Many of us grew up memorizing the so-called Roman Road to salvation that includes a verse that says, *The wages of sin is death* … Happily, the rest of the verse says … *but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* He might just as well have said that *the wages of grace is life.*

The parable Jesus tells in Matthew’s Gospel of the laborers in the vineyard is counted by scholars among the parables of judgment. At the end of the workday—which signifies the End of Days altogether, judgment is rendered, scores are settled. In the parable, wages are paid and the laborers get a surprise. Some see it as unfair and others see it as a gift—what we might call the wages of grace. Let’s look closer at the passage and see if we can find in judgment a way to celebrate grace.

The story Jesus tells is as modern as ancient. A landowner has a harvest to bring in and he is feeling the crush of time. If he can’t get all the grapes picked, the rains will come and ruin his chances of getting his grapes crushed and to market. So, he goes down to the Home Depot parking lot to find day laborers. He grabs some who were there at the crack of dawn and makes a deal with them to pay them a standard day’s wage—a denarius.

Now, a denarius wasn’t much. If a worker earned a denarius per day every day, he would have barely been able to feed his family. It’s difficult to establish what the value of a denarius would be today, but let’s just say it probably would be no more than minimum wage. So, maybe $100 per day. Like many of the workers you might load into the back of your pickup to do work in your yard, say, that would be what both they and you would expect. You make a deal and everyone should be happy.

Midmorning, the landowner looks at the progress and sees that he needs more help. So, he goes down to market two more times and gets more workers, promising to take care of them. No terms are given, just the promise he will treat them right.
By five o'clock he realizes he still needs more. He goes back and wonders why these men haven’t been working. They say no one had hired them. We get the impression they weren’t the most eager workers. But they go work the remaining hour and help bring in the harvest.

So far, so good. Nothing alarming about this yet. But when the workday ends, the landowner sends his foreman to pay them all. Here’s where it gets interesting. He instructs his man to start with the last group and pay them a full day’s wage. Apparently, he did the same with the two groups who came in between the first and last. You can bet they all talked. When the first group was paid what he had promised—which was the same as everyone else got, instead of being grateful, they grumbled that they should have received more because they had worked longer than the others in the scorching heat. He replies that he has done exactly for them what he promised and who are they to tell him what he should have done for the others if he decided to be generous?

Nowadays, we hear people who are committed to just wages complaining about pay inequalities. And with just cause, don’t you know?! White women make only .79 on the dollar compared to white men, black women .62 and Hispanic women .54. Black men make .87 and Hispanic men .91 compared to white men. Until our society achieves pay equity, the charge of systemic racism persists.

Others look at this parable and see socialism. Jesus undermine our capitalistic system by paying everyone the same. Others see true capitalism in that an employer is unfettered by regulations and is able to pay whatever he wants. Workers should have no complaint. They should be glad to have the work.

But all of that misses the point of the parable. There’s still a lot of bookkeeping going on based on accounting standards the workers think are just. Jesus has a different point to make. He isn’t trying to tell us what kind of economic system we ought to operate under. He’s making a spiritual point.

But look at the real rub of the text. When the grumbling workers complain about their pay, they say you have made them equal to us. Equality is not what they want. They might
claim they want justice, but what they want is advantage.

An old “Family Circus” comic strip shows two brothers, Jeff and Billy, squabbling over the size of the slices of pie their mom has placed before them. “They aren’t the same,” Jeff pouts. Mom tries again, evening-up the slices. Still Jeff is upset. “They still aren’t the same!” he whines. This time Mom uses a ruler and absolutely proves that both slices of pie are the exact same size. “But Mom,” Jeff complains, “I want mine to be just like Billy’s . . . only bigger!”

There’s something in us that wants to prove we are bigger and better than others. We don’t want to be equals. And we find all sorts of ways to make sure we are superior.

Isabel Wilkerson’s new book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, is all the rage right now. Oprah selected it for her book club and believes it’s the most important book on race in our time. Wilkerson wondered what’s behind white supremacy and whether there is something more to it all than just an American tragedy of whites suppressing Blacks. She studied the caste system in India and the racial purity ideology of the Nazis and concluded that there’s something in the human spirit that resists the idea that all human beings are equals. What she found is disturbing. We work really hard to make sure that there are strata of worth that we need to maintain in order for some people to be on top and others below us.

Many see this play out when their parents die. The will provides for all the kids to receive equal portions of the estate, even though some of the kids believe they have done everything right and others have been on the dole all their lives and should get little or nothing. We are looking for justice, or so we say. It’s as if we are the ones hired at the beginning of the day. If you are hired later in the day, that is, if you only get your act together later in life after being a ne’re-do-well for most of it, you can only hope for something more than you deserve.

It’s like the woman who sat for a portrait. When the artist finally

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1 Thanks to Len Sweet, *Is God Fair?* https://www.sermons.com/sermon/is-god-fair/1456858
completed his work and showed it to her, she didn’t like what she saw. The artist defended the accuracy of his work by declaring that everyone he had showed the portrait to had said that it did her justice. The woman retorted, “I’m not looking for justice. I’m looking for mercy.”

In the original setting of this passage, Matthew is probably trying to show through Jesus’ teaching how Jewish Christians in the church in Antioch who came first to the gospel shouldn’t resent those Gentiles who came last to the church. The whole idea that some expect more privilege than others is a spirit that we fight in every age.

In some churches, those who have been there the longest and have been most faithful over time want the prerogative to run the church. They resent the idea that newcomers should be treated equally and be given an equal say in the decisions of the congregation.

In other cases, some fear that others aren’t as deserving of equality—be they women or singles or gays or trans folk or whatever. They see inequality in difference, and it makes it hard to share the fullness of grace with those who don’t seem as deserving.

We wrestle with this in our society in numerous ways. Voter suppression is a big subject right now. Many polling places have been closed, and none of them in wealthy white neighborhoods. Some people believe some people are more worthy than others of determining the direction of our country.

Equality is not only a democratic value, though; it’s a gospel truth. The church is supposed to practice an economy of salvation that is an alternative to the world. We are supposed to model what it looks like to include Every Body, the way God does. We are supposed to celebrate the fact that we all get to work in God’s vineyard, and everyone gets what they need to live the life God desires for the world.

My old friend, Kenny Wood, likes to tell the story of his crazy uncle who would sometimes come to visit his home when he was a boy. He would call Kenny over to

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2 Ibid.
a table and say, let’s empty our pockets and see what we’ve got. Kenny would pull out a few coins and a rabbit’s foot and a pen knife. His uncle would take his billfold and pull out all the paper bills. The older man would then gather up the money, count the total amount, split it in two and give half to Kenny and keep half for himself. He would then say, \textit{There, we’re even.}

Sounds a whole lot like God in this parable, doesn’t it? \textit{The last will be first and the first will be last.} Equal. Even. The wages of grace.

God isn’t always fair. But it turns out, God is good. And what do we really need from God in the end? Amen.