

## IS GOD FAIR?

We have many excuses to give gifts to each other. Christmas, birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Secretaries Day, etc. Children are especially interested in gifts and so many times parents give them the impression that gifts are a reward for being good. We even promote it in some of the secular songs of the Christmas season: "You better watch out, you better not cry, .." Sometimes it is difficult to recognize the difference between a gift and a reward, but there is a fundamental difference in the two. A gift is at the discretion of the giver and is determined primarily by the nature and character of the giver and the input that the recipient has perhaps nothing more than a need that is known. A reward depends on what the recipient does and how well he does it. A gift is not earned or deserved; however, a reward is earned.

We often have trouble understanding this difference and this misunderstanding leads to ill will. I have seen situations in which children received presents and were just as happy as could be until they found that a brother or sister got what they thought was a better gift. Then they were unhappy because they equated their self-worth with the value of the gift received -- they confused the concept of gift and reward. Jesus told a parable to illustrate the closeness of the concepts of gifts and rewards and how this confusion leads to resentment among people.

**MATTHEW 20:1-2** The idea of a steady job where one goes to work on a regular basis at a retail store or a manufacturing plant is a fairly recent phenomenon. The industrial revolution started about 150 years ago and even within your lifetime there have been significant changes in the make up of the work force in this country. When you grew up, many people earned their living from the land by farming and made extra money by doing odd jobs or some craft that they had developed. Nowadays less than 5 percent of families depend on farming for their income. Thousands of years ago, the economy of various regions was dependent on agriculture and if people did not own their own land they would be looking for work in the fields and vineyards of others. Landowners would not need workers on a full time basis and so they would hire people a day at the time.

In the parable that Jesus told, some workers were hired at an agreed upon wage early in the morning. The wage paid was the standard for a day's work in those days. This was a situation where people were literally living from hand to mouth. Without the development of energy sources and machines to multiply our efforts, people rarely made enough to have anything left over unless they were landowners. The average laborer was not likely to be able to accumulate any wealth.

**MATTHEW 20:3-7** At harvest time, timing is important to insure the quality of the fruit. When the grapes are ready, then they need to be picked and you can't afford to have too few workers because saving or losing the harvest would mean the difference in success or failure for an entire year's effort. The landowner kept going back to find more workers. He did this all day and even hired some about an hour before quitting time. You get the impression that getting in the harvest is the most important thing for this landowner. There is an element of urgency in his going back time after time. We can see in this the concern that God has for people that are lost. We can also see the need that we have to take the message to people that have never heard. Notice that he did not agree to pay them a certain amount of money for their work, only that he would do what was right by them.

**MATTHEW 20:8-9** Because work was done a day at a time and there was uncertainty that more work would be there tomorrow each worker was paid on a daily basis. This was important to the survival of many families. They would need the money to buy what they required to feed their family for the next day. At sundown the worker came forward to receive their pay. The people that

were hired right before quitting time were paid first. They had not been told what they would receive and may have been concerned about the fairness of the landowner. To their amazement, he paid them a full day's pay. Had they earned that much? No, but they needed that much to put food on the table for their families. Part of their pay was reward and part of it was a gift motivated by the character of the landowner and his realization of the workers' needs.

**MATTHEW 20:10-12** Most people endorse a belief system that is based primarily on a formula for fairness that goes something like this: "If you do wrong you will be punished. If you do what is good, then you will be rewarded." The corollary to that rule is the more good you do, the more will be your reward. The men that came to work early in the day, were applying that rule to their situation. If the person who worked only one hour was rewarded with a day's pay, then they ought to be rewarded with several days' pay because they had worked so much longer. When that didn't happen, they were unhappy and grumbled against the landowner. What they failed to understand was the difference in "reward" and "gift". They got what they deserved -- their reward; however, they did not received a gift.

**MATTHEW 20:13-16** The landowner knew the difference. The agreement was for a penny. That was the wage or the reward and the landowner fulfilled his obligation fully. However, the landowner choose to give beyond the wage to certain ones. This was perfectly fair and lawful. It is unfortunate that some are incited to envy because others are generous.

In a sense, this parable is about the difference in Christianity and the other religions of the world. Every other religion has a system of works and progressions of moving higher by degrees as one does things to please God (or gods). Without exception, they teach that a person needs to work for rewards and they miss the concept of the grace of God which is exactly why Jesus came to die in our place. Any religion that misses this is a false religion and will not lead to salvation. "It is not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to His mercy that He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost."