

The Thief of Comparison

Today's sermon is about how Life is not fair. That's it. That's the whole sermon. Hello. My name is Jeff and I am one of the pastors here at City Church and apparently, my job this morning is to teach a parable about how life is not fair. That's the big idea. Life is not fair. And I'm not gonna lie, I resonate with this idea on a deep soul level in a tortuous way. If life is fair, celery would be 600 calories and a donut would be 25 calories. And I wouldn't stand before you today as a plump asian man. Life really isn't fair. More seriously, if life is fair, *you* would be the one that gets recognized at work instead of the person that works less and gets offered the promotion. If life is fair, *you* would be the one that gets a spouse and kids, not your friend who always complains about their marriage or being a parent. Life really is not fair. And frankly, when we look at this parable, we're going to realize even the concept of fair is not fair. Let's dive into our passage today. Turn with me to Matthew 19

If you are joining us for the first time today, we are in our multiyear study of the book of Matthew. Last week we looked at the interaction between a rich, young, prominent man, and Jesus. Think Harry Styles. So Harry Styles rolls up to Jesus and asks him, what do I need to do to have eternal life. And Jesus told him you must give up everything, your riches, all your colorful yet weirdly empowering wardrobe. Everything. Give up all of those and follow me. And the parable ended with him walking away sad from Jesus. And honestly it is a heartbreaking interaction. And that's one of the main points of the parable, that each and everyone of us will walk away from something. We either walk away from the things we love or think we can't live without on this Earth, *or* we walk away from Jesus. That's the decision before each and everyone of us. We will have to walk away from something.

So it is after this interaction we pick up our passage for today. V. 27

27 Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

I love Peter so much. It dawned on Peter that while the rich young ruler was not able to do what Jesus asked of him, Peter connected the dots that that's what each of the disciples did. Peter went "Jesus! We did the thing! We did the thing that Harry Styles couldn't do! We left everything behind, our lives, our families, our livelihood, to follow you. What's our reward? What is in it for us? *Tell us what we've won!*" Peter contrasts

the disciples' sacrifice with the rich young ruler's **lack** of sacrifice, and wants to make sure they get the credit and recognition they're due. And Jesus responds in v. 28

28 Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

So Jesus responds with, there will be rewards, in fact rewards beyond what you can imagine. That everything you do now will be rewarded in heaven and nothing is done in vain. So first, Jesus sets Peter's mind at ease by saying that the disciples will indeed be rewarded for their sacrifice and obedience to Jesus. But in Peter's question, Jesus detects an attitude and a posture that must be addressed. So he's about to do that, in the form of a parable. Look to chapter 20 verse 1.

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2** He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

So Jesus is teaching to an audience who exists in a hand to mouth society. It means most of the society does not have any savings, they live each day hoping to somehow get enough food to survive. To all my people who have dumpster dived and college students, you know what I am talking about. In a society like this, unemployment means starvation. So people would gather in the town squares early morning at 6am, hoping they will get hired to work that day just so they can eat. So the story starts with the landowner (spoiler alert, who represents God in this parable), going out to hire workers to work his vineyard. And he agreed to pay each of them a denarius, which is roughly the amount of money you need to feed yourself and your family for one day. And a denarius is pretty standard pay for a full day's work in this society, which by the way means you work from 6 am to 6 pm.

So think about it from the perspective of the people that got hired. In a society if you don't work, you starve, and you just got hired today for the wage you need to survive. I would imagine there has to be a sense of gratitude and relief that at least for today, you

are taken care of. Because of this opportunity, you and your family will be ok today. You all get to eat! Let's keep going. v3.

3 "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. **4** He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.'

