

# Life Isn't Fair

**Sardis Baptist Church**

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**Matthew 20:1-16**

Life isn't fair. It's a true statement. I cannot count how many times I heard those words growing up, and I have undoubtedly said them to my own children countless times as well. I hated to hear that as a child, because life just seems so much easier when it is fair. In high school, my sister got to go to Europe on a field trip with the Spanish club, and one year in college, she spent spring break on a beach in Cancun. I was a couple years behind her, and the furthest I ever went on a school field trip was Asheville. The most exotic place I spent spring break was Myrtle Beach. I also got to travel to South Florida one year, and it was quite exotic as well. As I complain about how my spring break travels compared to my sisters, I do want to say that I realize now, as an adult, what a privilege it was to get to take spring break trips at all. I didn't have that perspective as teenager.

My sister also got to go to sleep away camp every year: Camp Eagles Nest in Hendersonville. She spent three weeks every summer at camp doing things like horseback riding, archery, canoeing and making lots of new friends. I did not get to go to camp every summer. It just wasn't fair.

What is fair is not always just, and what is just is not always fair. Fairness is equal distribution, without consideration of needs. Justice is different; it requires consideration of other factors.

What you don't know about my sister, is that she has Type I diabetes. She was diagnosed at 7 years old, in the mid-1970's. Although it continues to be a serious and dangerous disease today, there has truly been a revolution in diabetes management in the last 45 years. Type I diabetes is different from Type II. It's an autoimmune disease where the immune system attacks cells in the pancreas therefore preventing the production of insulin. You cannot live without insulin.

Successful management of Type I diabetes at the time required insulin injections multiple times

per day, consistent blood sugar monitoring (which meant lots of painful finger pricks), as well as carb counting, healthy eating, and physical activity. These are not simple tasks for a 7-year-old, or a teenager, or for that matter, for her single mother.

The reason my sister got to go to Camp Eagles Nest every year is because it was run by the American Diabetes Association. It was an opportunity for her to be surrounded by peers and mentors who were also learning how to live with diabetes. Camp helped her learn to manage her disease; it helped her gain confidence; it helped her not feel like an outcast, and it was a place where my mom knew Mary was safe – that her physical needs were being appropriately tended to. The cost of Camp Eagles Nest was money well spent in our family.

Still, it wasn't fair that I didn't get to go to camp, but my sister had some special needs that I didn't. If the resources were available to send me to camp too, I'm sure I would have gone. That was not the case. It wasn't fair, but it was just, and justice is what today's parable is about. Here these words from Matthew, Chapter 20...

*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 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.’ 13 But he replied to one of them,*

*'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

The parable begins, "the kingdom of heaven is like...", and then it goes on to describe an unfair boss who pays unreasonable wages to colleagues that haven't carried their weight. What - that's what the kingdom of heaven is like? Maybe we're better off outside the kingdom where our indignancy is justified!

We all know people like those grumbling workers – people who live with a victim mentality. Something is always wrong, and it's always someone else's fault. Perhaps some of us *are* those grumbling workers. Do any of you ever focus your attention on what *others* have? If so, you lose sight of what *you* have. It's long been said that comparison is the thief of joy, and this parable shows that to be true. Even though the early workers were paid a fair and agreed upon wage, it wasn't enough. Their envy kept them from seeing the landowner's generosity as generous. Instead, they saw it as unfair. They wanted more money for themselves and less for the others, regardless of the knowledge that the others wouldn't receive enough to survive on, much less thrive on. They cared about fairness, not about justice.

What if, instead of being envious, they had been grateful for the denarius they received – a wage they'd agreed to before the start of the workday? A denarius was an acceptable daily wage at the time. It was not extravagant; it was considered adequate to meet basic needs. What if, instead of being greedy, they were pleased to work for an owner that made it possible for neighbors to feed their families – families who otherwise may have gone hungry? If they'd thought like that, with a mindset of gratitude and generosity, they would have realized that when greed wasn't a factor, there was abundance to go around.

Do any of us think we're greedy? Do we want more for ourselves without regard to others? Do we want new, stylish clothes – even though we know that the chemicals and materials used in

their production are harming the environment? Do we still want those clothes, even though we know that many of them, especially the most affordable ones, are made in sweatshops in countries known for oppression of laborers?

How about our food industry? We want convenience, even though we know that Big Agribusiness practices are depleting our soil, and leading to habitat loss and deforestation, and emitting outrageous quantities of greenhouse gases. And then there's the way factory farms treat the same God-created beings that we gave thanks for during the Blessing of the Animals service last Sunday.

