

The United Church of Moscow
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Equality isn't Fair - Thank God!

Matthew 20:1-16

Scarcity + Inequality

In 2015, Gravity Payments - a credit card processing company, started to take a hard look at the working conditions and the livelihoods of their employees.

They found that their average employees who were just starting out were struggling - they couldn't pay off their student loans, couldn't afford to buy a house, to travel home to see their families, or to start families of their own.

Living life on a starting salary was just barely enough to pay their bills, but not much for actually living life. In short - they realized their employees were surviving, but not really thriving.

They decided there was something profoundly wrong with the fact that good, hardworking employees, many with higher education degrees, were unable to live an enjoyable life even while they had a full-time salary. They realized there was a profound inequality occurring within their company.

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Perhaps we should also take a hard look at the conditions surrounding the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20. We don't know the stories of the laborers in the vineyard. We aren't told why so many of them waited until the end of the day to find work or why they weren't picked for work earlier in the day.

- Perhaps these workers arrived later in the day because they had been out late working the previous day.
- Maybe they had an unforeseen family emergency that prevented them from coming to the marketplace earlier.
- Maybe that had disabilities that prevented them from being a desirable candidate for manual labor, and no one wanted to hire them.
- Or maybe they were lazy; they slept in, had no work ethic, were just trying to get by on the minimum amount of work possible.

We don't know their stories or their situations. The text doesn't give us that information, but it seems to make one thing abundantly clear: There is not an equal opportunity for work. There are social and economic inequalities in the world.

And we can sit here and speculate as to how the workers found themselves as victims of this inequality. Sometimes people do things or participate in things that put them in these desperate situations, and sometimes systems are put in place to keep people down, or sometimes life just happens and people find themselves down on their luck.

Regardless of the reasoning for HOW people become victims of inequality, the point here is that there are social and economic inequalities in the world. This seems to be a fact of life.

Equality isn't "fair."

When Gravity Payments were faced with the inequality within their workplace, they decided to make a drastic change. They raised the starting salary of every employee to \$70k. They also increased the salaries of every person at the company and worked to create better salary benefits for their employees based on their expressed needs.

They were able to do this primarily by cutting their CEO's salary. See, in their initial research, they realized that the average CEO makes about 220x what their employees make, and the same had been true at Gravity. So, the company reallocated their funds to the employees, cutting the CEO's salary to just about 2.8x his employees, rather than the astronomical salary that many C level executives enjoy.

As you can imagine, this decision was quite controversial at the time, with some members of the business world and the press praising the decision, while others were staunchly against it.

People in the business world were concerned that this would place pressure on other large companies to do the same in their business practices. They said Gravity now made these companies look stingy and corrupt to their employees. Rich CEOs reached out to Gravity's CEO to complain about this decision, claiming that they earned their money and wanted to keep it.

People in the business world said that the company would fail; that this model was unsustainable. The Press called them socialists and accused them of being anti-capitalists. And some of their customers withdrew their business, claiming that Gravity was pulling a political stunt that their business did not want to be a part of.

The most difficult thing that occurred from this decision was the internal conflict it created. Some of the company's most valued and senior-level employees quit, claiming that it was

unfair that new hires received such a high pay increase, while they received only a small raise.

One of these employees, before leaving the company said, they “Gave raises to people who have the least skills and are the least equipped to do the job, and the ones who were taking on the most didn’t get much of a bump.” (NYT)

Another employee, despite getting a pay raise, complained, “Now the people who were just clocking in and out were making the same as me...It shackles high performers to less motivated team members.” (NYT)

In other words, Gravity’s solution to the social and economic inequality occurring within the world isn’t fair.

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The landowner in Matthew 20 took a similar approach to the social and economic inequality he observed in the marketplace.

He noticed that some people were out of work, and therefore, unable to live, unable to provide for themselves and their families as best as they could. So, he hired them. Not worrying about why they were late to the marketplace, or why they weren’t hired sooner.

The landowner didn’t ask them questions about what got them into their social and economic hardship. He just asked them if they were willing to work. The only requirement for being a recipient of the landowner’s generosity was a willingness to show up.

And then, at the end of the day, much to the surprise of everyone - the landowner paid every person the same amount of money. It didn’t matter how long they had worked, how hard they had worked, or why they needed the work at all. They all got the same amount of money.

The landowner’s generosity, again, was not dependent upon the contributions of the workers, but their willingness to work.

