

The workers in the vineyard.

As modern people, we approach this parable in 'economic' terms. The parable seems to present God as unfair – as wildly generous to people who did little work.

For the ancient people of Jesus' time, the meaning was slightly different. First, we note the context of this gospel text. Just before it we have the young man asking Jesus what he must do, to be "good" or perfect. Jesus tell him he should give up everything else in his life, and "follow Jesus" Next, Peter says to Jesus, "we have given everything up to follow you, what will we receive or get back?" Jesus says, you will be rewarded in the 'next age' and receive eternal life. The we have this parable – Jesus offers an illustration of the way God thinks and acts and of how he "rewards" us.

In the story, the Landowner is described in two ways: first, he is an employer. He pays the early starters what is fair for their days' work. But, secondly, he is a patron, the head of a family. In the ancient world, patrons or family heads looked after their own family members especially. They were not just "fair" but generous and benevolent, lavish in their gifts. This is how the landowner treats the later workers – not as employees to be paid by the hour; but as family members receiving the father's gifts.

So, God is not unfair to anyone. But God is also lavish with his gifts to those he loves. He treats us as family, not employees.

One question for us today: do we think of ourselves as just workers for God, employees, or do we think of ourselves as beloved members of God's family, receiving and sharing in God's lavish gifts? A similar point is made in the parable of the two sons: one is prodigal (he spends his inheritance) but the Father welcomes him back. The other is hardworking and loyal, but does not appreciate his freedom within the family. The Father tells him, "all I have is yours".

So the parable explains how God is "good" or "complete" – how God is truly Godlike.

Yes, we will be rewarded for persevering in our faith. But we should not measure our reward by comparison with others. Our reward is not greater because another receives less. Our reward is simply our friendship with God, our trust in him as our Father, the Father from whom we have received everything as gift.