So 3 hours later, the landowner goes out and hires more people. And pay attention to what he says to this group because it's different from the first, he said I will pay you whatever is right instead of a denarius. Remember that, we will come back to this later. v.5

5 So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. **6** About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

7 "Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

Ok, 2 things to note here. Typically the people who are not hired to work in this society are people who were weak, sick, disabled, elderly, or other targets of discrimination like criminals or anyone with a bad reputation. In other words, the unwanted or undesirable in this society. Notice the landowner goes to them and hires them. We don't have time to dive into this in detail but Jesus is actually saying here the kingdom of God is available to everyone, he desires for everyone to be a part of it, even if they have been rejected by society, he is saying come and be a part of my kingdom. So if you're in the room and this is where you find yourself, know that this morning the Spirit of God is saying to you, come, come and be a part of this, my kingdom has room for you even if the world does not.

Second thing to note here. Think about the people who were hired at 6am, that first crew. As they continue to work throughout the day, they see more and more people coming to work. It means the amount of work they need to do becomes less because they have more help. I would imagine not only there's gratitude like we said earlier, this job means they and their families are taken care of for today, now this job is becoming easier and easier with more people coming to help. I would imagine there is a swell in gratitude as

their day progressed. They started the day unsure if they will avoid starvation and now the day has progressed to a day of work with pay and lots of help. v.8

8 “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

9 “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius.

So now it's pay time. But Jesus pays the last people hired, first. So they only work one hour, and get paid a denarius. People hearing this story at the time would be like, yooooo, I want to work for this landowner. So imagine this again, for the people who were hired at 6am, they are probably doing the math and thinking, I am about to get rich! I should be getting paid 12 denarii if this dude is out here paying 1 denarius per hour. And that's exactly what they were thinking. v.10

10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. **11** When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. **12** ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

Roh roh. Instead of 12 denarii, they only got 1. And they began to complain. They see the people who only worked one hour getting paid the same amount they are paid. Had the first hired workers get paid first before anyone else, they would have gone their merry way, with smiles on their faces and gladness in their hearts because the 1 denarius they received was a very fair payment. But because they saw what the later hired workers were paid, they saw this unfair treatment, this unbalance of pay and this sense of entitlement swells up. They think we should be paid more. We worked harder and for a whole lot longer than these jokers. We should be compensated more. You owe me more.

And frankly, it is unfair right? Can we not all agree with that? Two people who worked different amounts of hours should mean two different amounts of payment. However, the purpose of the parable Jesus is telling is actually not about employment and salary practices. Jesus is using this parable to show us something about who God is and how His kingdom works. Jesus is trying to show, the God we serve is a God who is about more than just being fair, that he is also about being incredibly generous. And sometimes we let envy and comparison rob us of the view of his radical generosity. Sometimes, like

the disciples, we're completely content with the life God gives us...until he gives someone *else* a life we like a little *better*.

How many of us here prayed and prayed hard for God to give us a job. And he gave us a job. And we were so thankful for it! But then before long, we noticed that other people have jobs we like a little better, and all of a sudden we don't like our job at all. We're not thankful for it at all. In fact, we kinda feel like God is being unfair to us because here are all these other people with fun, exciting jobs—and I'm over here with a normal, boring job. When God gives you the spouse you've prayed for. But as you go on, you see other people's marriages, their picture perfect marriage on Insta, their seemingly perfectly put together homes when you are over for dinner, and now you are bitter about the state of your marriage and the spouse and family God gave you. When you are in a season of loneliness and you beg God to give you friends, friends who would actually care about you. Then God faithfully answers your prayer and brings people into your life for meaningful relationships. Then after a while, you see other relationships that seem more fun, more adventurous or more meaningful and you feel what you now have is lacking or not as good, you become disillusioned with what God has given you. It's amazing how comparison can erode something that once was good and turn into something that is now lacking and complain about.

So when the first hired group of workers saw the people hired after them getting paid exactly the same as them. This comparison leads them to envy and entitlement and complaints to the landowner, who once was someone that provided for what they needed but now has become someone who owes them. This landowner went from being fair to now unfair.

