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The National Presbyterian Church

## **It's Just Not Fair**

Matthew 20:1-16

Dr. David Renwick

In our sermons through the spring and summer we're looking together at the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in particular at the stories that he loved to tell that he called "parables." Parables – stories about people and about nature that in some way explained a spiritual truth in terms of nature and of the relationships between different people.

Sometimes we expect that a parable should be explicit, very clear, as to what the meaning is. As if to say, "Ah, this is an illustration; and now I understand what I didn't understand before." And sometimes it works that way. But sometimes when Jesus told these stories he deliberately made them to be just a little bit obscure, just a little bit edgy. He would add something to them that would make people sit up and go "*Wait a minute, I'm not sure I understand that. I'm not quite sure I get that. I'm not sure I agree with that. In fact I'm not sure I like that!*" And if people were to respond to Jesus like that, well, I think Jesus would have had a smile on his face. I think he would have said, "*That's wonderful. That's exactly what I intended because the last thing in the world I intended was for you to hear these stories and simply say, 'Ooh, that's nice,' and then keep on going on your own merry old way.*" No, he wanted to needle. He wanted to get a word into our thoughts and hearts. He wanted to dig into human lives so that in fact we would move from where we are to another place; we would grow, painful or difficult as it might be. And that's the kind of story that we're looking at today, the kind of story we just heard in Matthew 20 – a story which just has a little edge in it – a little twist, just a bit strange!

It's a story of a land owner, a person who owns a farm, a vineyard, and the grapes are ripe. And it's time to bring the grapes in, it's time to bring the harvest in. And this particular land owner wants to do as

much as possible within a very short period of time; perhaps even within a day if possible. So he goes out early in the morning and finds some people who will work in his vineyard, who will bring in the harvest, gather in the grapes. And when he does this he promises to them that he's going to pay them a fair wage – the going rate, the published rate for a day's work in a field (in their coinage, one "denarius" – that was a day's pay, and everybody agreed that it was just and fair). So he hired these people who began their work.

Well as time went on he realized that he needed more people in order to complete the work and there were people standing around who didn't have jobs, so he went out to them and asked them if they would join the laborers in the field. And he did this again and again, in fact, repeatedly, through the day. He did it at 9:00 o'clock, he did it at noon, he did it at 3:00 o'clock, he did it at 5:00 o'clock. And so there were these different groups of people who were all working in the fields but each of them was working for a different length of time. And the evening came and the time came to pay. So the landowner found his manager and said, "*You need to pay everybody. Begin with those who came most recently and end with those who worked all day and pay them all the same. Pay them all the same. A whole day's wage even if they didn't work for the whole day.*"

Now up until that point people didn't know what the others were being paid, and in a sense they didn't care. They felt that the wages offered them were fair, and so they worked diligently at their work. But when it came to pay time (and, by the way, in doing this, this owner was following the law of Moses, Deuteronomy 24:14: don't delay in paying your wages. Pay them on time. If somebody works for you, you pay them immediately. Get that out there. Make sure you give the pay to those who work. He was a law abiding, Moses law abiding person) . . . when it came to this moment, he told his manager to pay them all the same wage.

So the manager does this. He lines them up and he begins to pay them and the first group gets one denarius, the amount that he's agreed on. The second group gets it, the third group gets it, and so on down the line. And those who've worked all day are watching this. And there's a little anger that's stirring up within them. There's a little jealousy stirring up within them, and they are saying to themselves "*Surely by*

*the time he gets to us we'll get some more."* But it doesn't happen. It doesn't happen. They all get the same amount, the amount that they agreed to work for this particular man.

So everybody gets paid but when it gets down to the ones who worked all day the dam finally bursts. They are so mad, so furious, so jealous, so envious, and one of them screams out to the landowner this is just not fair. I mean it's just not fair: "We worked all day long, we worked longer, we worked harder, we worked through the heat of the day and we deserve more than this." They were just furious, angry, jealous.

. . . Of course, what they didn't know at the time was that they were suffering from what modern psychologists and sociologists call "relative deprivation"!! Ever heard of it? know anything about it? They were suffering from relative deprivation. Whether we've heard of it or not, all of us know what it is. *Relative deprivation is when you feel okay most of the time (I mean things are going quite well) . . . until you compare yourself to someone else. And as soon as you do that, as soon as you make that move, wham: all the sense that "life is good" disappears, just like that.* Relative deprivation. Here's a formal definition of relative deprivation (adapted from Wikipedia):

Relative Deprivation refers to the discontent people feel when they compare their positions to others and realize that they have less of what they believe themselves to be entitled to than those around them. The concept of relative deprivation has important consequences for both behavior and attitudes. Political scientists and sociologists such as Ian Walker, Robert Merton and Ted Robert Gurr have sited relative deprivation as a potential cause of social movements leading in extreme situations to political violence such as rioting, terrorism and civil wars.

Imagine! All of this is happening in a split second with these workers in Jesus' story. Relative deprivation. In this overwhelming moment they are feeling keenly that life is just not fair. The group was great until they saw what others were getting. And then they entered into the complaining game, the murmuring game.

