

Modern-Day Proverbs sermon series
Win Some, Some - Matthew 20:1-16
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Today, we finish our “Modern-day Proverbs” sermon series, in which we’ve looked at some sayings that aren’t in the Bible but probably should be. We’ve talked about phrases like “too many irons in the fire,” “when you point the finger at someone, three fingers are pointing back at you,” and “don’t judge a book by its cover.” I hope you’ve enjoyed this series, but if you haven’t, what can I say? No good deed goes unpunished. I tried my best, but the road to Hell is paved with good intentions and at this point, you can’t that toothpaste back in the tube. If you’re upset with me, please don’t cut off the baby’s nose to spite its face when you’re throwing it out with the bathwater. I promise you that this, too, shall pass. You know what they say...you win some, you lose some.

Hey, that would be a great saying to end with, so let’s do it! This phrase is often said to provide comfort or justification when something doesn’t go our way, like college basketball games. It most likely originated in the early 1900s among gamblers who bet on sporting events, which means it’s the unofficial motto of Keeneland. Or for me, it’s “win one, lose the rest.” This saying has had many variations over time, including in early 20th century Britian, where folks were heard to say, “If I lose on the swings, I’ll get back on the roundabouts.” If I had a nickel for every time I said that...

Our scripture today is a story about winners and losers, or losers who become winners and winners who think they’re losers. This truly is what one commentator called “the most un-American of parables.” A vineyard owner needs workers, so he goes down to the street corner where the day laborers hang out, selects a group of them to hire, and negotiates to pay them on denarius for a day’s work. These would have been the most dependable workers, the ones with a good reputation for doing their job well. He goes back several more times during the day and hires more workers, promising them a fair wage. Finally, with only one hour left in the day, he hires a few more workers to finish the task. Realize that the good workers aren’t the ones left at the end of the day. These stragglers were probably still around because they were unhireable – the deadbeats, the disabled, the different.

When it comes time to pay the workers at the end of the day, the owner starts with the last workers hired, giving them a denarius, a full day’s wage, for only an hour’s work. The workers who were hired first thing in the morning start salivating, because if the late-comers got a full day’s pay, imagine how much they will get! But when they open their envelope, they get a denarius, same as the others. “That’s not fair!”

Have you ever heard that? Have you ever SAID that? It was a common refrain around our house after the birth of our second child, Molly. Once she came home from the hospital, it was clear that Molly was the center of attention. So, before too long, we started hearing, “That’s not fair! No one is paying attention to me! No one is playing with me! No one loves me! It’s not fair!” Finally, my wife had to step in and say, “It’s OK, Kory, things will return to normal soon.”

Our DNA is coded to detect the difference between right and wrong, which is why this parable is so hard for us to deal with. We know what should happen, and yet the landowner does something so outlandish that we cry out with the first workers, “That’s not fair!”

A question to ask when reading a parable from Jesus is, “Who am I in this story?” We’re obviously not the vineyard owner, and I would guess none of us would identify with the late-

comers. We are the early workers. We are the ones who show up, who get the job done, who put in our work and expect our reward. Because of who we are, from our work ethic to our socio-economic status to our privilege, we expect to win. We're not the last workers hired.

That's why Spidey senses are tingling right now. We feel the pain of the early workers, because we all know someone who sneaks in by the seat of their pants. The classic example is the death-bed confession, but don't we see this all the time? When a lane is closed, instead of getting over promptly, we see the driver speed down the close laned and cut over at the last second. Unfair! The person who judges you because of how you look instead of who you are. Unfair! The scoundrel who lives a long life when a good person dies an early death. Unfair! Those people are supposed to lose, and us early workers, the ones who play by the rules, are supposed to win.

When I played Little League, I was a decent player. One year, I led the team in all of the statistical categories, including most gum chewed. So, when it came time to honor the team MVP, I was pretty sure my name would be on the trophy. "And the award goes to...Jeffrey!" Huh? Jeffrey? He hardly could swing a bat, much less drive in a run. What a loser! All Jeffrey did was sit on the bench and cheer on his teammates, help the coach pick up the equipment, console the kid who struck out. After the ceremony, the coach took me aside and said, "You know, Kory, there's more to being an MVP than hitting the ball." But at the time, I wanted to scream at him, "That's not fair!"