I can relate to this all together. And a while back, we were given this very building that all of us are sitting in, and we were ecstatic. Not sure if you know, it's not a common occurrence for new churches to just be given a building, let alone a building this big and in an area that's growing and in need of the gospel. I mean, when's the last time someone offered you a free house? Some of you may know, we are a church plant that was sent out by a church that's based in Columbia, SC. So we called our sending church excited to tell them the good news. But instead, we were met with "Oh of course you guys got a free building. Church planting is just so easy for yall and everything is just terribly difficult for us. Blah blah blah I'm too jealous and am going to use humor to compensate for it." I'm paraphrasing what they said, but that was the vibe.

I was so frustrated. I was frustrated that they couldn't just celebrate with the good that was happening to us, but instead were bitter because it didn't happen to them. It was like comparison had robbed all of the gratitude they could've had. It was baffling to me. Now we could have responded with a beautiful reminder of the gospel but instead we just

replied back #blessed #sorrynotsorry #jesuslovesusmore. So, we obviously didn't respond in a Godly way back but man it was frustrating to see their response. They could not see the good that is happening in Knoxville but instead only see what they didn't get.

So a few months later, my buddy Chet, who is also a church planter, told us that his church got a new building. We were pumped for them. But then he showed us the pictures of the building. It was a really awesome building. Like not quite as 1970s as ours is. THEN, THEN he said not only were they given a building, they were also given with the building, \$350,000 in the bank. Y'all. I'm not gonna lie. I was mad. Like big mad. I immediately thought, you gotta be kidding me. When we got our building, to start it came with a negative \$75,000 because we have to fix the HVAC to make it work. Then we needed to spend oodles of money just so all of us here in the sanctuary can have toilets to use. #nolongerblessed #jesuslovesmenomore. Amazing how comparison can steal gratitude right from under your feet. It can take you from a place of gratitude and joy to a place where you're convinced God is holding out on you.

My point is that we are incredibly good at taking the generosity of God towards others, and using it as ammunition to begrudge God's generosity towards us. We love comparing our lot in life to other people's lot, and concluding that God must not love us. Must not care about us. And sometimes, the only thing that's happened to make us believe that is that God has been a different **kind** of generous to someone else. That dynamic is what this passage is about.

Keep going to v.13

13 "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? **14** Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. **15** Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The landowner pushes back on the accusation. He said I am not being unfair to you. We agreed this was your pay. We agreed I *am* providing you and your family with what you needed. Why do you think you have the right to tell me what to do with my money? Are you envious just because I was a different kind of generous to the other workers?

And it is right here God exposes what is really going on. This whole sense of this is not fair, God you are not being fair, is actually triggered by envy and entitlement. This isn't fair God. They were completely content with their hourly rate, until they saw someone

else who got more. The only thing that changed is that they started comparing themselves to others. But in reality, it is the workers who are not being fair. The landowner said “Hey, we made an agreement. You’re the one who isn’t being fair for *expecting* something more.” This is about the workers being envious when they saw how the landowner treated the other workers. From their perspective the other workers should get less than what they got.

But God's actions aren't **primarily** driven by fairness; they're driven by generosity. Remember this is a hand to mouth society, if you don't work, you starve. Recall earlier the landowner told the later hired workers he will pay them what is right. The landowner sees the workers who were last hired, even if they only worked one hour, they still need a full day's wage to feed themselves and their family. This parable illustrates not God withholding what was deserved but God gave much more than what was owed. This parable is not God is unfair but instead God is unreasonably generous and righteous. I have heard it said God is never **less** than fair. But sometimes, he is **more** than fair.

And the parable exposes the first group of workers' desire for fairness is actually unfair. In their desire for fairness is the belief that the other workers should NOT get paid the same as them. They should get paid less because they didn't work as long or as hard. The first group of workers only saw the situation in terms of what they each received or not received. The first group of workers' desire for fairness is actually calloused towards the later groups of hired workers. Envy and entitlement can make you uncaring and failure to see what others are lacking and need because you only look to yourself what you are owed or lacking. Envy and entitlement can turn a good and generous God into a God who is withholding joy from you, a stingy God who is indebted to you, who owes you and a failure to recognize God's provision for others in need.

