

“Equality or Equity” (Matthew 20:1-16)

1. A long time ago, I read a Peanuts comic strip featuring Charlie Brown and Lucy. One day, Charlie Brown and Lucy visited Mrs. Olive's house. As they were leaving, Mrs. Olive handed them some cookies. Charlie Brown turned to Lucy and proudly said, "We got these cookies because we were good kids!" But Lucy shook her head, and replied, "It's not because we're good but because she is good!" When we receive a blessing or a gift, we tend to think it's because of how great we are. From the time we are children on a playground, we instinctively cry out, "It's not fair!" whenever we perceive an imbalance. We believe in a simple, reasonable formula: work hard, get rewarded; work harder, get rewarded more. Contribution should equal compensation.

2. In our gospel lesson, Jesus disrupts this deep-seated human instinct. This story begins like any ordinary business arrangement in ancient Judea. A landowner needs laborers for his harvest. The first group of workers enters the vineyard at 6:00 AM, happy with the agreement. As the day unfolds, the landowner returns to the marketplace at 9:00 AM, 12:00 PM, 3:00 PM, and finally at 5:00 PM—with only one hour of daylight remaining. He doesn't hire them because they are superior or more qualified; he hires them simply because they are standing there, unemployed and vulnerable. To these groups, he doesn't promise a set rate; he simply says, "I will pay you whatever is right." (v.4) When evening comes, the moment of accounting arrives. The landowner instructs his foreman to pay the last workers first. At 5:00 PM, those who worked a single hour receive a full denarius. Watching this, the early-morning laborers—those who had endured twelve long hours under the scorching desert heat—begin to calculate. Their eyes light up. They reason: If those who worked one hour got a full denarius, surely, we who worked twelve hours will receive much more! Instead, when they step up, they too are handed a single denarius. They are furious. They grumble against the landowner: "You have made them equal to us." (v.12) Their complaint is rooted in human transactional logic built on strict numerical equality. But the landowner responds with the gentle, piercing logic of the Kingdom of God: "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 one who was hired the last the same as I gave you. (vv.13–14)

3. To grasp the heart of this parable, we must understand two concepts that shape how we view justice: Equality and Equity. Equality means giving everyone the exact same thing, regardless of their background, starting point, or individual need. It applies to a uniform standard across the board. Equity, however, means ensuring everyone receives what they need to thrive and survive. It recognizes that people enter life's vineyard from different circumstances, with different burdens, vulnerabilities, and handicaps. Equity tailors its care so that the end outcome is life, dignity, and flourishing for all. If the landowner had operated on strict human equality, he would have divided the denarius proportionally. The twelve-hour worker would receive a full denarius, while the one-hour worker would receive one-twelfth of a denarius.

A denarius was a generous day's wage—enough to feed a family, pay rent, and cover the essentials for twenty-four hours. What would a twelfth of a denarius buy in first-century Palestine? It would mean that the late-arriving worker would go home to a hungry household, carrying the shame of failure into the night. The early workers demanded proportional equality. But God operates on divine equity. The landowner knew that every worker, whether at 6:00 AM or 5:00 PM, had the exact same basic human need. The worker standing idle at 5:00 PM was likely not lazy; in ancient day-labor markets, those left behind until late afternoon were often the old, the weak, the disabled, or the socially marginalized. They were the ones no foreman chose first. They waited all day in anxiety, watching others get picked while their own desperation grew. When the landowner gave the last worker a full denarius, he was not practicing bad accounting; he was practicing restorative equity. But the fundamental mistake of

the early workers was that they viewed the vineyard as a meritocracy. They believed their long hours earned them elevated status and greater entitlement. They viewed the landowner's pay as a merit bonus rather than a gift of life.

When we look at the Kingdom of God through the lens of human transactionalism, we fall into the same trap. We start to view grace as something earned through spiritual longevity, religious duty, or personal moral effort. We think: "I've been in church my whole life..." "I've served faithfully for decades..." "I've kept the commandments and carried the weight of religious commitment..." And then, when God extends lavish mercy, and full inheritance to a deathbed convert, a quiet resentment can stir in our hearts. We whisper, "that's not fair. They didn't suffer like I suffered. They didn't work like I worked." When we think this way, we betray a profound misunderstanding of the Gospel. Grace is not a wage; it is a gift. If God operated on strict, unyielding equality without equity or mercy, none of us would stand. A holy and equal standard of absolute justice applied to flawed human beings would mean universal condemnation. We do not actually want strict mathematical equality from God; we want His equity—His willingness to meet us in our weakness and supply what we lack. Jesus' love does not ask, "How much did you earn today?" Jesus' love asks, "What do you need to be made whole?"

4. Where do we see this divine equity manifested most clearly in the Bible? At Calvary. Consider the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus. One spent his final moments mocking Christ. The other, facing death, looked at Jesus with brokenness and surrendered faith, saying, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42) That thief had zero time left to work in the vineyard. He had no opportunities left to do good deeds, pay tithes, join a community, or bear the "heat of the day." Yet Jesus turned to him and said, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43) That is divine equity in action. Jesus did not measure that man by his past or his lack of merit. He measured him by his profound need for salvation and met that need with total, undeserved grace. Back when I was serving as a youth pastor in Long Island, we decided to upgrade the youth chapel. Out went the heavy, traditional wooden pews, and in came sleek individual chairs to move freely! But it was way too heavy for just the church janitor and me. So, we decided to get some extra help. The janitor went down to the local spot and hired two men for the day. But as soon as they arrived, the janitor's jaw dropped—he noticed that one of the men had a disabled hand and couldn't lift heavy objects properly. All morning long, the janitor grumbled, "I picked the wrong guy! He can't carry the pews!" I said to him, "We are God's workers. Let's just encourage him and let him do whatever he's able to do." When evening came and the work was finished, can you say, "'Since you only worked with one hand, we're only paying you half a day's pay'?" Of course not. Even though he could only use one hand, he still had a family waiting at home, and his family's living expenses were no different from anyone else's. So, we gave the exact same day's wage to the worker with two strong hands and the worker with one.

When the latecomers are welcomed into the family of God with open arms, do not stand on the sidelines like the elder brother or the early-morning laborers. Jesus ends this profound parable with a paradox that turns human power structures upside down: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (v.16) Those who think they are first because of their pride, their work ethic, or their spiritual resume will find themselves humbled. And those who know they are last—the latecomers will find themselves wrapped in the equitable grace of the Savior. He is not looking for your qualifications. He is looking forward to your needs. His grace is not a prize for the spiritual elite; it is bread for the hungry, life for the dying, and hope for the lost. Amen.