

“Fair and Equitable”

Matthew 20:1-16

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

People in the world today are always going on about “fair and equitable” treatment. But what does that really mean? Well, in modern society people drone on about fair and equitable treatment for all people no matter their race, religion, or so-called “choice” to call themselves something other than what God made them to be. In the business world, you hear about fair and equitable pay for all the workers, making sure that each receives their just reward for their hard work. There’s always someone screaming that life isn’t fair, and so it’s up to you and the rest of the world to make sure that perceived unfairness is dealt with in a swift manner and to the benefit of the one screaming about it. Even your children get involved in claiming that things just aren’t fair. When they get punished for doing wrong, the first instinct as a child is to say, “That’s not fair!” Or, “He got more ice cream than me, and that’s not fair!”

But as much as the world likes to talk about things being fair and equitable, there really isn’t much fairness to go around, though I am not talking about social justice, or so-and-so’s rights being violated, or any of that nonsense. Our text this morning highlights truly what it means to be treated fair and equitable in the eyes of the Master of the vineyard. Each laborer does their work, hired on at different times of the day, but receives the same pay no matter when they showed up. Certainly, the sinful flesh perks up at that injustice and screams, “That’s not fair!” Which is exactly what the ones who came first thought when they received their contracted pay. Is this fair and equitable treatment from the Master of the house? It doesn’t seem to be that way. This parable shows us the true nature of our Father in heaven, the great love that He has for His people. Because no matter when one comes to the faith, whether on their death bed or at their birth, they are among His sheep, and He cares for all His sheep equally.

The sinful flesh simply cannot grasp such a concept. Someone who has for their whole life borne the burden of the faith, the persecution of the world, and stood strong through all of it must receive a better reward. That would be the only fair thing for the Lord to do. That old man whom Christ called to belief in Him while he lay dying in a hospital bed couldn’t possibly receive the same reward as the one who has suffered so much for their faith. That would be the only fair thing to do is make sure that the first person receives a higher place in heaven, maybe even a bigger room in the Lord’s mansion, and an honored seat at the heavenly feast. But that just isn’t how faith in the one true God works. There’s no measuring stick to put up to yourself and track your

progress on the doorway with pencil marks that show your growth. Paul says in Romans 12:3, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.”

If you are to ask the Lord for fair and equitable treatment using the Law, then you are going to find yourself in a world of trouble. Because in that instant what the laborers in the vineyard receive ceases to be fair and equitable according to the Law. Their day’s wage is not only less than they deserve, but entirely contrary to what they deserve. Every one of you has done many good things throughout your life of faith. You’ve done good in keeping the Commandments where you can, you’ve read your Catechism, and made it to church to receive the Sacrament every chance you get. I dare say that every person in this room could consider themselves to have done good in laboring in the Lord’s vineyard. But that is a standard which uses the Law as the measuring stick, and in that moment that measuring stick becomes the yard stick that used to rap the back of your hand when you got out of line in grade school.

According to God’s good and righteous Law, you have failed to meet His standards, and you don’t deserve the reward that comes at the end of a hard day’s work. And that is because of the sinful flesh which you bear that continually leads you astray and down paths of unrighteousness. That is why Peter admonishes you in 1 Peter 2:11, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.” Your flesh must be put in its proper place, and that place is in the death it dies in Baptism. Through confession and absolution, you are reminded of the death you died with Christ in those waters, killing the Old Adam that lives within you and resurrecting the new man that now dwells in you. Because the Old Adam just wants to kill you by keeping you in your sin. Sin is not your friend. It is not something you can dabble in here and there and then do enough good to make up for it.

Your works cannot stand up to the standard of the Law, and so if you seek to be accountable to the Law, then you will receive fair and equitable treatment in the courtroom of God’s justice, and your verdict will be one of condemned. You cannot fulfill the Law of God in any form that will bring you righteousness and salvation. The Law condemns. It shows you your sin and shows you your unworthiness before the only truly righteous One, and that is Jesus. He has fulfilled the Law on your behalf. Through the work of His active obedience to God’s Law, keeping it perfectly in all that He did in His incarnation, He has made the condemnation of the Law come nowhere near you. He took what was fair and equitable for you and took it upon Himself. There was nothing fair about what Jesus did for you upon that cross at Calvary. Every whip, strike, spit, nail, and thorn should have been yours, but He took it as His own. He shouldered the

weight of your sin upon His own back, taking them to His death in order to defeat the enemies of His people—in order to defeat sin, death, and the devil.

You don't deserve to be paid by the Master and be rewarded for your work. Your debt was due, and instead of forcing you to pay it, He paid it for you. Paul says exactly that in Colossians 2:13-14, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." Instead of condemning you to death, which is precisely what you deserve as a poor, miserable sinner, He gave you a day's wage of forgiveness, life, and salvation. That "denarius" is one that is yours only because of His gracious gift of divine mercy. No matter the time you've spent in the vineyard, the measure of success is Christ. The debt is canceled and the reward is equal for all, because there is nothing more precious than the gift of everlasting life which comes to us by His blood.

You have received what is not fair, for the sake of the one who had every right to scream, "That's not fair," but gave you the benefit of His righteousness. He imputes His righteousness to you all in equal measure. As we read in our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 55, the Lord will abundantly pardon, having compassion on the unrighteous who return to Him, and that is a mystery that simply cannot be comprehended. For His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. Yet, in the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ, you stand in the blessing of forgiveness that you don't deserve, save for the compassion of your loving God. And He gives it to you freely in the gifts He comes here to bring you. By the water of Baptism your unworthiness is washed away, and you are given Christ's white robe of righteousness as you rise pure and holy in the sight of God from those waters. You receive the very body and blood of the Lamb who was slain in your mouths as you partake of the wedding feast of the Bridegroom and His bride the Church.

You do not receive fair and equitable treatment from your Lord and Savior. You receive what is fair for Him and Him alone because He loved you to the point of death, to the point of death upon the cross. Which is why I preach to you, just as Paul proclaims, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2)." It is nothing more than the blood of Jesus which brings you the joy of reconciliation that now exists between God and man. And so, each receives the same reward because of the work of Christ alone. No man works harder than another and is thus worthy of a greater pay, because each and every one of you are made righteous only for the sake of Christ and His all-atoning sacrifice for sin. Because He has died the death

you deserve, you will surely live. You have the treasured gift of everlasting life, and that will one day come to its fulfillment in the Parousia of Christ, His second advent when all will be made new. He will come again, in the same way that He went on the clouds of heaven, to bring you into the joy of His heavenly dwelling, where among the saints and angels you will be in the fullness of the glory of Jesus forevermore. Amen.