, what you achieve, and how you behave. Sometimes, it is fair to give a reward. Other times, it is a punishment. We live in and promote a wage-based society where you earn what you get. You deserve the consequences, good or bad, of your actions.

What happens, though, when divine goodness trumps human fairness? You get today's parable. Today's parable suggests wages and grace stand in opposition to each other. They are two opposing world views. The degree to which this parable strikes us as unfair is the degree to which our life and worldview are based. A wage-based worldview allows little room for grace in our own lives or the lives of others.

Grace is dangerous. It reverses business as usual. "So, the last will be first, and the first will be last." That's not how a wage-based society works. The world says the last are last and the first are first because they deserve it. It's what is fair. Our understanding of fairness, however, does not seem to have priority in the kingdom of Heaven, where grace is the rule, not the exception. Grace looks beyond our productivity, appearance, dress, race or ethnicity, accomplishments, and failures. Grace recognises there is more to you and who you are than what you have done or left undone.

Grace reveals the goodness of God. Wages show human effort. Grace seeks unity and inclusion. Salaries make distinctions and separate. Grace just happens. Wages are based on merit. The only precondition of grace is that we show up and open ourselves to receive what God is giving; when we do, we see our lives, the world, and our neighbour differently.

Grace reminds us that we are more self-sufficient, deserving, and independent than a wage-based society would like us to believe. Neither is our worth determined by our productivity or usefulness to another. Grace does not justify or excuse discrimination, unfairness, or oppression. On the contrary, it holds before us that each person is more than their behaviour, looks, accomplishments, or failures.

The tragedy of a wage-based life is that it closes our eyes to the presence of grace and God's life. It can make us resentful of grace, goodness, and beauty in the life of another. It separates and isolates us from others. Eventually, we set standards and expectations for ourselves, others, and God. That's what happened to the first hire in today's parable. They saw themselves as different from and more deserving than the later hired. They grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us." The truth is they are not that different from each other. Neither group owned the vineyard. Both groups needed a job, and both groups were chosen and invited in by no effort of their own doing. There is, however, something that distinguishes the first hired and the later hired.

The distinction is different from the time they showed up to work. The fundamental difference between the first hired and all the later hired is the terms under which they entered the vineyard. The first hired entered the vineyard only after agreeing to the usual daily wage. They settled for too little. They short-changed themselves. That's often what happens in a salary-based society. Apparently, the landowner is willing to pay more than the usual daily wage. A full day's wage for less than a full day's work. "That's not fair," we might say. No, it's not. That's grace.

The first hired got what they bargained for. The later hired workers, those who come at 9:00 a.m., noon, 3:00 p.m., or even 5:00 p.m., did not negotiate for the usual daily wage. They entered the vineyard, trusting they would be paid "whatever is right." Whatever is right is not determined by the first hired or by a wage-based society but by the goodness of the landowner. These later hired workers received more than they earned, more than they deserved, and more than they had a right to ask or hope for. That's just what God does. "Whatever is right" isn't about fairness but about grace.

Why settle for the usual daily wage when God wants to give you "whatever is right" for your life, needs, and salvation? "Whatever is right" will always be more than fair, more than we could ask or imagine. Yet, we sometimes trust a wage-based life more than we trust grace. In so doing, we deny ourselves and others the life God wants to give. So, how might we move from a wage-based life to the vineyard of grace?

Stop comparing yourself and your life to others; you will create room for grace to emerge. Refuse to compete in such a way that someone must lose for you to win. Trust that in God's world, there is enough for everyone. Let go of expectations based on what you think you or others deserve. Give God the freedom to pay whatever is right, knowing God's ways are not yours. Make no judgments of yourself or others. That is the way of grace, the way of God.

Imagine letting go of those four things: comparison, competition, expectation, and judgment. Your life would be God-filled, you would make space for the life of another to be God-filled, and the world would, the parable tells us, look a lot like the kingdom of heaven.

**AMEN**