Bob Russell is the retired minister of a very large congregation in Louisville, Kentucky and he retired in 2006. It had grown from some 120 members when he started off as a young man to 18,000

people on any given Sunday. Highly successful but still humble, able to tell a story against himself – and this is a story he tells about an occasion when Max Lucado, great author, Christian author Max Lucado came to his church. He says,

“Years ago when popular author Max Locado was a guest speaker at our church, my wife couldn’t say enough good things about him. Judy was in charge of our church’s tape ministry and gleefully told me ‘we sold a record number of tapes today. We sold 670 tapes of Max’s sermon.’ I said that’s great.

But then I made the mistake of asking what’s the highest number of my tapes you ever sold? She replied ‘oh your message on worry. A few months ago it sold 250 tapes. But we sold 670 tapes today. Can you believe it?’ Somehow I wasn’t encouraged. You see if Judy had told me weeks before your sermon on worry today sold a record 250 tapes I would have been elated. But 250 compared, and that’s the word, compared to 670 is, it’s embarrassing.

That same weekend, I learned that Max had sold 38 million copies of his books – 38 million copies! Now, I’ve written a few books but have only sold about 380,000. I remarked to a friend, ‘boy that’s humbling. I’ve sold one tenth of what Max has sold. He said no, you’re math is off. It’s 1/100<sup>th</sup>!!!’<sup>1</sup>

So we’re all fine. I mean things are going well until a comparison begins and then our world falls apart. So the farm hands begin to scream. I mean they’re watching all these others and they begin to scream, “*It’s just not fair; it’s just not right . . . boo hoos, I feel relatively deprived. Everything is wrong.*”

And us too, right? When you read this story don’t you feel that way too? That it’s just not fair? There’s something not right? Well, I think that’s part of Jesus’ genius, the twist, that he tells the story in such a way that we feel exactly what the hired hands felt it. There’s something just not right here. We can’t put our finger on it, but it’s just not right.

But not everyone feels that way! In the story the land owner doesn’t feel that way. And I guess we can conclude that Jesus doesn’t feel that way either. The land owner wants to say to those who are standing before him,

“Listen – that’s one way of thinking. It’s the visceral way. But it’s not the only way of thinking. There are other ways of thinking. Let

me help you think about this in a different way (whether you want to think about it in a different way or not!). Let me ask you a few questions.

- You're not accusing me of any wrongdoing are you?
- I mean there was no deception, no fine print, I didn't deceive you? No.
- You made the choice freely? I mean I didn't coerce you into making the choice. I mean you know exactly what you were getting into? Yes.
- The wage was fair, I mean it's published, everybody knows that this is what you get for working a day in the field, a whole day in the field. Yes.
- And you'd agree that as the land owner it's mine? And I can be as generous, if I'm not breaking the law, I can be as generous as I want with what I have. I can do with what I have exactly what I want? Yes.
- Well then what's the problem? To which the answer is "Well, if you put it like that I suppose there's no problem."
- To which the land owner replies and Jesus would reply with him,  
"Well I do, in fact, put it like that. That is exactly how I put it, and that's how you need to put it. You need to turn it around, you need to look at it from a different angle, you need to ask different questions because the way you're looking at it is leading you to a dead end which will hurt you and hurt others. And it's time for a shift. It's time for a change."

And some of us are in a rut and it's time for a change – time to ask different questions in a different way that will move us on from stuck to another place.

And we respond by saying, "Well there are no other questions, there is no other way."

To which I think Jesus would reply that

there are always other questions and there's always another way. It may not be comfortable. It may not be easy. In fact it may be painful. It really may be painful. Not always just a quick fix. But it's always possible to think in another way.

In fact scientists and businesses do this all the time, I mean all the time. To be successful they take where they are and when they are stuck they turn things around, they ask different questions, they approach the issue from a different angle or they make no progress at all.

Think for example the question which haunts me. I just find this fascinating so I repeat it again and again. What's your main question about the earth and the sun?

Is it, "Does the earth revolve around the sun"? Or is it "Does the sun revolve around the earth"? When you move away from that second question, "Does the sun revolve around the earth?" and replace it with the first question, "Does the earth revolve around the sun?" and replace it with the first question, our view and understanding of the whole universe changes. The change in question, the change in direction changes absolutely everything. The question change is literally "universal" in its ramifications.

Or, think, for example, about a company like Black and Decker. What does Black and Decker make? Well most of us I suppose would say drills. They make drills. Or I'd say these days they make household implements which have little motors in them. They make things with little motors. But some years back when drilling was the business, I understand somebody began to ask really seriously "What do we make?" Drills? Yes! Or . . . as someone correctly suggested; "we're actually in the business of helping people make holes." And maybe if we think about what people want. (A drill? Or a hole?) Then maybe we can make a better product.

Or think about it this way with Disney. What does Disney do? What do they make? They make movies. Yes. They make theme parks. Yes. But they also make "memories"! They make memories. And it's that whole thought, that simple thought, that through their theme parks and their movies they actually make memories, that drives the enterprise: what kind of memories? Memories with a sense of joy? A sense of pleasure? A sense of "ah that was wonderful"? The question and its answer infects and invades everything that they do, whether it's in their movies or their theme parks.

