

## 1 Septuagesima – Matthew 20

Sometime in my teenage years during a Good Friday service, we were singing, “Christ the Life of All the Living,” I had sung it many times before, but the constant reiteration of this great exchange finally hit home, which caused a lump in my throat and quiet gasps of overwhelming joy. “Through Thy suffering, death, and merit, I eternal life inherit . . . Thou didst choose to be tormented that my doom should be prevented.” I don’t remember not knowing this gospel truth. I don’t remember not believing it. But it was especially vivid and clear for me that day. It motivated me to memorize more hymns, other than the ones I had already learned at home and in Sunday School, and to relish in this pure gospel, this good news, this atoning sacrifice, this love of my Savior who gave up all comfort to comfort me, who took on all sadness and punishment to make me glad, to cover my sins, declare me righteous, and bless me forever. I began to read Scripture with more intention, looking for every place where this precious gospel was taught, to pay more attention to the sermons, which clearly laid out this saving truth. I loved the gospel. I took comfort in the atoning obedience, suffering, blood, and righteousness of my Savior.

By the time I was in college I wanted to tell everyone about it. Most people were polite enough. Some mocked it. Others awkwardly said, “Interesting,” while looking for a way out of the conversation. It didn’t matter much to me how people reacted, because I knew I was laboring in the vineyard of my Lord, confessing his Word with the confidence that it was good and true and that it would draw people to faith on its own. And while I knew that it was something you can only grasp by faith, it still made sense to me. We are sinful. God is just. God’s grace caused him to send his innocent Son to suffer the wrath and judgment we deserved. Through faith in Christ we stand righteous before God. It’s a simple teaching, which gives profound comfort.

One evening I was at a social gathering off campus somewhere, and I spent about an hour talking with one of my fellow students about theology. He wasn’t a Christian, but he had been raised in some kind of Christian environment. I explained to him that Jesus took the sin of all people on himself and gives to sinners his perfect righteousness in exchange. He delivers it all to us in his Word, and he gives us faith to believe it. My college friend kept telling me that this wasn’t fair. Now, I had heard that before. The campus was filled with all sorts of Joe and Jane Apostates who couldn’t understand why those who never heard the gospel would be condemned. God wasn’t fair, they thought, because he condemned sinners. But this particular student wasn’t making the same argument as the others. He was saying that the gospel wasn’t fair, but, unlike the other students, he said it was unfair that Jesus had to suffer like that. Jesus, he said, was innocent, and we are sinful. He agreed that we all deserve to be condemned. He didn’t seem to have any problem understanding that at all. But he couldn’t believe that the only innocent man would be condemned.

I was taken back by this. I thought perhaps I wasn’t being clear enough. I would then try to explain with more clarity that this is God’s great love for sinners. Yet my fellow student would continue to give the same response. It’s not fair. Look at how much Jesus suffered. He bore the heat and the burden of God’s anger. But that’s what we deserved. We went back and forth in our conversation for a long time, making the people around us nervous. He still couldn’t believe it. In his eyes, it just wasn’t fair.

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Now, I had been discouraged plenty of times by the unbelief of my peers. But this conversation was especially depressing. Here was a guy who agreed that we all deserve to be condemned, yet he couldn't believe that God's Son would take the condemnation on himself. It was very humbling to hear his responses, and it confirmed that only faith can grasp this great message of Christ. It didn't matter how much it made sense to me. My fellow student was right, that is, as far as human reason goes. In the court of human wisdom, the gospel simply isn't fair. It's strange and even offensive to our own understanding. As the hymn goes,

What punishment so strange is suffered yonder!  
The Shepherd dies for sheep that love to wonder.  
The Master pays the debt his servants owe Him.  
Who would not know Him?

Who would not know him? Those who can't get passed how offensive it is to their own reason – those who want fair wages, payment to whom payment is due – their unbelief keeps them from knowing their Savior. This friend from college admitted that God would be just to condemn us all. That would be fair. But what did he hope in? Maybe his hope was that God wasn't all that invested in us. Perhaps God would just leave us alone, without any kind of judgment or salvation. Or maybe we would all get what we deserved, but some would turn out better than others based on what they've done.