Entitlement and envy rob joy from your life fam. It is like a thief that comes and takes and destroys. It turns God from being a good generous dad in your life to an unfair, unreasonable boss. It leads you down a path where you can acknowledge Jesus, who gave everything, his life, suffered tremendous amount of pain and death, that same Jesus, is now absent, does not care about you, does not want good and joy in your life, a God who withholds good from you even though he suffered so much to make you his. That is how powerful envy and entitlement can be: lead you to a point where the grace of God, the sacrifice of Jesus no longer holds much weight and meaning in your life. The bible tells us that the enemy comes to steal, kill, and destroy. And so often, he does that through envy and comparison. He loves when we compare our situation in life to everyone else's. And it's an easy thing to do, because I'll just tell you: there's always someone who has it better than us. There's always an opportunity for envy.

Envy and entitlement screams you deserve more or you *need* more. It is like an enslaving master that tells you over and over again life is not fair. You worked too hard, cared too much to only have what you currently have. You deserve more. Envy and entitlement blinds you to what you *already* have, and fixes your focus on all the things you *don't* have. And it is a cruel master. Because it's a master that tells you you need more, and you don't have enough. Because there will always be more, the desire for more can never be satisfied.

But God is a much better master. He says I will give you *more* than you deserve. You see when I teach this parable, most people identify with the workers that were hired first, the workers that worked a full 12 hr day. Very few people see themselves as the workers that were hired last. Even in the way we interpret this parable, we inherently assume that we're the ones being treated unjustly. None of us go "wow—the landowner gave me a job when he didn't have to?! That's awesome!" But that is exactly who we are. That's actually what the point of the parable is: God is the good landowner who gives us, the last hired workers, more than we deserve. The God we serve, is a God who is radically generous, who is above than just being fair, who provides what we need even though we do not deserve it. In fact the only thing unfair about our relationship between us and God is that God is incredibly unfair to himself. Let me show you what I mean. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 it says:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:21

Jesus, the perfect son of God, came to planet Earth on a rescue mission, who walked this earth perfectly, who loved everyone perfectly including his enemies, who served everyone perfectly even though they hated him, who forgave everyone perfectly even to the point him praying for the people who were actively killing him as he hung on the cross. Jesus did nothing wrong, he did everything right and what he received was a tortuous death. That is unfair. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. We are the ones that benefited from the work that Jesus put in. We received the payment of Jesus' perfect obedience. We received ALL of this because we have a God who is incredibly generous. *He* gets what is unfair. *We* get grace.

But maybe for some of us here today, as we listen to all of this, internally we still get this voice pushing back "Yes but my life is still unfair. The injustice I have experienced, the

pain and sorrows I have faced, experience that have broken me down to my bones, you're telling me God is gracious? That He is good after what I have been through?!" There was a time in my life where that was my relationship with God. I had an incredibly difficult time approaching him because there was just too much pain.

In that season I have a friend, his name is Allen. God used Allen to help me understand what it looks like to follow after Jesus and how to love and serve as a pastor. I would not be standing here today unless God has worked through Allen. Allen is a dear friend and in our friendship I have a front row seat into his life. I have seen the joy him and his wife Courtney experienced when they found out they were pregnant after trying for years. I have seen their excitement mixed in with fear when they found out they were pregnant with 6 kiddos. I watched them weep when they lost all 6 babies. I watched him deal with confusion, pain, and anger as they buried their children. I was there when Allen and Courtney became parents and had 2 more girls, and saw what wonderful parents they are. I was there when they got the devastating news that one of their daughters had stage 4 kidney cancer. I was there with them on our knees begging God for a miracle. I was there when they found out they were pregnant again, but that the baby wasn't going to be viable. I remember thinking, are you kidding me God? How can you be this cruel and unfair to my friend and his family? Enough is enough. Is this how you treat someone who loves you and serves you faithfully?

