

Mercy Rewarded Equally

“Do you believe you are a better person than me?” You can picture the situations where this question gets asked. Perhaps you’ve lived them...at work, at home, among friends. There’s an intense discussion or argument. As one person is heavily implying superiority, the other asks this question: “Do you believe you are a better person than me?”

With whatever the situation is, when this question is heard or asked, an evaluation process begins in our minds. “Why would he think he’s superior to me?” “Does she think I’m less of a person for this or that reason?” “I know them and I know me. How can they think this way?”

So we evaluate ourselves compared to that other person based on what they have and who they are. “He doesn’t have the income that I do.” “She doesn’t have the responsibilities I have.” “They don’t have as nice a house as us.” “I’m older and have the life experience he doesn’t.” “They don’t know what they’re talking about when it comes to America and politics like I do.” “They’re really (fill in the blank with an adjective here). But I’m...”

Do you notice what it turns into? As we evaluate what another person has or who another person is, the question, “Do you believe you are a better person than me,” turns into, “How can I demonstrate that I am a better person than you?”...because of my income, politics, house, characteristics, and more. Consciously or unconsciously, each of us tries to prove that “I am better than you.”

Let’s ask the question in a slightly different way. “Do you believe you are a better *Christian* than me?” If we try to prove ourselves better in our everyday lives, we can’t be so naïve as to think that this evaluation process does not take place in our relationships with other Christians. And since Jesus has a parable that talks about this very thing, we really can’t be naïve about it.

So not if, but when we start evaluating ourselves against other Christians at Mount Olive or elsewhere, we’ll see how Jesus’ parable in Matthew 20 “levels the playing field” among betterness competitors so that we see all the more clearly what and who makes us blessed.

Right before this parable, a rich, young man came to Jesus and asked him an eternally important question: “**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**” That young man proceeded to tell Jesus how well he had followed the commandments—he had excellent behavior. But once Jesus told him to sell all he had and then come follow him, the young man went away sad because his heart loved what his money gave him more than anything else. He believed he had set himself up for eternity. Turned out, he was far from it.

It’s with that background that Jesus follows up with the disciples by telling them—in the form of a parable—how the kingdom of heaven is like the interaction they just witnessed. A landowner goes out looking for workers. He finds the first group, agrees on what to pay them, and sends them out to his fields. He keeps going out throughout the day hiring and sending

more workers into his vineyard—right up to the end of the workday...wanting to find people to work for him that nobody else was looking for.

Finally, the workers are called in to be paid. The last workers hired didn't know what they would get for so little work. They got a day's wage. This made the group who worked all day—not a few hours or less—really excited for their payment. They got a day's wage.

We feel for those guys in the first group. Their complaining. Gripping. Discontentment. It seems perfectly fair. They were the first ones out in the fields. Working all day. In the heat. Getting roasted by the sun. Those of us who've worked manual labor jobs outdoors know how it feels while you're working and how exhausted you are when you're done. It's hard work! And then like someone at your job who you know is lazy and isn't efficient like you who ends up getting a promotion and you don't, these guys who worked all day get paid the exact same as the guys who were standing around in the market while they were working!

We get their gripe with the landowner. They go to him. "Do you believe they are better than us?" "We worked more." "We worked longer." "We were proactive and looked for work as they stood around doing nothing all day." "We deserve better because we are better."

And it's here that we find a similarity...between the workers in the parable...the rich, young man...and us. What is Jesus ultimately pointing out with the workers in this parable? It is not about being paid what is fair for the work you do. It's the kingdom of heaven he's talking about.

Jesus points out how it is very easy to slip into a mindset that salvation is something I do for God and not what God does for me—meaning that the life I live and the things I do make me not just better but the best. That's why the rich, young man asked, "**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**"...and then go on to show how good of a person he had been. So in practice, when I am so focused on how I am living because that's what makes me better before God, then situations like we see in this parable happen.

Sometimes we are jealous of people who receive God's mercy that we believe don't deserve it like we do. They're rewarded simply because of his grace, but they aren't a better Christian than me. How do I know they aren't better than me? "Because I know them and I know me." We evaluate. "I've given more...served more...volunteered more...sacrificed more of my time and energy...been a member here longer." "I've put in my time laboring under the heat of the sun while they show up and get rewarded."

