

Matthew 20:1-16
Churlishness condemned

Delight in grace for others, too

I don't know if all kids were like me, but I think I was a bit fussy at times. I can remember the first time I encountered cheese other than bog standard cheddar. I think it must have been some **Double Gloucester**. But it was the *wrong* colour. Wasn't going to eat *that!*

And then Mum did the sneaky on me, buying **mature Cheddar cheese**. Right colour, but wrong *taste*. I remember glaring at it in the fridge, thinking of it - having made the mistake of having sampled it - as "mustard cheese". You can probably guess I was none too keen on **mustard** itself, either.

And you know how it is when you visit other people, and they have different ways of doing things. And different food options. That was the downside of visiting one particular set of cousins who lived up-country at the time. Whatever it was that I had for breakfast in those days, cereal of some kind, I would guess ... but they had those minced-up cardboard things that were labelled **Shredded Wheat**. They were just about palatable when the milk had finally gotten them soggy, and there was enough sugar to mask the gruesome taste.

But what really *horrified* me one day, visiting those cousins, was that they **mixed their cereals**, too. Two different cereals from two different packets in just one bowl. *That just wasn't right!*

People of all ages have a pretty sharp sense of rightness and wrongness - though it's usually not calibrated particularly well, I also have to add. In my case as a kid there, you see, it was focused on something that is absolutely *not* a question of right and wrong, morally speaking, but just what I was *used to*. I mentally defined that - as perhaps kids generally do - as "the *right way*" to proceed with breakfast cereals.

One of the comments you will hear most frequently when kids get to a certain age is "**that's not fair!**" To start with, it means rather more that *I just don't like that decision* - they can't get their own way - but that does soon get relatively refined into a sense of "fairness" that persists into adult life. It's that that makes people jump up and down and - perhaps not literally - cry out *that's not fair* if there, to quote one of my pettest hates, a "**postcode lottery**".

To my mind, if you have a system of government where you delegate authority to take decisions down to local levels, instead of deciding centrally, then there is *always* the likelihood that different regions will decide things differently. But then that **not fair** instinct kicks in, when, for example, people in Devon are treated differently from people in Cornwall. And the typical outcry is to denounce it as that "postcode lottery", instead of simply accepting it as obvious consequence of devolution.

And haven't you heard a lot of this just these last few days in the news, with the announcements about the various **Tiers** of restriction? All those cries of *not fair!*

But in this parable, Jesus uses our innate sense of *not fair* to trip us up as he tells the story. There is something that *we* feel, as we read it, odd, incongruous ... well, to be quite

honest, yes, you *can* see why it was that those people complained, at the turning point of the story,

“... 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.’”

(Matthew 20:12)

As ever, it's so brilliantly told. We naturally feel that apparent injustice. We wonder *just how is this fair?* And then Jesus, like that **magician** with the trick when you pull away a piece of cloth and leave the tower built upon it still standing, *hey, presto!* ... And then Jesus shows us something even more wonderful than fairness: *grace*. **Jesus' parable warns his disciples not to begrudge the breadth of God's grace**

Why does Jesus tell this?

(The telling of the story)

How might this apply to *us*?

- **Why does Jesus tell this?**

I suppose you could say that I'm just picking up the first word of the chapter and developing it into a whole point in its own right.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like ...”

(Matthew 20:1)

But you really do need to run the end of chapter 19 into the start of chapter 20. It's a terrible chapter division. (And, by the way, I can say that, because Matthew and the other Bible writers didn't write in chapters - that's a *much* later addition, and we should reserve the right to dispute the best places to divide the books up, if they don't make sense to us). Let me briefly take you back a bit.

And behold, a man came up to him, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

(Matthew 19:16)

Not going to run through that account now, but you'll probably remember how it ended.

When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

(Matthew 19:22)

And then Jesus turns to his disciples and surprises them with a comment about wealth.

And Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 19:23)

That knocks them back. A few more words are interchanged.

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

(Matthew 19:25-26)

And the very next thing that Matthew reports is what, I think, this parable Jesus gives is in response to.

Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”

(Matthew 19:27)

Now I’ll come back later on to pick up precisely what this is getting at, but notice that what Jesus says right at the end of chapter 19 is a very gentle, encouraging reply to this, first of all ...

Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

(Matthew 19:28)

But there is still a but. The first word of the last verse. Jesus has given encouragement, but he also gives a gentle but clear enough warning. At the very least, Peter, don’t push that attitude there any further.

“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

(Matthew 19:30)

That comment is not just left to mysteriously hang in the air. It’s linked to the start of the next chapter with a strong connecting word, a *therefore*, really:

“For the kingdom of heaven is like ...”

