

Thank God He Is Just

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

Context makes all the difference, and often answers most of the questions people ask about Biblical interpretation. It is no different as we discuss the Gospel lesson for this morning, Matthew 20:1-16. On the surface, all kinds of questions float to the top, challenging many of our misconceptions about God, His character, and His will. But to fully understand chapter 20, we need to take a peek at chapter 19. And as we do, we see Jesus address some pretty difficult, and applicable real-life issues:

Divorce (v.1-12)

The exalted status of children (v.13-15)

The rich young ruler and true salvation (v.16-26)

The eternal reward of the faithful (v.27-30)

What most don't stop to ask themselves is, "Can there be a general point to all these lessons?" We tend to see this chapter as 4 separate stories teaching 4 disconnected points, with little or nothing to do with each other. But that couldn't be further from the truth. We forget that Jesus never wasted a word, nor an experience. God uses every aspect of the continuum of our lives to guide us to an appointed end. And I believe that Jesus is using each question and circumstance in chapter 19 to build up to one critical eternal principle – the impartial and all-wise Justice of God. So let's go back and review each of those 4 passages through that lens:

- * The perfect expectation and design of God – which all fail. Matthew 19:10&12c The disciples *said to Him, "*If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.*"... (Jesus) "*He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.*"
- * Age has no bearing on divine acceptance. Matthew 19:14b "*...for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*"
- * Wealth and status don't guarantee salvation. Matthew 19:24-26 "(Jesus)...*it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*"²⁵ (Disciples) "*Then who can be saved?*"²⁶ (Jesus) "*With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*"
- * Personal sacrifice will be rewarded, but won't improve your eternal status. Matthew 19:27-30 (Peter) "*Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?*"...²⁹(Jesus) "*Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.*"³⁰ "*But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.*"

It is on this foundation of Kingdom-principles that we see the Gospel lesson for today build to its culmination...and the initial "For" is a dead give-away.

Matt 20:1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 "When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, 'You also go into

the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And {so} they went. 5 "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. 6 "And about the eleventh {hour} he went out and found others standing {around;} and he *said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' 7 "They *said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He *said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' 8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard *said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last {group} to the first.' 9 "When those {hired} about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. 10 "When those {hired} first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 "When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 saying, 'These last men have worked {only} one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' 13 "But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 'Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' 16 "So the last shall be first, and the first last."

It is no coincidence that those hired last were paid off first. To make His point, Jesus needed to draw in the crowd listening to the story. He knew that could only happen to its fullest by creating a "fairness" scenario. After all, each of the previous stories had been built in one degree or another on the overarching principle of "fairness." So when the laborer responded in anger and "grumbling," all listening to Jesus would have chimed in with the expected rebuttal of, "That's not fair!" This was exactly Jesus' point, and one He could drive home today as well.

One of the concepts driving the socialistic ideologies of today is the false understanding of justice and fairness. We're told that it isn't right for some to have more than others – there shouldn't be a 1% nor a 99%. Those pushing that agenda state that under Communism and socialism, the ground would be level, and all would be "fair." But there are lies embedded in that proposition: the first is that fairness is the ultimate goal, the second is that bringing the top down, will bring the bottom up. In fact, all that happens is we lose the top - the top is neutered, and the bottom eventually drops out.

As I said, all of this goes back to a false understanding of Justice and Fairness.

- * Fairness evaluates a situation based on the horizontal impact or application on the people or parties involved. In other words, favoritism or nepotism makes us cringe – and even the smallest child can recognize a rule applied with partiality. If two people break the same rule, there should be equal punishments – regardless of race, status, or lineage. For one person to be punished severely, while another receives a "slap on the wrist," because of circumstances beyond their control, creates anger resulting in bitterness.
- * But while Fairness looks around – from side to side – Justice looks up. Justice looks to a fixed point, an objective standard, by which ALL involved are measured. Under a "just" system, all people and parties are measured equally,

rewarded equally, and punished equally. Hard work and integrity are rewarded with raises and advancement – while the consequences for sloth and dishonesty lead to ruin and dishonor. There is no place in Justice for comparison or partiality. All evaluations are based on a person’s gain or loss, in light of a set and independent standard.

In her book, *God is Just...Not Fair*, Jennifer Rothschild, makes this observation:

We tend to feel like a little suffering is expected, but once we’ve met the Christian quota for suffering, it just isn’t fair to have more piled on. Besides, don’t we as Christians deserve protection, blessings, and healing from “fairest Lord Jesus”? And not just us — there are plenty of people who may not be Christians, but they don’t deserve a bum rap either. You know, like how a dad loses his job at the same time his elderly mom has to be put in a nursing home, while his young son struggles with a new diagnosis of diabetes and his wife is so overwhelmed that she falls into a deep depression. And of course, with no job, there is no insurance. How is that fair? How can “good” people deserve such bad things in life? Especially when we believe God is good? Many of us embrace the belief that we deserve good things from God because he is good and that seems only fair. But is it really true? Yes, God is good, but does this mean we deserve only good things in our lives?



Jennifer Rothschild actually speaks to this problem of fairness as she comments on Jesus (*Matt. 20*) parable:

*Rather than playing the comparison game, perhaps the real question you and I should ask — and the question the workers should have asked — is not “Is the master fair?” but “Is the master just?” In other words, Did the master do as he said he would?... The master in the story paid the workers exactly what he’d promised — he was just. He did not lie. It would have been grossly unjust if the owner had lied by promising one denarius and giving less than that or none at all. But he didn’t lie. And God doesn’t lie either (*Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2*). God is just, even when he doesn’t seem fair. - Rothschild*

You see, the Bible is pretty clear about God’s standards for judgement, and they aren’t based on a curve...or any earthly form of measurement (*ch. 19*).

Ps 130:1 Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD. **2** Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive To the voice of my supplications. **3** If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

Rom 3:22b-23 “...for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”

Rom 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 5:48 Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

There is nothing of “fairness” there. The standard is clear—it is absolutely objective. It is uniform, and you will never find God to be swayed by nepotism or partiality.

Deuteronomy 10:17 For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe.

However, Jesus Christ received the “wage” of sin that was due to us. He took on himself what he did not deserve when he died on the cross so we wouldn’t have to. Thankfully, God is Just...not fair.

Psalms 103:8-10 The LORD is compassionate and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. ⁹ He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. ¹⁰ He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

Isaiah 43:25 “I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins.

Micah 7:18-19 Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in unchanging love. ¹⁹ He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins Into the depths of the sea.

Going back to Jesus’ parable, we find this lesson following the worker’s grumbling retort:

Matthew 20:13-15 But he answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. ¹⁵ Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?’

In the end, our righteous Judge will reward His laborers based on His own just standards and expectations – fairness or earthly partisan considerations won’t enter in.

Lawbreakers won’t be denied

Young and old will be measured equally

Status or wealth won’t buy you points

And personal sacrifice won’t get you ahead of the line

In fact, Jesus repeats his summation from the end of chapter 19:

Matthew 20:16 So the last shall be first, and the first last.”

I will conclude with one of Rothschild’s observations:

We can trust that he will always, always, always be just — even when things don’t seem fair. God is just in the way he cares for each of his children. We can rest in his just, righteous, and merciful character.

- Rothschild