

Grace Isn't Fair and That's Good News! Matthew 20:1-16

Is the Kingdom of Heaven a Socialist state?

We are living in the digital age and information is instantly and readily available to more people than ever before. If you have any questions about anything, you can just google it and you will instantly get your answer. [ppt] Do you know the meaning of this word, ‘Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia?’ I don’t even dare to read it! Can anybody read it for me? This is a medical term defining a phobia where the person is afraid of reading long words. You don’t have to know this word for your living, but if you see this word and wonder what it means, you just need to google it. From how to perfectly fry an egg to the definition of Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia (히이.푸.과.두.문.스트로.스킵.아.리.오.포비아), you will find a vast amount of information on the internet. People also ask many interesting questions on the internet. One interesting question I found is, “Is the Kingdom of Heaven a Socialist state with God as a benevolent ruler?” What do you think? I know we have some allergic reactions to words like “socialist” or “communist.” But some people say Jesus was the first socialist, while others argue that Jesus’ teaching is in line with capitalism. Was Jesus a Socialist, Capitalist, Or Something Else? Of course, Jesus and his teachings can never be defined by a single label, such as socialist or capitalist, but it is also true his teachings on the kingdom of Heaven often challenge the conventional values of capitalist society.

The parable of the Kingdom of God

In today’s scripture reading, we’ve heard Jesus’ parable of the kingdom of heaven. “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” In Jesus time, many were day laborers on farms. These ‘day laborers’ gathered early at the town square, hoping that someone would hire them. Day laborers were expected to be compensated at the end of each day so that they could stop by the market on their way home and buy bread for their family. If no one hired them for work, the whole family had to endure hunger unless they had been able to save something to eat.

Unlike today, the workday generally began at sunrise and ended at sundown. So, the people worked from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. After agreeing with the laborers on **the usual daily wage**, the landowner sent them into his vineyard. How would these first hired laborers feel? They would be grateful to know that at least, they could feed their family that day.

“Later, about nine o’clock, the owner of the vineyard saw some other men hanging around the town square unemployed. He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them **a fair wage**. So, they went. He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o’clock. At five o’clock he went back and found still others standing around. He said, ‘Why are you standing around all day doing nothing? They said, ‘Because no one hired us.’

Why had no one hired them? We don’t know for sure, but we can assume that they are the undesirables. Maybe they were not as productive as the other workers. Maybe they had disabilities or bad reputations in the town. In our society, they could be minorities, undocumented immigrants, or ex-convicts. They were considered as unreliable and undesirable. No one wanted to hire them. But the landowner told them to go to work in his vineyard.

“When the day’s work was over, the owner of the vineyard instructed his foreman, ‘Call the workers in and pay them their wages. Start with the last hired and go on to the first.’”

How much did they get after an hour of labor? They received a denarius, the usual daily wage. I bet everyone was surprised because they worked only an hour and got the usual daily wage. Those who came at the very beginning must have been a bit excited. They probably had expectations that the owner would give them more because they not only worked longer hours but also endured the heat of the day. However, the owner disappointed their expectations. They were only given one denarius as well. They complained and protested. In short, they thought it was unfair. Their gratitude to the owner, who had given them the opportunity to work disappeared. They were overwhelmed by the feeling of being treated unfairly and saw the owner as an unjust person. Imagine what it would have been like if you had been in their shoes. I would feel the same way they did. What do you think of the owner’s actions? From our capitalist perspective, his action was unfair and if

there was a labor union, they would plan an organized strike to protest. Furthermore, his actions challenge our very notion of fairness and the system of capitalism. Some could even say he is a “socialist” since the landowner equally distributes their wage at the end of the day.

Grace Isn't Fair and That's Good News!

At this point, we need to remind ourselves that this parable is about the Kin-dom of God. To be fair, Jesus was not interested in either capitalism or socialism. He was interested in life in God's kin-dom and through this parable, Jesus teaches us the principle of the God's kin-dom and its values that often challenge our notion of fairness. In our society, we get paid based on our contribution such the hours worked or expertise, but the owner of the vineyard did not pay wages based on their working hours or the intensity of their labor. To be sure, he kept his contract with the first workers and paid them the agreed wage. But he also considered the desperate circumstances of those who were not hired until the last minute and gave them their daily wage. The owner of the vineyard saw something more important than profit or fairness based on one's contribution. He saw that all human beings share the same needs and a daily wage is meant to meet daily needs. So, he chose to satisfy those needs out of his own money. We call it grace and generosity. Of course, we may still feel it was unfair. But grace and generosity are not fair. That's their very essence. 'Fair' means we get what we deserve and 'grace' means we get what we don't deserve. Grace isn't fair! and I am glad for it. Aren't you? God doesn't deal with us in fairness but in grace and mercy. We all are saved by grace through faith. (Ephesians 2:8) This is good news.

A pastor shared a story about the janitor of the church. Before the janitor worked for the church, she was a homeless person living on the street and often came to the church, asking for help. After a long discussion, the church decided to hire her as a janitor to give her an opportunity to rebuild her life. Although there were some initial struggles, things went well and the pastor developed a close relationship with her. While the pastor prepared for an infant baptism one Sunday, the janitor happened to ask the pastor if she would go to hell since she had not received baptism. She said that her mother told her that she would go to hell because she had not received baptism. The pastor explained that a baptism is not a necessary condition for salvation, rather, salvation is God's grace for all and baptism is a means of God's grace. The pastor asked if she would like to receive baptism. Initially, she felt that she was not worthy of baptism because her life was so broken. But after learning that salvation is God's grace for all, regardless of who they are and what they have done, she was elated and received baptism. God's unfair grace saves us all. This is good news as well as a guiding principle for our lives.

Living by Grace and mercy

Compassion and mercy for the poor and the marginalized is the essence of the kin-dom of God and we need to learn to live by this rule of God's kin-dom. Grace and mercy should run our lives. John Wesley lived in the time of the Industrial Revolution and saw the rise of modern capitalism in the Great Britain. He saw the suffering of laborers and how economic inequality ravaged people's lives. John Wesley knew the importance of money and taught the proper use of money to Methodists. He provided simple rules, “Gain all you can, Save all you can, Give all you can.” We are good at the first two rules but may struggle with the last one. But Wesley's emphasis was on the last one. He wrote, “What way, then, (I ask again) can we take, that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who 'gain all they can,' and 'save all they can,' will likewise 'give all they can;' then, the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven.” As we live by this rule, the more you have, the more opportunity you are provided to give it away. In fact, sharing gifts we have received with the poor and the marginalized is a way of salvation for those who have enough.

Asbury has been good at sharing what we have. ABC bags, food drive, food for the soul. Keep up your good work! Food for the Soul will resume our work in October. We are doing fundraising. You can join the ‘No More Hunger Walk’ or make a special donation with a note, “food for the soul.” All your contributions will be used to feed our neighbors in need. Also, you can volunteer to cook for Food for the Soul. Remember we are saved by God's unfair grace to be God's children. So be gracious and generous with our neighbors and we will experience the joy of the kin-dom of God here on earth. Amen.