

Romans 9:14-16 ...Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' (Exodus 33:19b) It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

1. We hear about and experience unfairness often
  - a. Ever watch 2 year olds playing (mine)
  - b. As children become more verbal you hear, "That isn't fair!"
  - c. Our poor granddaughter. When she was in kindergarten she had a homework assignment of printing her name 5 times. She did it once and explained to her mother that she wasn't doing it again, and she said "that isn't fair" her name is too long, and printing it once should be enough to prove she can do it. Her name is Madeleine and her last name is Thawngmung, 20 letters total.
  - d. And of course teenagers are really good at saying, "That isn't fair!" statements and I'm sure I said that to my parents from time to time.
2. As adults, while we know life isn't fair, that doesn't mean we accept unfairness easily.
  - a. I live a little over 2 miles from here straight up North Ave., north of Morgan road. I encounter 6 traffic lights in this distance and I can even manage to get all 6 red – and "That isn't fair." Have you noticed the two, 1 in front of the former Meyers Toy World and the next 1 at Calhoun Street? I used to have those 2 timed – I had plenty of practice coming to church twice a day, 365 days a year to feed our church cat that lived in the storage area where our van is kept.

First it is a given that I'll get the light red at Morgan and North Ave. and I learned that if I actually went the speed limit (imagine that) from Emmett St. heading to church (30 mph, then 25 mph) that I wouldn't have to stop for either of those lights, because both lights would turn green just as I reached them.

Have you noticed the new in timing? There's only about 3 car lengths between the 2 lights and you get both of them red. Sometimes I can't even pull forward when the 1<sup>st</sup> one turns green because there isn't any room with 3 cars already stopped at the 2<sup>nd</sup> light. So that means you are stuck for another red light cycle before getting a green light and then, hopefully you are able to get to the next red light. Now if you are 1<sup>st</sup> car at the 1<sup>st</sup> light you might catch the 2<sup>nd</sup> one at the end of its green cycle, if you gun it immediately when your light turns green. But that doesn't always work and of course isn't acceptable to my husband, not to mention is probably frowned upon by our police force. And don't think I'm exaggerating – check it out yourself and have fun.

Now I'm sure "That isn't fair" and it certainly doesn't help traffic flow. And what is worse, my husband, Mike, is a patient man who never cares about red lights, etc. The other day I was driving into town and when I got the 3<sup>rd</sup> light red. I glanced at Michael in the passenger seat and he had a huge grin on his face. We've been married 55 years – he knows I'm grumbling in my mind about how stupid this timing is, etc. He knows I think red lights just wait for me to come by and that I think they are a waste of my time. Heck I went to a meeting on Helmer Rd. I took the highway because that has seemed to be the faster way to go with 37 still under construction. There are 11 lights to get there and I got 10 red of them red. And don't tell me to relax and enjoy the view – I tried that once - I got so into looking at the beauty of a tree nearby and appreciating God's work, that I got honked at because I didn't go on green.

- b. I have a problem at the grocery store too. You've seen the "10 items and less" self-check-out line in the grocery store. I will patiently wait in line, practicing Tai Chi weight transfer ... that is until I notice a couple of people in the process of checking out their million items. Then I think how "That isn't fair" to us who follow the rules and only have a few items to check out.
  - c. And have you ever been sincerely happy for a friend who is going on what you consider YOUR dream vacation, while you might silently be wishing you were going too? Jealousy is a human emotion and usually only occurs when something is in our interest area. I can feel a twinge of jealousy, wishing I could do what someone else is doing, but I want you to know I have never been jealous of someone getting to play golf.
3. Today we have been reminded in our scripture that God isn't fair, God knows it, and God will do it his way, even if we mumble, "That isn't fair." God can have mercy and compassion on whomever he chooses; and human desire or effort does not have a bearing on divine decisions.

You remember Isaac whose father was Abraham. Well our reading today is in reference to Isaac & Rebekah's twin sons. It was customary at the time for the older son to receive the father's blessing. But God foretold that the younger son would receive the birthright and blessing from his father, rather than the older son. God also declared that the older son, Esau, would serve the younger son, Jacob. And so it happened, just as God said it would. Jacob received his father's blessing and Esau, was told to serve Jacob.

- a. Esau was furious and definitely thought, "That isn't fair."
- b. And what about God – is it fair for God to elect something to occur on the basis of his sovereign freedom to choose?

- c. Of course we just heard in our scripture that God has the absolute right to do all things as he chooses, not as we want.
- 4. This reading may be from Romans, but it applies perfectly to the parable of the workers in the vineyard. We will look at that and you can decide whether God is just or unjust.
- 5. The Parable is only found in Matthew. It is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning and it can be found in Matthew Chapter 20.
  - a. Jesus shared this parable with the disciples to help them understand what the kingdom of God is like.
  - b. The first verse starts with, “for the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner.”
- 6. In first century Israel, it was common for landowners to hire day laborers, especially at harvest time. Think of yourself as a day laborer as we go through the parable.
  - a. You don’t have land of your own, you aren’t skilled in any trade, and you and your family barely live above the poverty level. You need to earn money every day to feed your family the next day.
  - b. There aren’t any government programs available to help you, like financial assistance or food stamps.
  - c. You get up very early in the morning and go to the marketplace. The marketplace is kind of like the unemployment office – all the day laborers meet there in the hope of being chosen to work for the day.
  - d. The landowner in this parable has a vineyard and needs to get the grapes harvested ASAP. If the grapes are picked too soon he won’t get the finest wine, and if they are picked too late they are ruined.
  - e. So the landowner sought extra workers and went to the marketplace to hire help. You and some others were chosen and you all agreed to work for a denarius in payment. A denarius was a fair wage, equal to the day wage of a Roman soldier
  - f. A typical work day at that time was 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.
  - g. The landowner goes back to the marketplace the 3<sup>rd</sup> hour (9:00), the 6<sup>th</sup> hour (noon), and the 9<sup>th</sup> hour (3:00). He hires more workers each time, telling them, “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” “So they went.”
  - h. The landowner even goes back to the marketplace at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour (5:00). He asks the men who are there, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” “Because no one has hired us,” they answered. So the landowner says, “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.”
    - i. You can imagine how these last workers felt. They may have spent all day waiting and worrying whether or not they would earn any money that day.
      - 1. It would be kind of like the child who is picked last for a team or who wasn’t invited to a birthday party that others are talking about. And “That isn’t fair.”
      - 2. These kind of painful experiences happen to adults too. I don’t know about you, but I have been in a group with others talking about a shared adventure that I hadn’t been invited to and wasn’t sure what they were talking about. I probably wasn’t the only one in the group