(Matthew 20:1)

And *after* the telling of the story, Jesus specifically says that *this parable* illustrates *this point* - first last and last first:

“So the last will be first, and the first last.”

(Matthew 20:16)

This is how, what I’ve just said. Which is what we really need to look at now, don’t we? So ...

- **The telling of the story**

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.”

(Matthew 20:1)

And just like so many of Jesus’ stories, it starts with an entirely recognisable situation. It’s possible that this “master of a house” is a foreigner - a bit like second-home

owners in Cornwall - and therefore more tolerated than actually greatly liked. It certainly was the case that foreigners had come in and bought up property, which now the original owners or their descendants had to work as daily labour. So there's a bit of ambiguity about this master - and perhaps the suspicion that he might not be above a certain degree of exploitation of his workers. We shall just have to see about that, as the story unfolds.

But, apart from that bit of background, this is all pretty standard stuff. Of course it would be an early start, to make the fullest use of the light. Grapes when they were ripe needed harvesting quickly.

And since this is daily labour, he goes to the place where the men looking for work would be. And actually, anyone motivated enough to be here in the marketplace this bright and early is just the kind of person you'd probably want to employ for the day, surely?

"After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard."

(Matthew 20:2)

So the pay they would receive for their day's labour is agreed. A denarius is actually a decent wage for a day's work. Certainly nearer to "living wage" than "minimum wage", and perhaps even as Jesus says this, these disciples he's speaking to are starting to revise the possible question mark in their minds about whether this is a mean employer. There is certainly no evidence of it here. So far, so good.

But it appears that this is a big vineyard, and there's scope with this year's harvest for more workers. Probably more than just scope, *need*. So, a few hours later ...

"And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ..."

(Matthew 20:3)

So it's obvious what comes next, I should think. The only uncertainty might be precisely what the pay might be. After all, a quarter of the day has already gone by. But it seems now that this "master of a house" has a reputation for some kind of honour. He can be trusted to be fair.

"... and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went."

(Matthew 20:4-5)

And now, as the story progresses, it starts to get just a little bit surreal. How long can Jesus stretch this out, do you think?

"Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same."

(Matthew 20:5)

So that's midday - the sixth hour - and mid-afternoon. And this is an increasingly odd "master of a house", too. We find out a bit later that there is a foreman, and it might normally have been a foreman's job to go and hire the daily labourers. Yet *this* guy is doing it all himself! We are meant to simply presume from "he did the same" that the same "what is fair" agreement was made in each case.

So it's nearly the end of the day. Time for reckoning, time for the punch-line of this parable, you'd think. But no. Now this is ridiculous. If you hire someone when it's just an hour until dark, by the time they walk to the vineyard and get into place, it *will* just about be dark. So ... he couldn't ... he wouldn't ... would he?

“And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing.”

(Matthew 20:6)

Why on earth has he done this? He can scarcely get any useful work out of these guys. So perhaps he is actually an unusually public-spirited landowner, with a concern for the needs of the working man, looking to do some good to his community, even if it financially disadvantages him.

Though he is no idiot. He's not totally naive. He asks a very fair and relevant question to these people who are still waiting around. Are they the bottom of the bunch? Has nobody else given these particular people work because they're perhaps not the most productive workers? Is that maybe a hint that this landowner usually leaves it to his foreman to do the hiring, but today, on some kind of whim, he's doing it himself? - only he won't know who the usual rascals and layabouts are at the Job Centre?

“And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’”

(Matthew 20:6)

And the answer he gets, *I* don't think is particularly convincing. To me it certainly sounds as if it could be a bit sullen. What do you think?

“They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’”

(Matthew 20:7)

It would still have been fair to ask, *yes, but why not?* wouldn't you say? And yet ... OK, maybe that answer will do. By now, these guys are going to be desperate for just *anything* to show for their day in the market-place.

“He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’”

(Matthew 20:7)

So what do we expect? They'll obviously need some kind of token payment, as they will only have done a token amount of work. That's *fair*, isn't it? Already our sense of what is *fair* has been telling us what to expect when it comes to the reckoning. Even when you know this is Jesus telling the story, and when you know it's going to be one of those tricky parables, and you're watching out for the catch, he *still* manages to wrong-foot you!

“And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’”

(Matthew 20:8)

Well, that might be a bit unusual, doing it that way around. The guys who have been here from sun-up *might* hope to be the ones paid first and sent off home. But ... well, this is a maybe rather quirky guy in charge. And it's only a question of a few minutes ...

And do you think this is Jesus teasing his disciples just a little, telling it this way? Here is a *literal* first-becoming-last, last-becoming-first, as the workers who arrived first will be dealt with last. I think it's just told this way to make the punch-line more punchy ... but it also keeps the disciples off-balance as he makes his point. Which is coming very soon now.

So ... hold on!! What's *this*??

“And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius.”

(Matthew 20:9)

And if those five o'clock hires were rather work-shy, they're certainly not going to look this gift horse in the mouth! But ... you can imagine everyone else waiting in line first bemused, and then ... well ... as things progress ... rather hopeful. If he has given *them this* much .. well, to be fair ... surely?

But Jesus skips right to the other end of the line. The nine o'clocks and the middays and the three o'clocks just vanish from the scene. We're not told what they were paid, as it would distract from the parable's big sting in the tail, which is now hurtling towards us. Presume what you want. But surely, however *they* were treated, you *know* ... out of that sense of fairness ... don't you, what *must* happen with the responsible, hard-working people who were in the market-place looking for work at the crack of dawn? Nope! We are as bemused as they were.

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

(Matthew 20:10)

Doesn't that *not fair!!* absolutely scream at us now? What's this? *This* is a picture of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like?? At least we can predict, from our knowledge of human nature, what has to come next, can't we?. And this time we ARE right!

“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.’”

(Matthew 20:11-12)

And you've got to admit, they have a point. But, when the landowner replies doesn't *he* have a point, too?

“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’”

(Matthew 20:13)

And that *is* true, isn't it? It's not *that* far back to the beginning of the story. When they signed on for a decent day's pay for a decent day's work, was there any dissatisfaction then? If it was such a terrible rate of pay, couldn't they have tried to negotiate for more, or take their labour elsewhere?

Just in passing, the word “friend”, used like this, is a slightly challenging word. The other couple of times that Matthew records Jesus saying it, it’s a sign of non-retaliating graciousness.

There’s the parable of the Wedding Banquet - which we haven’t come to, yet:

“And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’”

(Matthew 22:12)

And there’s that moment of Judas’ betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane:

Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you came to do.”

(Matthew 26:50)

So I think that in Jesus’ parable, that landowner is actually aggrieved by this accusation of injustice. Folks, we do need to be really careful if we start disputing with God about his handling of our lives. We don’t have any right to come and harangue him about what he has chosen to send across our paths. I think you can take it as a certainty from what Jesus shows us in this parable that he will never grant us *less* than is fair.

“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’”

(Matthew 20:13)

God *never* does any one of us any wrong. If the world seems to be dealing us a pretty rough hand, we just have to stop and think, *But what has Jesus SAID we can rely upon in this world?*

“In the world you will have tribulation.”

(John 16:33)

We’re tempted to think that something must have gone wrong, if things suddenly become uncomfortable. But that is totally the wrong attitude:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ...

(James 1:2)

Yes, trials are testing - that’s actually what the word that James uses means, trial / test. But those trials or tests have a meaning and a purpose, James argues in the subsequent verses. They are designed to mould you into the person God desires you to be. They’re not evidence that God has forgotten you, or that God has short-changed you. It’s actually the very opposite: God is *at work*, precisely as he told us he would be:

... he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

(Hebrews 12:10-11)

But let's get back and finish Jesus' story first, before we think a bit more through how all of this might apply to us in other ways again. I think there's a certain sadness about the dismissal of those people who had worked so hard.

“Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go.”

(Matthew 20:13-14)

And it feels to me that they do fade from our view. They were there just as background, to make the attitude of the landowner stand out all the more. I said attitude ... I could just have said the *grace* of the landowner. Isn't this what Jesus is telling us here? This parable, he said, is about the kingdom of heaven, once again:

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who ...”

(Matthew 20:1)

And the kingdom of heaven is about grace. The people who argue their rights go away muttering. But the master of this house insists on his right to show generosity and grace.

“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?”

(Matthew 20:14-15)

If, theologically speaking, you're not so happy with a God who *chooses* specific people to save, a God of spectacular grace, then you are setting yourself against the way that Jesus says his kingdom is going to operate. It is a question of God being generous to the unworthy, and being worshipped for that grace. So when Paul teaches briefly about the plan of God, he says that

... he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, ...

(Ephesians 1:5-6)

In [“the Beloved”, = Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, ...

(Ephesians 1:7-8)

And in Romans, when Paul gives a much longer treatment of all this stuff, he sums it up like this. Why does God insist upon his sovereign right to do as he wishes?

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

(Romans 11:32)

The people who believe they are well do not run to the doctor. The people who believe they are good enough already do not run to the Saviour. But

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, ...

(1 Timothy 1:15)

If you will not accept that you are a sinner, and come in order to receive grace, then you are - back to Jesus' story - the ones who come demanding what is obviously their "right" - and are dismissed angry.

"Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go."