Moving on to real estate – we recently received a mailer from our neighborhood realtor that made me realize we can probably sell our house for more than triple what we paid for it. This gave me a bit of a thrill, even though I know that the skyrocketing cost of real estate will make it impossible for many people to ever buy a home. The thrill ended when our property tax bill arrived following the recent revaluation, and I began to behave like the grumbling workers. I genuinely want public programs that elevate the downtrodden. I also want more money in my bank account. I have to ask myself which I want more – and what would Jesus ask of me?

Lastly, I'll mention the auto industry. One of the many problems during the Great Recession that began back in 2007 was the Automotive Industry Crisis. The same "Big 3" car companies that are in the headlines today, were facing insolvency. Autoworkers at the time agreed to concessions that included a suspension of cost-of-living adjustments to their wages. Fifteen years later, those adjustments have never been reinstated. According to the Economic Policy Institute, which is an independent, nonprofit organization, (1) "US auto manufacturing workers have seen their average real hourly earnings fall 19.3% since 2008." "Real income" is an economic measure that considers inflation and purchasing power of wages. In other words, although autoworker wages have gone up, their purchasing power has decreased by nearly 20%.

The industry has long since recovered from that crisis. In the last 10 years, profits for the “Big 3” (Ford, GM, and Stellantis) are up 92%. CEO pay has jumped by 40% during this time, and \$66 billion has been paid out in shareholder dividends and stock buybacks.

The industry says they need those profits to support the transition to electric vehicles. No doubt, the costs will be astronomical, but the “Big 3” are set to receive record incentives to support the transition. These incentives, paid for with our tax dollars, will substantially boost the profitability of the companies’ investments in EV technologies, and therefore line the pockets of the CEOs that are already making between \$23-\$29 million per year. I don’t have to wonder what Jesus would think about this if he were listening today, because today’s parable tells me that he cares about a more equitable wage structure.

Of course, we have to buy clothes and food. We need homes to live in, and transportation to get around. But corporate greed is driven by consumer spending. If we want our world to look even a little bit more like the kingdom of heaven, as the parable begins, we must make informed and compassionate choices with the dollars we spend. We may not be a room full of one-percenters, but we are the “haves” rather than the “have nots” in our society. I, for example, am healthy, middle-class, able-bodied, and educated. The *culture* we live in teaches that my status as a “have” is a result of my own efforts: I make food choices that include a rainbow array of colors (occasionally that includes Skittles and M&M’s, but not frequently); I give my best effort at work; I exercise regularly; I studied for my education – and I still study today. I won’t keep going, because the problem with this assessment of my status is that it assumes the “have nots” don’t deserve to be in the same category as me.

If you live in one of Charlotte’s food deserts, it’s next to impossible to eat a rainbow array of fresh fruits and vegetables, but much easier to access Skittles and M&M’s at the corner convenient store. If you’re a single parent, and you work two jobs to pay rent, utilities, food, childcare, transportation, clothes, et cetera, it’s doubtful that you have time to go to the gym – much less money to join in the first place. We might be here all day if I start talking about access to education. All I’m going to say, is that access to higher education is anything but equitable.

Unfortunately, it seems that even access to elementary and secondary education is becoming more and more that way as well.

The landowner in today's parable does not devalue the workers who started early in the morning, and the point is not to say that efforts are not valuable. *Efforts are not the point at all.* The landowner *elevates* the "have nots" so that they *have equity* with the "haves". (2) Amy-Jill Levine (who wrote "Short Stories by Jesus", which helped me prepare for today) says, "The point is not that those who have 'get more,' but that those who have not 'get enough.'" The landowner recognizes that the basic needs of all the workers are the same regardless of their circumstances. Each one, regardless of how much fruit they harvested, was of equal worth in the eyes of God. Jesus does not convert hours and minutes into dollars and cents, and he is not (3) "interested in our warped ways of keeping the ledger of life." As the quote on the front of your worship guide says, (2) "His focus is often less directly on 'good news to the poor' than on 'responsibility of the rich.'" What is fair is not always just, and what is just is not always fair. May each of us do our part to make this world more just, even when it just isn't fair. Amen.

(1) Economic Policy Institute; blog post by Adam S. Hersh; September 12, 2023;

<https://www.epi.org/blog/uaw-automakers-negotiations/#:~:text=Forecasts%20for%202023%20expect%20more,dividend%20payments%20and%20stock%20buybacks>

(2) Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi, by Amy-Jill Levine; copyright © 2014 by Amy-Jill Levine, HarperCollins Publishers.

(3) The Christian Century, September 2023; September 24, Ordinary 35A, by Ray Speller;

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/lectionary/september-24-25a-matthew-20-1->