And church family, it is in that season, it finally clicked for me that God never promised us a life without suffering. It was an incredibly painful realization. That my savior said suffering will come for all of us because of the broken world we live in. And I was trying so hard to hold onto a promise God never promised, a life without suffering, and I forgot the beautiful promises he does make. The promises to us that he will always be with us, no matter what, no matter how painful this life can be. He will never leave us, nothing will ever separate us from his love. Nothing in all of creation. That if he did not give up on us at his most painful while suffering on the cross, he will not leave you either in your pain. You have never wept alone in this life. You have never hurt alone. Those dark nights where you feel all strength has left you because the pain and suffering you are facing has broken you down to dust, he was right there with you, weeping and grieving.

And, more importantly, the certainty of life with him forever *is coming*. An eternity with him is coming. While on this side of heaven things will never be what should be, but heaven is coming. Revelation 21:4 says there will be a day where Jesus will see you face to face, and he will wipe every tear from your face. And he will declare, there will be no more pain, no more death, no more suffering. The tears you have that you shed through those dark lonely nights, he will say I was there with you, and I am now saying

you will never have to shed any more tears. I am making all things new, and the old is now gone. You no longer have to experience anymore of this brokenness. That's the promise God has for us: a day will come where everything sad will be made untrue.

So the question is, is that enough for you? Is God's offer of grace, and his promise of making all things new enough. To put it another way, are we judging God's faithfulness to us on the basis of him being true to his promises? Or are we judging God's faithfulness to us by comparing what he's done in other people's lives?

Some of us might be thinking "But my life still isn't fair. Why doesn't God have Heaven happen now? Why doesn't he end the suffering and pain now?" I want to point us back to the parable. It's his desire to get as many of the workers in his vineyard as possible, even the undesired workers, all because he is generous and loving. Heaven not being here yet is not because he is being unfair to you, heaven is not here because God sees those who are not part of his kingdom yet, the people the world has rejected, and he wants them to have what we have: a life of eternity with him that's without any pain and suffering or injustice. So he's going out and pursuing them and inviting them into his kingdom.

So tracing back to the beginning of our passage today, Peter asked Jesus, I did all these things to follow you, what do I get? After witnessing the rich young ruler ask what he needs to do to get eternal life and seeing Jesus's answer, Peter then went on to say he did those things, so what else do we get besides eternal life? Peter thought life was about what more he could receive. And Jesus responded with a parable that's actually not about payment and reward but with a parable about God's generosity. Because life is about how incredibly God is generous towards us already, not about what more we can get. Life is about understanding we have a good, good father who loves us deeply right now and who will go far beyond anyone just to show he loves us and he is good. If your focus in life is about what you get and compare to what others got, you will miss out on seeing God as a generous and good Father like the workers did in the parable.

You see, the way it works in the Kingdom of God is God gives us more than we deserve and it makes no sense. But it is right. In God's kingdom, he leaves the 99 for the 1 who wandered off, the payment of the 1 hour worker is the same as the one who worked for 12 hrs. The offering of pennies from a widow is more than the thousands from the rich. It is the least of these that will enter the kingdom of God. The first shall be last and last shall be first. Kingdom math doesn't always make sense. In fact, a lot of times it doesn't. And the more you embrace that, the more joy to be found in him and in your life. You will see gratitude everywhere in your life. But if you believe the way the kingdom God is

supposed to be, we work and receive blessings or payment based on the work we put in, that is actually more in line with the hinduistic teaching of Karma. If you do good, you will receive good. If you do bad, you will receive bad. That's the belief of Karma. But the way of Jesus and how his kingdom works is quite the opposite. And if you do not understand that or see the difference between those two, you will continuously compare yourself with others and be filled with envy and entitlement. And you will continuously be frustrated seeing life as unfair and God owes you.