left out. I felt left out, unacceptable & unwanted. I imagine these thoughts went through the minds of the 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers too.

- ii. These last men were likely the marginalized and rejected people. The landowner went out of his way to make sure everyone who wanted to work had the opportunity to do so.
- iii. To finally get chosen to work, even if only one hour, meant that there would be some money for food. I assume these last workers were pleased and relieved, finally getting the opportunity to work.
- iv. The Landowner didn't just give these men the opportunity to earn money – he gave them dignity, respect, and purpose.
- i. It soon became 6:00 p.m., quitting time, and payment time.
  - i. Deuteronomy 24:14-15a instructs, “Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it.
  - ii. And Leviticus 19:13 says, “Do not hold back the wage of a hired worker overnight.”
  - iii. The landowner tells his foreman to pay the last workers first.
  - iv. You all line up in reverse order of your hiring time which means you are going to be the last to be paid. The workers who worked one hour are each given a denarius.
  - v. You saw this and you figured since you worked all day you would probably receive more than a denarius. That's logical. But you and your fellow workers who worked all day only got 1 denarius, just like the 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers.
  - vi. You think about how you worked 12 hours in the hot sun. You are exhausted, sweaty, dirty, and you're your body aches. What do you think about the pay? .....
  - vii. It is easy to think, “That isn't fair.” You and the others who worked all day grumble against the landowner about the one hour workers being made equal to you. In Matthew 12b they point out that they had “borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.”
  - viii. Philippians 2:14 & 15 tells us, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing, so that you may be blameless and innocent children of God without blemish, in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”
  - ix. But you aren't a shining light right now. You are someone who thinks you have the right to be treated fairly. Even young children demand fairness.
  - x. Our earthly standards have us thinking things should be fair, that those who do more work should be paid more than those who barely work ... But this thinking doesn't compute with heavenly standards. Clearly you can see that this landowner was unjust and things are unfair in this kingdom. The landowner has obviously cheated you. It is puzzling when you find this reversal of expectations.

7. The landowner responds to your complaints, saying “Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”
  - a. That reply is so typical of God. He didn’t get angry as he responded first with the word “friend.” You can find God described as being “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” in both the Old and New Testaments.
  - b. Likewise you can read, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end.” And also, “The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.”
  - c. Did the landowner wrong you by doing a favor to your fellow workers? He did not withhold from you what you agreed your payment would be.
  - d. Some of these workers may have been jealous over what the others had received and simply begrudged the landowner’s generosity.
  - e. **Workers grumbled, not because they had been deprived of money, but because the landowner had been so merciful to the others.**
  - f. The workers were comparing their worth to the worth of the men who only worked one hour. This comparison stole the excitement they felt when they made the deal to work for a denarius. Now they aren’t happy receiving a denarius.
    - i. Have you ever been thrilled to be first in anything, Halloween decorations, an essay contest, or maybe the Goguac Lake swim, expecting to get a 1<sup>st</sup> place ribbon or some sort of recognition, but instead you get that “participation ribbon” the same as everyone else? That can be deeply disappointing.
8. God’s grace, mercy, and compassion are his to give away. He doesn’t have to be fair; he can do whatever he wants. And certainly we don’t have the right to tell him what to do, although I’ve tried to do that many times.
9. God gives each of us gifts and comparing our gifts to another’s gifts, or wasting time wishing we had the same gifts as someone else, means we aren’t enjoying and sharing the gifts we have. The denarius payment to the 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers was about God’s love and grace – not fairness.
  - a. The landowner was incredibly generous. He had compassion for the needs of the workers, and in his mercy he gave each worker enough to feed his family.
  - b. This parable isn’t about who worked harder or longer, but instead, on the incredible generosity, mercy, and grace of the landowner. It is about God’s generous love and compassion for those with the least and how unmerited grace is given. God provides according to what is needed, not what is earned or deserved.
  - c. You know what it is like to have unconditional love for a child. You may not be pleased with everything your child does, but that doesn’t diminish your love. God loves his children too. He is a merciful God, extending grace, love and compassion to us, as his children.
10. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3:9a reminds us that, “We are all co-workers in God’s kingdom.”
11. And Romans 12:20 says, “Love each other like brothers and sisters. Give each other more honor than you want for yourselves.”
12. We are all sustained by God’s mercy and love that is new each and every day.

13. The next time we think, or hear, "That isn't fair." Let's think of God's steadfast love, and the times we have received compassion and mercy. Remember God has blessed you with unmerited grace – and let us be grateful.

Blessing:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,  
be with us all, now and evermore. Amen

#341 ... O, God Show Mercy to us

#649 ... Amazing Grace

#263 ... All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name

#475 ... Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing