

**“ALWAYS COMPLAINING!”**  
***Exodus 16:2-3, 9-21; Matthew 20:1-16***  
**Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor**

Some people just love to complain! There’s always something wrong. They always have a suggestion as to how you could do a better job. The story goes that a man walked into a restaurant and ordered two eggs for breakfast. “I want one egg scrambled and the other hard-boiled,” he said to the waitress. When she brought his food, he was very unhappy and called the chef. “What’s wrong, sir? There’s one scrambled egg on your plate and one hard-boiled egg.” “Yes, but you scrambled the wrong egg!” the customer replied.

Some people are always complaining. I remember when we were kids, my brother and sisters and I would start complaining about stuff. My mom would say, “If you don’t stop complaining, I’ll give you something to complain about!” That must have been how Moses and Aaron felt when the Israelites started complaining in the wilderness. They had just risked life and limb to get out of Egypt. God had delivered the people from the bondage of slavery. Moving all those people was not easy. Only by God’s grace and the leadership of Moses and Aaron had it happened. But alas, the corporate memory was short. The needs of the moment loomed large. “Here we are in the wilderness with nothing to eat. At least we had food when we were in Egypt,” they whined. Had they forgotten the fact that in Egypt they were slaves, forced to do hard labor day after day?

Once again God supplied their need. God sent quail into the camp for the people to cook and eat. Then God sent a strange, flaky substance that the people began to refer to as “Bread from heaven.” While that took care of the people’s hunger, they would eventually complain that they needed water, and so on. The complaining never stopped. But eventually most of the people realized that God was faithful, and that God would supply their needs.

The Israelites were whiners and complainers. It’s hard to understand how a people could be delivered from slavery as dramatically as the people of Israel left Egypt, had the Red Sea part for them to pass through, and then close on Pharaoh’s army, and still find something to complain about. But when we hear about the workers in the vineyard, that’s a different story. Those folks had reason to complain!

The landowner goes to the local temporary agency first thing in the morning and hires laborers for the day. After agreeing to a fair wage, the workers go into the fields. Realizing that the crop is bountiful and that the grapes are going to rot if they are not picked that day, the owner of the vineyard goes back at nine o’clock and hires more workers. He returns again at noon and again at 3 p.m.

He makes one more trip at 5 o’clock. Now only one group remains. The landowner says to the workers, “*Why are you standing here idle all day?*” They respond with one of the most

painful lines in all of Scripture, *“Because no one has hired us.”* The text does not say why they were not hired. Perhaps they did not have the needed skill set. Maybe they could not speak the language, lacked a proper education or were missing a green card. Maybe they could not afford the increase in gas prices and had to walk, or stayed home that morning with a sick child. Perhaps there simply were not enough jobs to go around. Whatever the reason, they were left out. Like the old man in a rowboat in New Orleans who kept going back into the flooded city, finding more and more people who needed to be rescued, this landowner desperately wants everyone to have a job in his vineyard. He cannot stomach the thought of anyone being left behind, for there is more than enough work for all. So he says to the last unhired workers, *“Go into the vineyard.”*

When the day is over, and the workers line up to get their paychecks, they discover, lo and behold, that they have all received the same amount! Needless to say, those who have worked all day in the scorching sun are outraged. “What kind of business owner are you? Don’t you know the basics of incentive and reward? We have sunburns, blisters and pulled muscles. We’ve kept going since daylight this morning. Not only do you pay us last, but you pay us the same amount! We deserve better!”

Every sophomore in Econ 101 knows that this is no way to run a business. It destroys morale. This is bad business, fuzzy math and flat-out unfair. In the world as we know it, time plus effort equals productivity, and productivity means pay. Those who are in the most demand, the hardest workers with the highest skills deserve the first and greatest reward.

And so it is that the cry goes up, “Unfair! Unfair!” It’s time to file a complaint. It’s time to write a grievance. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer about this!”

Yes, we can get into this story because we know about “not fair.” We’ve not been treated fairly, either. It’s not fair when we give our blood, sweat and tears to a company, and then we come in one day and are told to clean out our desk because the company is down-sizing, and we have just been fired. It’s not fair when we do our best to be devoted parents and then have our kids turn their backs on us and go in a direction we prayed to God they would not go. It’s not fair when a person who watches his diet and exercises every day has a heart attack in the prime of life and dies. It’s not fair when a devout person gets cancer and experiences severe pain and has her life cut tragically short. It’s not fair when our sons and daughters are the victims of a war they did not start and whose sacrifice does not seem to bring our world closer to peace. Yes, we know about “not fair.” Life is not fair. Can I give you a few examples? How much time do you have?

Now to add insult to injury, Jesus tells us that God is the landowner, and that it is God who decides not only to pay everybody the same wage, but to pay the johnny-come-latelys, those who barely broke a sweat, first, while the tired, worn-out workers stand in line and wait!

We, of course, assume that this is not a parable about how to run a business. No company could stay competitive in today’s market if everyone was paid the same wage, regardless of their performance. So what is the point of this parable? Just to remind us of a fact which most of us are already painfully aware, that life is not fair?

No, I think there is more to it than that. Let us go back to the story of the Israelites in the wilderness where God gave the people, not what they deserved, but what they needed for each day. Ungrateful people that they were, they probably deserved to die of starvation. But God in his mercy gave them food. If they gathered too much, it spoiled. If they tried to hoard food, it

rotted overnight. They could not keep extra, even for one day. Every morning they had to harvest what they needed for that day. But they were never short. There was always enough for everybody.

We always assume that if life was more fair, we'd come out way ahead. The truth is, we do not deserve God's grace. We have done nothing to earn it. We have done nothing to merit our salvation. If God gave us what we deserved, where would we be? I drove by a church recently where the sign said, "No one gets what they deserve, thank God!"

The fact is, the all-day workers got what they were promised. Commentator Tom Long writes, "*God gives everyone a daily wage so extravagant that no one could ever spend it all. A deluge of grace descends on all; torrents of joy and blessing fall everywhere. And there these first-hour workers stand, drenched in God's mercy ... clutching their little contracts and whining that they deserve more*"! (1)

Suddenly this story of Jesus gets personal. And we are confronted with the reality that we are not promised an untroubled journey, but only a safe arrival. We are reminded that God gives us not what we deserve, but what we need. Rather than to complain that we think we should have more, maybe we should be more thankful for what we have.

This parable suggests that in the economy of God's kingdom there is something better than profit margin, greater than incentive and reward, more beautiful than a sharply run business — and that is abundant grace. This is a story about a God who wants everyone inside his vineyard, who will not stop rushing out into the marketplace until all have been rounded up, who will not stop until the outsiders, the forgotten and the lonely have been included alongside the skilled, the timely and the hardworking, even if it costs God everything.

In their jealousy and rage, I'm afraid those who labored in the vineyard all day missed the point. They got so caught up with what they thought they deserved that they lost sight of God's abundant grace. They spent so much time looking at their own pain that they failed to see the ultimate goodness of God's kingdom.

We could think about this parable in terms of family life. The parents of a 12 year old and a 9 year old do not love the 12 year old more because the older child has been in the family for a longer period of time. At Lakeside I told about a woman I met in one of the churches in the district where I was District Superintendent. She has kept in touch with me through the years. She has been a widow for over twenty years. A few years ago a man in her church experienced the death of his wife. She had known the couple for years. She and this man began spending time together. Eventually, she wrote and said they were going to get married. "People think we are crazy," she wrote "But we aren't worrying about what people are saying." Well, they got married. She was 93 and he was 92. They have been married for six years now. In January, she will be 100 years old.

Now this couple will not celebrate a 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Yet the number of years they are married is not what is important. A marriage of two ninety year olds is no less significant to God than the couple in their twenties that I married yesterday afternoon. God does not delight more in the love of young people than in the commitment of the elderly simply because younger people may have a longer time to spend together. Grace is offered to all. All are the recipients of God's generosity.

Remember when you were on the playground as a child and the captains squared off to choose teams? "I'll take her." "I've got him." You sat watching the other kids get picked and

wanted to wave your hand, “Pick me! Pick me!” We’ve all been there. Nothing hurts more than the feeling you have nothing to offer that anyone wants. Nothing hurts more than looking in from the outside.

The good news is that God cannot stand the thought of one person being left behind! God invites you into God’s vineyard, and God invites me. All of us are invited to be the recipients of God’s love and God’s grace. To the unhired workers in the city square, to those who have been forgotten, left out for any reason, to all who are crying, “Pick me! Pick me!,” God says, “You’re hired! Come on in to my vineyard!”

So, stop complaining! Just open your arms, open your heart to love and the grace of God.

*Prayer:* Dear God, we are painfully aware that life is not fair, to us or to others. But in the midst of our frustration, help us to see your grace, and help us to see your love for each of us. Help us to trust in you, knowing that you graciously give us all that we need for the journey. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Note:

1. Quoted in *The Clergy Journal*. Vol. 84. No. 7, p. 22.