So what do we do? How do we continually see the Kingdom of God correctly? I got two quick ways for us this morning: We practice the discipline of gratitude and resist the traps of comparison.

Practice the discipline of gratitude.¹

How often do you pray a prayer of gratitude to God? Church fam, gratitude does not happen automatically. If anything this parable shows we need to swim upstream to be able see the generosity of God. So do you practice the discipline of gratitude? Do you figure out ways and block out times where you thank your heavenly Father for what he has given you? Or does your prayer life primarily revolve around the things you ask of him? Do you observe your life in a way to see the things that are given to you instead of the things you lack or do not have? If this is something you do not have a rhythm of doing in your day to day, I would encourage you to try two things. First is to start each morning and end each day with a prayer of thankfulness. I love watching my son Luke do this each night. He thanks God for the most silly things, he's thankful for his tiggie the tiger, his lunchables, and maybe me and mom make the list sometimes. Do you thank God for the "silly" things? Or do you see everything in your life as earned and taken for granted? Or on the flip side, do you take time to praise God for the cross, for saving you? Or have you forgotten the best news, the most hopeful thing you have in your life? Try to start each day and end each with a prayer for thanking God for the big, small, and even silly things.

To go along with this, I would encourage you to do when you find yourself complaining, find two other things that you are grateful for. This was incredibly convicting for me because I keep finding myself the last few weeks thanking God for things. So each time you start feeling envious or entitled, find two things in your life that God has given you, things that you do not deserve but it is yours nonetheless just because he's a good Father and not a stingy God who withholds joy from you. So that's the first practice, practice the discipline of Gratitude

¹ The Book of Common Prayer is a great resource for this

Resist the trap of comparison.

The second practice is to resist the trap of comparison. What are things in your life that encourage you to compare yourself to others? Notice in the parable, the hired workers were perfectly content with their agreed upon 1 denarius payment until they compared other worker's payment to theirs. What things exist in your life that cultivates envy and entitlement? Is it Instagram or Tik Tok? Is it just browsing around in a store like Target or Amazon? Do you need to stop watching certain "product review" videos on YouTube? This one is incredibly convicting for me because typically, I'm happy with the stuff in my life until the new shiny thing comes out. And all of sudden what I have is no longer shiny and no longer new and turns into old and busted. Maybe some of us here need to stop watching certain videos that review stuff, cars, tech, or whatever. What are things in your life you can avoid so you can avoid the trap of comparison? Are there certain accounts on social media you need to unfollow? Some influencer that's living the adventurous life that you don't have, or that person you personally know that just happen to have a "better" job, marriage, family, than you.

Or maybe it's relationships. Do you look at other people's relationships and friendships and compare them to yours? Do you look at what other LifeGroups are doing and then compare that to your LifeGroup and become frustrated? And then, instead of trying to make relationships better in your LifeGroup by cultivating them, you become bitter about what they *aren't*. So when those comparisons come up in your thoughts, maybe we should let those become moments for the Holy Spirit to convict us and not let those become bitterness.

So I want to end our teaching today to give you some space to have an honest conversation with your Heavenly Father. I want to give you space if you felt His Spirit convicting you that you have been relating to him not as a Good Father but as a stingy boss that owes you your pay. I want to give you space to confess that to your Heavenly Father.

I want to give us space to pause and reflect on the things in our life, the good things we're given, do we see those as undeserving things God has given us or things we've earned ourselves. I want to give us space to see that we are actually the 11th hour worker that was hired and God is unreasonably generous towards us. I want to give us space to praise God and thank him for his generosity. So here are some prompts for you as you interact with the Holy Spirit:

- What good things in your life are gifts from God that you didn't earn?
- What things don't you have, that you feel you are owed?

- How can you celebrate the things God has given other people?

Pray.