Yet this is no hope at all! It is only despair. Whether you think that God is unjust because you don't think he should condemn sinners, or you think he is unjust because you don't think he should condemn his innocent Son, you will never grasp the gospel so long as you obsess over what is fair in the eyes of this world.

You want fair? Then you can face God without Christ bearing your sins on the cross. See where you stand then. You want fair? You can try to win over God's approval by your own life and your own religious devotion. But you won't succeed. The fact is, if you know the truth about yourself, you don't want fair. You want mercy. You want grace. You want God to treat you, not as you deserve, but according to his boundless love and undeserved kindness.

Our Lord is fairer than the sons of men, the Psalmist says, because grace is poured upon his lips (Ps 45:2). His fairness, his justice, his equity – his goodness – is shown to us in his grace. The Son suffers the burden of sin, wrath, and the cross in sadness so that we would be freed from sin and blessed with God's grace with all gladness. This is what he gives us in his gospel, and it is profound comfort to the broken heart that knows its sin and guilt. And not only does he give this true fairness to us in his gospel, he teaches it to us throughout our lives. He calls latecomers to faith after you have been believing, confessing, and bearing your cross for several years, and then he gives them the same measure of forgiveness, life, and salvation as he gives to you. He uses them to teach you what true, godly fairness and justice looks like.

This is the point of Jesus' parable. It is a warning against worldly views of fairness. The Master hires men to work in his vineyard. They agree on a denarius a day. Some work

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from sunset into the evening. Others work from midday, and others don't start working until there is only an hour left. And the Master gives them all the same wage. This isn't fair to the opinions of this world. But the Master doesn't give them the denarius because of how long they worked. He gives it because he is generous. God's fairness is found in his generosity. He sent his Son to die for the whole world. He calls on all people everywhere to repent and believe in this precious gift of salvation. And he is determined to call more and more people into his blessed vineyard no matter how late it is in the day. While the workers are in the vineyard the Master is doing the real work. He's running around all day looking for others to send in. He's spending his own money. He promises to give them all what is good and right. And his version of good and right is so generous it doesn't seem fair.

Those who were hired in the early morning ended up grumbling at the Master's generosity by the end of the day. Who knows how sincere they were in the beginning? Perhaps some of them always saw it merely as a contract. They agreed on a denarius a day. But perhaps others started off rejoicing in the Master's generosity, and they served in the vineyard with gladness at first. But as the day wore on, they lost their zeal for his kindness, and they became jealous of the others who were brought in later in the day. They thought they had labored more than what was fair, and their obsession with their own sacrifices kept them from showing mercy on their fellow workers.

But God desires mercy more than sacrifice. He teaches us to desire the same thing. He teaches us to show compassion on those who are just now entering into the church and to rejoice over God's abundant grace and mercy. Since my days in college, I have met Christians who, relatively recently, have come to believe the gospel and take profound comfort in the message that the innocent Son of God gave up everything to share his life and inheritance with poor sinners. They rejoice in it. And yet, fifteen years ago these same people were just as blind as my fellow college students were at that time. Had I spoken to them about the gospel back then, perhaps they would have scoffed, mocked, or called it unfair. But now, by God's grace, they know it. They believe it. They take great comfort in it. They love it. They memorize hymns with even more fervor than I did in my youthful zeal. Coming into the vineyard at a later hour than I was brought in, they bear fruit, which puts my own efforts to shame. Jesus teaches us that the last shall be first and the first last. The greatest among you, he says, should be like the youngest, and the one who rules as the one who serves (Luke 22:26).

Is this fair? What's that to you? It's good. It's right. It's the generosity of God. He did not spare his own Son, and he promises that with him he will give to us what is good and right. So whether you are young or old, a seasoned confessor or a new convert, Jesus Christ is your shield and your reward, given freely by God's grace. This is joy beyond all joy, which causes the broken heart to overflow with relief, peace, comfort, and thanksgiving. Amen.