

Series: Key Moments

January 25, 2015

## **Title: Fair Share**

**[slide 1]**

**Text: Matthew 20:1-16**

### **Fair is Fair**

#### **Hardwired for fairness?**

The cartoon says it all:

**[slide 2]**

- “Two identical PB&J sandwiches on identical plates served at exactly the same time.
- But somehow, the two kids served the sandwiches find a way to turn them into a fight about who is or is not getting their fair share!

Did you ever wonder just how far back the “It’s not fair!” response goes in your child’s development? Scientists have put their minds to answering that question. They have found that the desire for fairness is hardwired into our brains. It’s something we’re born with!

An article on [psychologicalscience.org](http://psychologicalscience.org) explains that our response to things fair and unfair happens deep in our “emotional brain.”

**[slide 3]**

*The psychologists wanted to know if there is something inherently rewarding about being treated decently. So, they scanned several parts of the participants’ brains while they were in the act of weighing both fair and miserly offers. Consistent with previous results, the researchers found that a region previously associated with negative emotions such as moral disgust (the anterior insula) was activated during unfair treatment. However, interestingly, they also found that regions associated with reward (including the ventral striatum) were activated during fair treatment even though there was no additional money to be gained.*

**[slide 4]**

*What’s more, these emotional firings occur in brain structures that are fast and automatic, so it appears that the emotional brain is overruling the more deliberate, rational mind. Faced with a conflict, the brain’s default position is to demand a fair deal. ([psychologicalscience.org](http://psychologicalscience.org))*

**[slide 5]**

So next time your kid blurts out, “That’s not fair!” you can thank their *anterior insula*.

**Fair Play:****[slide 6]**

If you want a real-time example of people’s *anterior insulae* getting worked up over perceived injustices, just look at the aftermath of the Patriots/Colts game. It turns out that 11 of the 12 footballs used by Tom Brady were mysteriously underinflated. Unfair!

**[slide 7]**

And this is just one more example of how obsessed our society is with fairness. On September 17, 2011 protesters took over Zuccotti Park in New York City’s financial district on behalf of the 99% of the population who did not have the vast proportion of the world’s wealth. Before long, just about anyone who felt that they or anyone else was being treated unfairly in any way had joined the party. Crazy things happen when you get a lot of inflamed *anterior insulae* together!

“Occupy Wall Street” is long gone, but not the host of economic disparities that it highlighted: raising the minimum wage, providing paid sick leave, eliminating gender disparity, protecting benefits and pensions – just a few examples of the things that make the headlines when it comes to our ongoing debate about fairness in our economy.

**It’s an old story:**

It turns out that people have been talking about fairness for a very long time. Jewish rabbis told a story about a king who had a vineyard and hired people to work in it. One worker stood out head and shoulders above the others, so the king took him by the hand and walked through the vineyard with him until the end of the day. When evening came and the king paid off his workers, this person received the same pay as the others.

Their response? “It’s not fair! He only worked two hours, while the rest of us worked all day long!”

To which the king replied, “What are you complaining about? This laborer has by his skill accomplished as much in two hours as you during the whole day.”

(Midr. On Eccl. 5:11, Jer. Ber. ii8, as cited by Edersheim, [The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah](#), p. 523).

The rabbi’s story addressed fairness, but raised the ante by rewarding excellence. No doubt the moral of the story was that God does the same!

## The Parable of the Workers

### A Busy Day in the Vineyard:

Jesus had His own story about hours worked and compensation. He uses this story to describe for us how God makes sure that justice happens in His world. And as with all of Jesus' parables, it comes with a surprising twist!

It begins with a landowner hiring workers at the beginning of a long work day:

#### [slide 8]

*Matthew 20:1-2 NIV*

*"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.*

No surprises here: the denarius was standard pay for a day's work.

But as the day goes on, the landowner returns again and again to the market to hire more workers:

#### [slide 9]

*Matthew 20:3-5 NIV*

*"About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup> He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.'<sup>5</sup> So they went.*

*"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing."*

Notice that there is no mention of what these workers will be paid. All the landowner says is that he will pay "whatever is right."