Life IS unfair, and that's what bothers us so much about this story. When we live such a capricious, unpredictable existence, when so much of life is not fair, we feel that God should be fair. Of all people, God should be dependable, predictable, honoring our sense of right and wrong. God should be the one authority we can count on to reward people for their efforts, making sure the winners win and the losers lose. Treating everyone the same is fair; treating everyone the same when they are NOT the same is not fair. We believe the first shall be first and the last shall be last. So, why doesn't God?

And yet, if given the choice between love and justice, which would you choose? There is a time for both, for sure, but if you had to choose, would you choose to exercise love or exercise justice? I would imagine most of us would choose love, especially with people we love. There are times when our children need justice – you don't clean your room, you get grounded – but, in the big picture, love is more important than justice for us.

So why do we bristle when the vineyard owner makes the same choice? Notice that the first workers who grumble so loudly get exactly what they negotiated for at the beginning of the story. They didn't get any less because the late workers got more. But the owner chose to express love to the late workers, even if they didn't put in a full day's work. By doing so, he levels the playing field; those who arrived last are equal to those who arrived first. As the owner says, isn't that his right? Isn't that God's right, to love those we feel aren't as deserving as us, those who haven't always followed the rules, those who only come to church on Christmas and Easter, or not at all? And if so, what does that tell us about the relationship between love and justice in our own lives? Which should we emphasize, especially with the late-comers, the unhireables?

I was once in charge of a large Easter Egg hunt at a church. We're talking hundreds of people and thousands of eggs. The event started at 2 p.m., and by about 2:45 p.m., every last egg had been claimed. A few minutes before 3 p.m., a mother and little girl showed up, the girl wearing a frilly dress and clutching her Easter basket, ready to find her eggs. They thought the event started at 3 p.m. As I started to explain this to the mom, I could see the little girl's face begin to fall. Just then, one of the kids from our church came over to us and said, "Here, she can

have some of my eggs.” A few more kids did the same, and before you knew it, the little girl’s basket was brimming with Easter eggs. Was that the fair thing to do? No.

Our sense of outrage at the end of this story softens a bit when we remember that there are times we have been the ones that deserved justice but instead received grace. In fact, if we want to be really honest with ourselves, we are the late workers. We are the ones who have gotten so much more than we have deserved or earned. Because, you see, God set out the rules of what it means to live as God’s people. God spelled out very clearly what we are to do and not do in order to receive the blessing of being called children of God. And every single one of us has failed. Every single one of us has fallen short. We are the losers. And if God was truly a God of justice, then we all would suffer the consequences of our shortcomings, just as we deserve.

But our God is first and foremost a God of love, so rather than leave us to our fate, God sent Jesus Christ to us so that we would know just how much God loves us. God sent Jesus so that we would know that, no matter how short we fall, no matter how far we run away, God loves us, God cherishes us, and God wants nothing more to bless us beyond our imaginations. Is that the fair thing to do? No. Not at all. But God has done it anyway. We are all winders.

So, rather than identify with the injustice of the early workers, let’s put ourselves in the place of the late workers as we open up that envelope. Because how the final pay is received fully depends upon what each person believes they deserve. How do you think the late workers felt to see that they had been paid for a full day’s work, that they now have enough money to put food on the table for the family, to provide clothing, to fill their prescriptions? Imagine their surprise, their delight at getting a gift they know they don’t deserve, they know they haven’t earned, and yet is theirs anyway because of the generosity of the owner. Do we take the gift of Christ’s grace for granted, or do we receive it with the same surprise and delight?

Let’s face it. We worship an unfair God. Sometimes that means that people we think aren’t worthy of God’s blessing will be blessed. That may not have been what we would have done, but thank God it’s not up to us, right? Because if it were, there’s someone out there that thinks WE aren’t deserving of a blessing. But God’s grace is not measured or counted; it’s simply poured out in abundance, it’s ours for the taking. In God’s kin-dom, the losers are the winners, and the winners, if they are looking out for the losers, are the winners.