(Matthew 20:13-14)

The choice in real life, outside the parable, is starker. Will you come to God as a sinner, and ask him for his grace? Or will you come to God as a sinner (still as a sinner!), and demand what you are due, your wages - even if

... the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 6:23)

Which will it be? Gift or wages? Grace that God delights to freely give, or earnings that you proudly insist on having? Folks, which are you going to do? Are you going to despise this grace, and depart with your wages? Or do you glorify the grace of God offered to you in Jesus Christ, and, as we sang earlier, rejoice that ...

*By grace I am redeemed
By grace I am restored
And now I freely walk
Into the arms of Christ my Lord*

And *that*, says Jesus, is how ...

"So the last will be first, and the first last."

(Matthew 20:16)

"He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."

(Luke 1:52-53)

- **How might this apply to us?**

Let's go back to the reason that Jesus told this parable. Peter, remember, has just asked

Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

(Matthew 19:27)

It's a fair enough question to ask, and Jesus gave Peter an encouraging answer. But he also gives this warning about what Peter's words might also show an inclination towards: the feeling of working for deserved wages, the feeling that God owes you something as a reward for services rendered. For Peter and those other disciples, the possibility that pride might grow that *they* were with Jesus from the first, and that therefore they are somehow to be entitled to something *extra*.

So folks, I think I'd say that I need to warn you about two related things, for nowadays.

Beware a sense of entitlement

This creeps back into so many Christian lives, like water slowly managing to seep through sandbags holding back a flood. Far too many times I've seen in a Christian's obituary a verse that worries me:

“Well done, good and faithful servant. ... Enter into the joy of your master.”

(Matthew 25:21)

If we are not careful, we start to show by careless use of those words that we actually part believe, underneath it all, that a long and faithful life serving Jesus Christ somehow, in part at least, *qualifies* you for heaven. And that undermines grace. So it is one verse that I specifically *don't* want preached at my funeral. If you want one that will do, try

“So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

(Luke 17:10)

And would, actually, that I could even say as much as that.

*Only by grace can we enter
Only by grace can we stand
Not by our human endeavour
But by the blood of the Lamb*

Beware a sense of superiority

Or maybe it will show itself as “Them and Us”

Think of those disciples - or apostles, we could also term them - the first ones to follow Jesus. And that promise from last week of thrones to sit upon. And then, next to Jesus on the adjacent cross, a bandit or terrorist cries to Jesus for mercy with almost his very last breath. And Jesus says to him,

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

(Luke 23:43)

C'mon, Lord, we sure have to have a better place than HIM!

Think on into the early church, a mixture of converted Jews and converted Gentiles. The Jews with their enormously long history following (in some sense) this God whom they had now come to know more fully in Christ. And the new kids on the block, Gentiles, who only a few months ago, perhaps, were worshipping so many gods that they ran out of fingers *and toes* just counting them. Yet there is the insistence that

For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

(Ephesians 2:18)

Couldn't you see the temptation for the Jewish-origin believers to think that they still had some spiritual inside edge, some kind of fast-track, in their discipleship?

Come right through to our own day, when the Gospel has been sent out from so many of the Western democracies ... but those nations are no longer the beacons for Gospel truth that they once were. The average Anglican nowadays, globally speaking, is under 35, lives in the southern hemisphere, and female.

People from those lands that British missionaries went out to, a century and more ago, are now returning to re-evangelise *this* country. Do we feel somehow affronted, to have become so needy? What has happened to our place - our *first*-ness - among the nations in this world? And these people coming *to* us now from *third-world* countries (careful with that phrase!) ... surely they can't know the Gospel as well as us ... can they?

And come finally to a church like ours. Some people have been believers ... even Reformed Baptists ... for decades. And along comes someone newly converted, with no church background at all, with all kinds of strange notions still to unlearn.

Or maybe it's not a new convert, but someone who has until recently been muddling along in membership in some theologically compromised denomination - and with a whole *different* set of strange notions still to unlearn.

Isn't there still some temptation to feel that the church stalwarts of many decades are somehow just a bit more God's favourites? Certainly when it comes to Church Members' Meetings, these people who don't properly know the history and grandeur of the Grace Baptist denomination in general and of this fellowship in particular ... really, should they have totally equal say in the decision making process? Shouldn't the years that I have been here in the church count for something?

Folks, remember the warning of Jesus:

"So the last will be first, and the first last."

(Matthew 20:16)

Jesus' parable warns his disciples not to begrudge the breadth of God's grace. That will take serious soul work.

First, let me urge you to treasure, to really treasure, the grace of God to you in Jesus Christ. Accept how much we all need it. And accept how insistent our God of grace is about his right to be abundantly generous with it.

Delight in that for yourself. And delight in that just as freely for your neighbour, too.

Close your eyes, perhaps, and right now pray *and give thanks* for someone you have felt yourself just a bit superior to.

Delight in grace for others, too