

WHY GOD IS NOT FAIR  
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Doesn't it make you mad when something is unfair—especially if you are on the receiving end? Recently I applied for a new health insurance policy. The company accepted me but charged me a higher rate because of my allergy problems.

The application never asked whether I smoked or how much (I've never smoked). They didn't ask if I regularly down a six-pack and then get behind the wheel (I don't drink at all). They never bothered to inquire whether I eat properly and exercise regularly (I do).

So some guy who smokes two packs a day, drives when drunk, eats junk food and never exercises could get the standard rate. But because I have hay fever, I have to pay more. I cried, "UNFAIR!"

We all want to be treated fairly. Most of us figure that if we do our best, God will deal with us fairly on judgment day. But Jesus taught that God does not operate according to our notion of what is fair.

In Matthew 20, Jesus told a story about a man who owned a vineyard. Early in the morning he hired some workers. He agreed to pay them the going rate for a day's wage, so they started working. About nine o'clock, he found some more workers and told them he would pay them a fair wage, so they went to work. The same thing happened at noon and again at three in the afternoon. Finally, at five in the afternoon he found some more men standing idle, hired them and sent them into his vineyard.

At sundown, he called his foreman and ordered him to pay all the workers, beginning with those hired last. For their hour or so of work, they received the full day's wage. So did everyone else, including the ones hired early in the morning. Everyone received a full day's wage, no matter how long they had worked.

Those who had worked all day grumbled. They didn't think it was fair that they got paid the same as those who had only worked an hour. They thought they should get more.

But the owner of the vineyard said, "What's your gripe? You got the day's wage we agreed on. If I want to give the same wage to someone who didn't work as long as you, that's my business."

The main point is that God doesn't operate on the merit system as we think he should. God deals with us

according to His free grace. As Paul explains, "For it is by his grace you are saved [delivered from God's judgment], through trusting him; it is not your own doing. It is God's gift, not a reward for work done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of" (Ephesians 2:8, 9; New English Bible).

Just over a century ago, a man named Shamel was the leader of a guerilla group fighting against the Czarist regime in Russia. The unity of his group was threatened by a rash of stealing amongst the members, which included the soldiers' families. So Shamel imposed a penalty of 100 lashes for anyone caught stealing.

Not long after that, Shamel's own mother was caught stealing. He didn't know what to do. He loved his mother and didn't want her to suffer, but he also knew he had to uphold his law or anarchy and infighting would ruin his army. He shut himself in his tent for three days, agonizing over what to do.

Finally he made up his mind: For the sake of the law and the whole society, his mother must pay the penalty. But before three blows had fallen on her back, Shamel had his real and final solution. He removed his mother and he himself took her place. The full price had to be paid, but he bore the penalty she deserved. His law stood, but his love prevailed.

Even if you're a pretty good person, one who has been at work in the vineyard since early morning, you've violated God's holy law. You've got sin that must be paid for. Maybe the guy coming in at five in the afternoon has more sin than you. But if God is just, both men's sin must be paid for. Either you pay (the merit system), or God pays (the grace system). God's grace doesn't seem fair to the self-righteous, but for those who recognize how undeserving they are, it is truly wonderful!