Nothing unusual or surprising there.

### Last Call:

Finally, just one hour before closing time he makes one more run on the labor force at the market:

**[slide 10]**

*Matthew 20:6-7 NIV*

<sup>6</sup>*About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'*

<sup>7</sup>*"Because no one has hired us,' they answered.*

*"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'"*

These individuals, who have been standing around all day long, are people who were considered unworthy to be hired. They have evidently been rejected by various employers since early morning. But now, they too are put to work, without so much as a mention of what they will be paid.

So, to review:

- We have workers who were hired at 6:00 a.m. and promised a full day's pay.
- We have workers who were hired at 9:00 a.m., 12:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m., and who have been promised "whatever is right."
- We have workers who were rejected by all the other employers who only work one hour all day.

How would you write the paychecks? How would you make sure that fair is fair?

**Fair Share****Payday!**

This is where Jesus' story gets interesting. The first twist in the story comes with the owner's command to his foreman:

**[slide 11]**

*Matthew 20:8 NIV*

*"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'"*

It was customary to pay workers at the end of the day. Moses had commanded that workers receive their wages before sundown. Remember: the early bird workers already knew what they were supposed to receive – one denarius. You can imagine that they would be doing the math for how much the late arrivals would receive. Think: 1 denarius divided by 12.

But they were in for a big surprise:

**[slide 12]**

*Matthew 20:9-10 NIV*

*“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.”*

You can imagine their reaction:

**[slide 13]**

*Matthew 20:11-12 NIV*

*“When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. <sup>12</sup> ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’”*

Somebody is going to have some big explaining to do! A whole log of *anterior insulae* are up in arms.

**“What’s your problem?”**

The owner does give an explanation for his unexpected way of compensating his workers, but it sure is *not* the explanation the workers were looking for! This is what he says:

**[slide 14]**

*Matthew 20:13-15 NIV*

*“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. <sup>15</sup> Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’”*

Was the owner fair? He certainly didn’t cheat anyone out of a penny. He paid off the full-day workers just as he had promised. Secondly, he had promised the other workers to do “whatever is right,” with no sum of money mentioned. That left him free to pay them a full day’s wage if he wished. No crime committed.

What he *has done*, however, is turn fairness on its head. He has redefined what it means to receive one’s fair share. Now, instead of calculating everyone’s time card, he has brought all the workers up to the same pay – a whole new way of being “fair”! Here is fairness based on

generosity instead of being based on performance. And that will do a number on your *anterior insula* every time.

### **Fair Share:**

Jesus finishes the story with a one line explanation:

#### **[slide 15]**

*Matthew 20:16 NIV*

*“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*

In the story that comes just before this parable Peter had tried to extract from Jesus some hint of the reward he would receive for being a disciple – one of the very first in the vineyard. Jesus had described the ultimate reward of receiving eternal life, but ended with the words:

#### **[slide 16]**

*Matthew 19:30 NIV*

*“But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”*

Could it be that Jesus told this story to help Peter and the other disciples understand that those who followed them, even hated tax collectors and “sinners” who were considered unfit for Kingdom service, would receive the same reward?

And how about us? I suppose it’s inevitable that our sense of fairness will pop up in our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. Like Peter, we may have made sacrifices along the way. We may have strived to live a godly life for many years. We may have been misunderstood. We may have labored long and hard for God’s Kingdom. Then someone, who has broken all the rules and wasted his or her life on all sorts of ungodly pursuits, becomes a follower of Jesus. They might even receive a blessing that we ourselves have been asking God to give us for years.

#### **[slide 17]**

Can you blame your *anterior insula* for copping an attitude? What kind of God is this anyway – Who treats everyone *the same*?

**Response Time:****[slide 18]**

- Which are you: a full-day worker or a late-comer?
- How is God's kind of fairness different from yours?
- What are you going to do about it?