Change the question, shift it around, turn the angle and you begin to see something, do something you did not see or do before. It's there in

the world of science. It's there in the world of business and it's there in the world of our relationships. It has to do with our happiness, our effectiveness in the service of God.

Norman Vincent Peale was in the business of positive thinking. He used to say, "Listen, think about the words that you use. What words? Think about the words beginning with D and the words beginning with P." And we go "What? The words beginning with D and the words beginning with P?"

He says, "Yes. Many of the words beginning with D are dismal! Many words beginning with P are positive."

We say, "Tell me more!"

"Well, words beginning with D are like *debt, doubt, disease, disaster, discouragement, depression, decay, disorder, danger, defeat, difficulty, discord, deception, disappointment, distrust, disagreement, dread, dejection, destitution and desolation!*

All the Ds. Maybe we're living in the world of Ds and we should move to the world of Ps where it's more positive!

And he goes on to say the "P" words, like – *peace, prosperity, power, pluck, persistence, purpose, promotion, possession, proficiency, progress, perseverance, prayer and paradise.*

What words are in my vocabulary? Or yours? Have a look at them. Maybe a little shift will change our internal happiness and lead us from stuck to a new place.

And psychologists and pastoral counselors will back this up. Sometimes paying attention to the words we use will actually change our relationships with others.

When do we use "you," when do we use "I," when do we use "they"? In relationships that go wrong, especially marriage relationships that go wrong, so often the word that comes to the front is the word "you." *You did this to me, you made me do that, you keep on doing this; you, you, you, you!*

But there's a little shift psychologists tell us, that can change things. If we moved away from you to saying "I feel this when you do that," we move away from being a victim, a helpless victim, from being a blamer, into somebody who's responsible and accountable for our feelings. A tiny shift with a major result.

Or when organizations begin to go downhill you will find the word “they” or “them” beginning to rise. “*They*” are doing this.” “*They*” are doing that. It’s all about “*them*.” It’s nameless. Move away from those pronouns and you’ll be amazed at what happens. Small change, big the results, less defeat, more progress.

And it’s true in our relationship with God. And, after all, that’s ultimately what the parable is about

- Jesus himself is the land owner in the story.
- God is the one who owns the vineyard.
- The vineyard *is the world* that God has created.

The vineyard *is the kingdom of God*, the realm over which God rules.

The vineyard *is the church* into which you and I have been called.

And it is a privilege that we are here. We haven’t earned it, we don’t deserve it. We have been summoned by invitation and by divine appointment and it’s a privilege.

Think of it this way: imagine Steven Spielberg comes up to you and says listen I’m making a new movie. I want you to work on the set. In fact I want you play any part you wish in the movie! And we’re going “Wow, I can simply be present as he works? I can actually work for *him*?” What an amazing sense of glory and honor and privilege we’d feel, just to be a part of it all.

And Jesus’ implication is that all of us who are called into the church, into this church, into any church, should have in our lives an overwhelming sense of privilege, whether we’ve been here all day long or whether we’re Johnny-come-latelies.

But the temptation (and Jesus is saying this 2000 years ago – he knew how human we were and are), the temptation is for those who have been around for a long time, who came in early at the beginning of the day who labored through the heat of the sun and when things were really tough to say “*this is mine, not yours. I own the church more than you do. You came late, you don’t deserve what I have.*”

Jesus warns us that that way of thinking will get us nowhere! Nowhere! A dead end. Let it go. Change the way you think. *Let the*

*foundation of our faith be this sense of inescapable privilege – unfair privilege that we do not deserve, but has been given to all of us to find a place and a home with God. He gives it to us freely whether we come late or whether we come early.*

The church is not mine. It doesn't belong to any of the pastors who came before me. It does not belong to me, does not belong to you. It's His. And we have been called to be laborers in His vineyard. And if in fact we allow the joy of that, that sense of privilege, not ownership, or of what we are owed, to guide our lives, who knows what God will do next with the abundant generosity that fills His soul.

There are so many ways to think about life.

Some of them lead to a dead end – lead us nowhere, hold us captive as slaves filled with bitterness: “relatively deprived”!

And some of them leave us thinking, “My word, I am unfairly blessed!”

That's how Jesus wants us to think. Look into your lives in all kinds of areas.

Where have you come to a dead end, where your thinking leads you nowhere?

And Jesus wants to take that thinking, shift it around just a little bit, hard as it may be, painful as it may be so we can escape from that deadly sense of comparison and move into the joyful world that God wants for us.

Let us pray. Holy God, look down upon our lives. Every one of us is different, but we're here at the appointed place at the right time by your gracious summons. Help us rejoice in this for ourselves and for others and extend the word of grace to as many people as we possibly can and find great joy in your abundant generosity. It is through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

1. <http://www.bobrussell.org/2012/03/04/unfair-comparisons-the-source-of-discontentment-matthew-20/>

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4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800