

IT'S NOT FAIR!
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in Brookfield, Connecticut
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Texts: Philippians 1:21-30 & Matthew 20:1-16

Philippians 1:21-30

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not

allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

When I was in high school, I had an after-school job at a pet store. We sold tropical fish, hamsters, lizards, parakeets—that kind of thing. I was making \$3.50 an hour, which was pretty good back then. Minimum wage was \$3.35 an hour, so I felt like I was really raking it in.

I'd been working there about a year, year-and-a-half, when the owner, Mr. Collins, hired a new guy. His name was Chris. I went to school with him. His dad was one of my teachers. One day not long after he started, Chris and I were sitting around talking, and the subject of pay came up. Chris said he thought he could make more money bagging groceries at a supermarket. Then he asked me much I was making, and I looked at him and said, "How much are you making?"

That's when I found out he was making \$4.00 an hour—fifty cents more than me.

I was outraged. I was offended. I felt like I'd been taken advantage of. But I didn't let on. I acted like everything was fine. Then I lied and told Chris I was making five bucks an hour just to make him jealous, even though it wasn't his fault. The one who was really to blame was Mr. Collins. He was the bad guy.

So I walked around for the next few weeks, fuming about how unfair it was that the new guy was making more money than me, until one day Mr. Collins came in the store, took me aside and told me he was giving me a raise. I thanked him and thought to myself, "Well, it's about time." Then he looked at me and

said, "Jason, how does \$3.75 an hour sound?"

I'll tell you how it sounded. It sounded like I was getting shafted. And maybe I was. But then again, in moments like that, when it feels like we're not being treated fairly, maybe what we need to do is change our perspective and look at our lives differently—especially when it comes to our spiritual lives.

I think that's basically what Jesus is saying in the gospel reading this morning. He compares the kingdom of heaven to a bunch laborers in a vineyard who all get paid the same amount, whether they worked the whole day or just part of the day. And the point of the parable is this: Whether we've been working to build up God's kingdom our whole lives or we just signed up yesterday, we all get the same reward; we all receive an equal measure of grace.

An equal measure of grace. That sounds so nice, but honestly, it still seems unfair, even though we're not talking about money—even though we're talking about something that's far less tangible, something we can't use to go out and buy stuff, something that has no material value. It still doesn't seem fair that someone who serves God faithfully for years and years gets the same treatment as someone who never gives God a second thought, and then at the very last hour has a deathbed conversion.

That's not the only way to look at it, however. There is another perspective that doesn't get hung up on the question of fairness and doesn't leave us feeling

like we've been taken advantage of, but instead focuses on what it really means to live a life of faith. And I think the other reading today, from Philippians, can help us see that perspective.

Philippians is a little bit unique. Paul isn't writing to address an issue that's causing problems in the community, like he is in most of his other letters. His purpose here is mainly to reassure the Philippians about his own situation. Because word had gotten back them that he'd been arrested by the Romans. In fact, that's where he was when he wrote this letter. He was sitting in a jail cell, we're not sure exactly where, waiting to stand trial on capital charges.

So that puts everything he says in this reading in a different light. When he talks about dying, he's not just musing on the idea of death; he's coming to grips with the reality of his death—the fact that he might soon be executed. And yet, remarkably, he doesn't grumble or complain. He's not bitter or angry or resentful. He doesn't bemoan the fact that he devoted his life to serving God only to end up where he is.

He actually sounds joyful.

He tells the Philippians that for him, "living is Christ and dying is gain," and what he means by that is that it's all the same, whether the Romans find him innocent and set him free, or they find him guilty and put him to death. Either way, whatever the outcome of the trial, he'll have the chance to witness to the gospel. He'll have the chance to stand in front of the court and lift up Christ for all to see. He'll have the chance to fulfill his purpose as an apostle.

That's what matters to him; that's what's important.

He doesn't get hung up on the question of fairness. He doesn't feel like

he's getting shafted. That's not how he looks at it. He's happy that he gets to be the person God called him to be. He's thankful for the opportunity to live a life of meaning, a life that has brought people hope, a life that has made a difference in the world, a life that's worthy of the gospel.

Personally, I don't know if I could ever fully live up to Paul's standard. I don't know if I could ever be joyful in his situation. But when I feel like I'm being treated unfairly, I can at least try to change my perspective and look at my life differently—especially when it comes to my spiritual life. I can at least try to focus on the fact that serving God in this life is its own reward.

When Mr. Collins offered me that 25 cent raise, I took it because it was better than nothing. But it always bugged me that Chris was still making more money than me. It always made me a little bit angry. Which is a shame because I really liked working there. I made some good friends. I gained a lot of experience. I had a lot of fun.

In fact, looking back on it, I'd say money was the least important thing I got from that job, and I wish I could have been more appreciative of that in the moment. I wish I hadn't been so focused on what I didn't have that I couldn't recognize how much I did have. Maybe it would have helped me grow up a little. Maybe it would have taught me to be more generous. Maybe it would have helped me finally be at peace. Amen.