Perhaps this jealousy happens because we haven't received the recognition we want. We've done so much for our church and for our Savior and the attention doesn't come our way. More likely, though, and possibly connected to that, it's jealousy because of how it feels like God is treating us compared to another Christian. I don't think anyone here would be upset that a sinful human being was shown mercy by God in Jesus. However, do you feel like God hasn't been fair to you because of who you've been for him...unlike him or unlike her?

"I've given more...and God hasn't financially blessed me with more like he has with them who don't give at all?" "I've served and volunteered more...and God's afflicted me with a sickness that prevents me from serving." "I've been a faithful member...and my life has trouble after trouble and the people who haven't been here in months have a life that's sweet

and peachy.” “I’ve done this and God’s reward to me isn’t fair because I deserve better! I am better!”

And that reveals the fact that we don’t deserve a thing. As we evaluate how we’ve given more, served more, volunteered more, sacrificed more, we’ve sinned more. We evaluated ourselves better and the best in a way that leaves Jesus out of the picture. We’ve registered a complaint that’s really telling our God that it’s his fault. We can’t claim to be better when it’s evident that we aren’t even good.

By telling us this parable, Jesus levels the playing field among us “betterness” competitors. He does so with purpose. We need to see who makes us good in God’s eyes and how it is that we get it. The workers come to the landowner grumbling and complaining that it wasn’t fair. His response? “It is my money. That means I do with it what I want.”

What does God want to do with you? He desires to do with his mercy what he wants to do. That means being merciful to you. The day’s wage he gifts is just that. A gift. Not based on betterness or effort. A gift. A Savior. Who lived in your place. Died your death. Won your victory. To people who don’t deserve a master to reward them because they haven’t done a lick to earn it, our landowner, our God, in his love and mercy places a full day’s wage—a total and complete reward—in our hands.

That’s what makes God’s grace amazing. He places in your hand as a gift the very thing you need to be a member in his heavenly kingdom: Jesus. No evaluations made. Mercy rewarded equally. He doesn’t care who you are or what you’ve done. He doesn’t go looking for the “better” or “best” people. He wants you. He wants me.

The kingdom of heaven is unlike the reality we live every day. The world operates under the principle that it’s fair for you to be rewarded based on who you individually are. The kingdom of heaven operates under the principle that “for Christ’s sake” you and I receive what we don’t deserve from our God. It’s in that way that the kingdom of heaven places the first last and the last first.

It’s a striking statement Jesus says. **“The last will be first and the first will be last.”** This parable is intentionally couched in between Jesus saying these words—first, to the rich young man and then to the disciples at the end of the parable. Self-promotion, competition, and declarations that “I am better than you” place a person last. Those who claim to be the best believe they have done what they need to prove their place before God. In reality, they are last because Jesus was not first.

But Jesus doesn’t tell us this parable simply to give us a piece of humble pie. It’s meant to demonstrate the amazingness of God’s character for you: mercy rewarded equally. God wants you in his kingdom so much that he goes to great lengths to make it evident that his mercy is the only way. It’s amazing as you see his mercy gifted to yourself, and also when you see it gifted to others.

There’s a man I know who has already made and will make more appearances in sermons because of how cool his story is. The man who in one year lost his father and his marriage. I can see him being in that last group of workers who are standing around because they don’t know where to go. Needing direction. Needing answers. And his God gave him both those

things. He learns who Jesus is, the Holy Spirit creates faith in his heart, and he now himself would tell you that Jesus is everything. And the coolest part of the story is...

I am not him. I was baptized five days after I was born. I'm the son of a pastor. I grew up with a Christian education from preschool through a master's degree. Around God's Word so much that if I wanted to be foolish I could say I know it all. And all I could use to claim myself better from 26 years of life is proven to be for nothing when a man who had no idea who Jesus was until he was 28 had the exact same gift—a full day's wage—placed in his hand by his...my...your God.

Every single Christian knows that God's grace is amazing. No matter what you have or who you are—you are a member in the kingdom of heaven. That's because God's equally rewarded mercy gifted into your hand a full days wage that's not in the shape of a coin but in the shape of a cross (+).

Amen.