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“What if I wish to give this last one the same as you?” (Matt 20:14).

The parable of the vineyard workers is one of the most provocative parables Jesus told, both for its original audiences and even today. When audiences hear that the owner has decided to give all his workers -- the early birds who worked all day and the latecomers who only worked one hour -- the same daily wage, they uniformly cry, “That’s not fair!”

As an example of hourly wage equity and good employee management, this is probably true, but the parable is really about God’s limitless mercy. The disciples wanted a meritocracy instead of mercy. They wanted a logical and orderly disbursement of God’s love based on worthiness and merit. Sinners and last-minute converts should not get saved like virtuous, lifelong churchgoers. They wanted to be first in line and paid overtime if others who worked less got the agreed-upon wage. They wanted extra credit. They wanted to be better than others.

God’s freedom to love everyone unconditionally and without merit goes to the heart of the Gospel, and it is a scandal to those who are constantly comparing themselves to others. The hardness of heart that creeps into this kind of calculation is the greatest obstacle to understanding who God is. And if intimacy with God is the ultimate gift God is offering everyone, the righteous always end up at the end of the

line when the saints go marching in.

The theme of this parable is familiar. It is also present in the parables of the Sower, the Lost Sheep, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Unlimited love is what God wants of us. A foolish extravagance reveals a generous heart, and this is what Jesus wants for his disciples if they want to be holy as the Heavenly Father is holy.

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