**THAT’S NOT FAIR!**

***Thank God***

The following text, copied verbatim, is taken from the ancient historian Eusebius, (260-340 A.D.) written in his famous book “*History Of The Church*” (Vol. IV, page 15). Read it and weep. The following account of Polycarp’s martyrdom is the stuff of legend.

“He stepped forward and was asked by the proconsul if he really was Polycarp. When he said yes, the proconsul urged him to deny the charge (of being a Christian –rl). “Respect your years” the proconsul exclaimed, adding similar appeals for him to: “Swear by Caesar’s fortune. Change your attitude. Say ‘Away with the godless.’ ‘Swear and I will set you free. Execrate Christ!”

Polycarp replied, “For eighty-six years I have been His servant, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” The proconsul replied, “I have wild beasts and I shall throw you to them if you do not change your attitude!”

Polycarp said to the governor, “Call them, we cannot change our attitude if it means a change from better to worse. But it is a splendid thing to change from cruelty to justice.” The proconsul said, “If you make light of the beasts I will have you destroyed by fire, unless you change your attitude!”

Polycarp told him, “The fire you threaten burns for a time and is soon extinguished. There is a fire you know nothing about – the fire of the judgment to come and of eternal punishment, the fire reserved for the ungodly. But why do you hesitate? Do what you want!”

The proconsul was amazed and sent the crier to stand in the middle of the arena and announce three times: “Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian!” Then a shout went up from every throat that Polycarp must be burnt alive.

The rest followed in less time than it takes to describe: The crowds rushed to collect logs and fagots from the workshop and public baths. When the pyre was ready Polycarp prayed:

“O father of thy beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we have come to know Thee, the God of angels and powers and all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous who shall live in Thy presence; I bless Thee for counting me worthy of this day and hour, that in the number of the martyrs I may partake of Christ’s cup, to the resurrection of eternal life of both soul and body in the imperishability that is the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

When he had offered up the Amen and completed his prayer the men in charge lit the fire and a great flame shot up.”

Every time I read that story I am immediately reminded of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. In shame I think of how easy I have had it in the 20th and 21st centuries. Life has been relatively easy for me, and probably for you too. But isn’t that what the Lord included in His incredible explanation of the parable of the vineyard?

When Peter saw the RYR (i.e. Rich Young Ruler) walk away, unwilling to sacrifice his checking and savings accounts to follow Christ, he informed the Lord that “*we have left all and followed you, so what do we receive*?” The reply of Jesus is priceless. He informed the apostles that they would “receive” twelve thrones, along with a hundredfold blessings in this life, and then at death they eternal life! (Matt. 19:28-30). Whoa! Not bad. Not bad at all.

But, there is a caveat our Lord puts into the fine print. “*The first will be last and the last first*.” What? What on earth (or heaven) does that mean?

He explains it with a parable, which is then concluded with this same caveat, only reversed: “*So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen*” (Matthew 20:1-16).

The parable of the workers in the vineyard was intended for the humbling of the apostles. The story tells of workers during the time of harvest who were called by the vineyard master to work in his fields. The first workers at sunrise (6:00 am) all but signed a contract to work 12 hours for a denarius (the common wage for a laborer for a day’s work). But then at 9:00 am, then noon, then 3:00 pm, and finally 5:00 pm the master came back to hire more workers, sending them to harvest his grapes on a handshake that he would pay “*whatever is right I will give you*.” Fair enough.

The whistle blows at quitting time of 6:00 pm. Payday. The master instructs his accountant to pay in reverse order of the one-hour worker first, followed by the three hour, then the six hour, then the nine hour, and finally the full day workers. The one-hour workers, expecting 1/12th of a denarius (hardly enough to feed themself, much less their family) are given a full day’s wage! “Unbelievable! The boss man is very liberal today!” This news spreads like wildfire down the line of workers. The sunrise laborers start counting their chickens before they hatch, expecting two weeks of wages for one day of work. They are already thinking of telling the wife and kids they are going to Temple-Land in Jerusalem for vacation! They break out in song, “O Happy Day!”

Licking their lips they reach the paymaster only to be slapped back into reality: “One denarius. Next…”

“Hey, that’s not fair!” they scream. The reply: “Fair? Who said anything about fair?” But they come back with, “*But we have born the burden and heat of the day*!” This implies they should receive a greater reward. He is talking about the apostles. They are “the first” who become “last,” becoming equal to all other kingdom laborers.

Yes, they will be the tip of the spear, leading the battle charge into enemy strongholds. Yes, they will be terribly persecuted, and then martyred, while others who follow them will likely live safer and better lives. But when “payday” (judgment) comes, all disciples will receive the exact same reward, becoming “*heirs of God and joint with Christ in His glory*” (Romans 8:17). Not one Christian, including any apostle, will be elevated in honor more than any other believer.

“But that’s not fair!” Exactly. I don’t want what’s fair at Judgment, do you? I want grace. I want mercy. Not justice. Not fairness. Thank God He is not fair, for then Polycarp, Peter and all of us would be lost.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. – Rick