

Jesus tells the parable of the landowner who hires workers throughout the day. At the end of the day everyone receives the same wage. Those who are happiest are the ones who were idle all day. They spent the day worrying about how they could provide for their families and are pleasantly surprised to be able to care for their families with a full day's wage. Then there are the ones who worked for a full day and received a just wage ... but less than they wished for. "These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day's burden and the heat" (Mt 20:12). Their needs are the same and the landowner has treated them fairly so that they too may take care of their families.

One may liken Jesus' parable to the free shipping at Amazon. Regardless of where you live in the country, everyone can order items online and if they are willing to wait a little, have the item shipped free of charge. Those who are happiest are the people who live in rural Alaska where without the free shipping, an item might be twice as expensive. Some years ago, I was in the Seattle airport awaiting a flight when a young man approached me. He had been a teenager when I was the pastor of Saint Nicholas in North Pole. He had grown up and was now working for Amazon. I asked him how the company could afford to ship packages to Alaska for free. He said, "We lose a ton of money." Certainly, one who lives in the lower 48 might complain they are paying more than they should if they are helping to subsidize the free shipping to Alaska. "These Alaskans who cost you twice as much, why have you made them equal to us? Why do we bear the day's burden and the heat?"

Another way to look at the parable is through the lens of God's mercy. The prophet Ezekiel illustrates the point well. If a just person does what is right, obeying the commandments of the Lord all the days of his life and helping those in need by giving food to the hungry and clothes to the naked, then that person will surely live. God will welcome him into the kingdom of heaven at the end of life (18:5-9).

A wicked man shall perish for his sins and not be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. But God does not find pleasure in the death of the wicked. "If the wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed, if he keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live. He shall not die! None of the crimes he has committed shall be remembered against him; he shall live because of the justice he has shown" (21-22).

The reverse situation is also possible. A person turning from justice to embrace evil, and having no repentance, cannot live. "None of the justice they did shall be remembered, because they acted treacherously and committed these sins; because of this, they shall die. You say, 'The LORD's way is not fair!' ... Is it [God's] way that is unfair? Are not your ways unfair?" (24-25).

We need to guard against being resentful because God is so generous with his mercy. If the Lord chooses the last to be first and the first to be last, we should not grumble. We revel in the free shipping from Amazon because we benefit from it. Should we not be even more jubilant with God? We are all recipients of God's mercy and we should rejoice whether we are first or last.

On the cross, Jesus was in agony, but he still reached out with mercy. One criminal mocked him but the other came to his defense. Jesus responded, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This thief was like the worker who showed up at the end of the day but received a full day's wage. When we are tired, and suffering, when we are persecuted and crucified, do we resent God, or do we seek to respond with love and mercy?

A generous response to God's mercy is to forgive others who have trespassed against us. A resentful response is to hold on to grudges. When we demand to be paid back, when we will not rest unless we hurt and punish others, are we not like the workers grumbling at the end of the day?