Now, much like Gravity experienced, some of the workers in the vineyard were not too happy about this arrangement. Those that had been there the longest, who had put in the most work, sweat the hardest, believed they deserved better.

After all, they had been there longer! They were more skilled! More qualified! Altogether superior to the last workers, the late workers.

It says they “grumbled” about the landowner’s payments. You can imagine them saying things like

- They’re lazy and slept in - you snooze, you lose!
- They haven’t worked as hard as me
- They have a disability that should disqualify them
- They’re an addict who was out late partying and showed up to work hungover
- They’re irresponsible, otherwise, they would have been hired first. Or shown up on time.

In other words, the landowner’s solution to the social and economic inequality occurring within the world isn’t fair.

Thanks be to God.

It has been over a decade since Gravity Payments made its incredible decision to raise the minimum wage of its employees. Now, this company is not perfect; they’ve made a lot of mistakes. Their CEO has made some terrible choices. This company, and their CEO should not be considered the heroes of any story.

And yet, in the decade since making this decision toward greater equality among employees, they’ve seen a huge change in their company. According to a report they did in 2015 (article):

- Their company’s revenue has soared over 650%
- Clients have grown happier and stayed longer
- They’ve started a profit-sharing program for their employees
- They’ve continued raising the minimum wage and are now up to a \$80k minimum wage
- They have a larger number of employees
- They are zero dollars in debts
- They have had zero layoffs - even during COVID
- Their company has a greater sense of collaboration and teamwork

But perhaps the greatest change has been how employees’ lives have improved, which was the goal to begin with. Remember how many of the employees were deferring good things in their lives, like traveling, buying homes, or having kids. Since 2015, this company has seen:

- 20x the number of marriages
- 12x the number of homes purchased
- 5x the number of kids
- Employees are taking vacations
- Employees are saving for retirement
- They’re paying off student loans

Equality didn’t seem fair at the time ten years ago, but the benefits from this upside-down approach to inequality has resulted in employees thriving.

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The text does not tell us the result of the landowners generosity on the workers' lives. It does not tell us what the workers in the vineyard produced. It does not tell us what the result of their work was. We don't know if their lives looked differently the next day. It only tells us that they worked, and that they were paid equally.

It can be easy to sit back on our high horses and accuse these grumbling employees. We're kind and generous people. We have examples like Gravity to tell us that "look! This can work. This is a good thing." But if we're honest with ourselves, I have to wonder if that would be our genuine response to this situation.

Because many of us would be the workers who show up early and one time for the work. The majority of us enjoy a lot of privileges in this world. And we are people of action who value others who show up to put in the work. Plus -

We live in a world that constantly reinforces the idea that you have to earn what you get, that working hard is the ultimate goal, that you are what you produce.

We have a government that tells us if you are poor, it's because you're lazy, or you didn't work hard enough, or that something is wrong with you. We are taught not to ask for help. Not to be too needy. Not to be too much. And that those who need a little extra help should be pitied.

And often, our charity comes with strings attached - I'll help you if you do something for me. Or our charity comes with a healthy dose of discrimination - we help those who are less fortunate than us to make ourselves feel superior, to make ourselves feel better about our own station in life.

Even on our best days, there is a small inclination to believe that those who work hard, deserve more. And that those who don't work hard or who can't work hard, deserve less. In this economy, in this world, living under this empire - every life is weighed and valued according to what you produce.

This is the way of the empire we live in. And yet, this is not the way of God's kingdom.

In the kingdom of God, there is no such thing as some people "deserving" more than others. In the kingdom of God, we are all deserving of good things, we are all worthy of equality.

The story of the laborers in the vineyard teaches us that equality is not something to be earned. It is something that every human person is deserving of. Equality is not a competition.

Equality for one person does not equal less equality for another. There is enough to go around - the kingdom of God does not have a scarcity problem.

What would it look like if we started living this way? Like the landowner who is representative of the Kingdom of God? What if we started living like there was actually enough to go around?

What if we stopped viewing peoples' equality as a debatable issue? What if we stopped requiring people to prove their worth, and instead, made sure that every person has good things?

What would have to change in your heart and in your actions, to create a world that looks more like the vineyard?

The equality of God's kingdom does not seem fair. Thanks be to God.

Reflection Questions:

1. Has there ever been a time when equality does not seem fair?
2. In what ways are you tempted to put restrictions on your generosity?
3. What would have to change in your heart and in your actions, so that your life more closely resembles that of the vineyard owner in Matthew 20?