

The Story of the **Vineyard**

The Point: Life's not fair—but God is always loving.

Scripture Connect: Matthew 20:1–15

Supplies for all Session 3 activities options: pencils, prepared poster, paper, masking tape, Bible, 1 small sack or basket, treats or favors (1 per child), 1 cup or basket, 10 coins per child (you'll get them back!)

The Basics for Leaders

Jesus spent a lot of time explaining a very basic truth to his audiences. The kingdom of God isn't just about rules or about behavior or about justice. It's also about grace.

Jesus told this story to help his audience grab hold of a basic truth: God is generous, and his gifts of salvation and eternal life are available to anyone who believes in him and trusts him—whether that belief comes at the beginning of a long life or just moments before someone dies.

Something about that arrangement doesn't seem fair to us. We want a bonus for spending a lifetime serving God. And in believing this, we miss the same three points the people who heard Jesus's story (or parable) missed:

1. God gives us a wonderful gift, just as he promised.
2. It's up to God if he decides to be generous with others.
3. Having a lifetime serving God is a bonus!

You'll help your kids discover these truths today as you share the story of the workers in the vineyard.

OPENING ACTIVITY—OPTION 1

HOWZITGOIN'

Time: about 5 minutes, depending on attendance

Supplies: pencils, prepared poster

Before kids arrive, draw a line on a poster. Write a 1 on the left end of the line, a 10 on the right, and a 5 in the middle. As kids arrive, ask them to pencil in their initials on the line.



Say: If this past week was so awful you wish you'd slept through it, place your initials by the 1. If it was a great week you wish you could repeat, put your initials by the 10. Place your initials anywhere on the line that shows how you feel about this past week—except exactly on the 5. Because there's no such thing as a week that's exactly half good and half bad!

After kids have signed in, give them 30 seconds each to explain why they placed their initials where they did. Be sure to include your own initials and explain your placement on the line. Kids will begin to express themselves more over time, and hearing their stories will help you adapt this lesson to make it relevant to your kids' lives.

OPENING ACTIVITY—OPTION 2

PUPPY-SITTING FLUFFY

Time: about 10 minutes

Supplies: 1 sheet of paper and 1 pencil per child

Form children into pairs and hand each child a sheet of paper and a pencil. Ask children to decide who in each pair will be the Day Person and who will be the Night Person.

Say: Let's say I'll be out of town and need someone to care for my puppy. I'll be gone 24 hours, and I'll pay someone to care for little Fluffy.

Before you decide if you want the job, let's list all of the things you need to do to care for a puppy during the day and night. The Day Person in each pair will list what it takes to care for Fluffy during the day, and the Night Person will list what it takes to care for Fluffy during the night.

As kids make suggestions, have them write the tasks on their papers. Be specific, making sure all tasks happen during the day. Explain that Fluffy sleeps from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. and doesn't have "accidents," so there's really nothing to do at night.

When the lists are complete, have kids read them aloud. Then say: **I'll pay 100 dollars for Fluffy's care, but I want to hire a team of two people—one to handle the day and the other to handle the night. I'll pay your team 100 dollars. What's a fair way for you to split the money? Splitting the money right down the middle, with 50 dollars each, isn't fair because the Day Person is doing all the work. How would you split it?** Give pairs time to talk, and then ask them to share with the larger group their solutions. Ask:

- How did you decide what was fair?
- How would each Day Person feel if the Night Person got paid the same amount?

Say: **Today we're diving into a story Jesus told that's much like what we just did. People were hired to work, but not all of them were happy with how they were paid.**

The people listening to Jesus's story discovered what we'll discover: life's not fair, but God is always loving!

AGE-ALERT TIPS

If you have mostly **younger children** who may not be able to list items, encourage them to act out their jobs. If a child is the Day Person, he or she might act out feeding and giving water to the puppy as well as taking the puppy for walks. The child playing the Night Person will simply act out sleeping. This will help **younger kids** see how unfair the payments are for puppy-sitting!

Cool Stories Game

FAIR TEAMS

Time: about 10 minutes

Supplies: masking tape

Place a masking tape line on the floor to separate the playing area into two sections. Tell kids to form two teams for piggyback races. Have each team stand on one side of the line.

When kids are in place, say: **We're not really going to have piggyback races, but I'm curious. How did you choose your teams? Was it because of size, height, weight, or age? Did this make fair teams? Why or why not?**

Encourage kids to tell how they chose their teams, and if this made them fair. Then say: **People say life should be fair. Let's see how well that works. We'll form teams for a few pretend games and see if we can make the teams exactly, absolutely, completely fair.**

When I call out a type of game, you'll have 60 seconds to choose teams, one team on each side of the line. Make the teams fair and be able to explain why after each round. Ready?

Pick fair teams for a ...

- Kitty-petting contest
- Dance contest
- Juggling contest
- Handwriting contest
- Relay race
- Spelling bee
- Staring contest
- Skipping contest

After each round, ask how kids decided what would make teams fair. Is it age? Numbers? Experience? Strength? Push for specifics.

Say: **Hard to make teams fair, huh? We're all different and all good at different things. But God knows us all and knows what we need. And though life isn't always fair, God loves us all! Jesus told a parable (or story) about a vineyard where grapes are grown and about a boss who seemed unfair to his workers. Let's explore that story now!**

Cool Bible Story

FAIR OR NOT?

Time: about 15 minutes

Supplies: Bible, 1 small sack or basket, treats or favors (1 per child)

Before children arrive, place small treats or favors in a sack or basket. Consider using small erasers, new pencils, or individually wrapped candies.

Invite children to form three groups. One child can be a group if necessary. Have groups sit on the floor. Hold the treat sack or basket. Explain that you

have treats to share but to receive them, groups need to do some work. Ask the first group to stand up and sit down 15 times—quickly—to get their treats. Have everyone count along out loud.

When the first group has completed the task, announce that the second group has to do the same thing—six times—to earn a prize. Have everyone count aloud. Say: **We have one last group. How many stand-up-sit-downs should they do? Thirty-five? Forty-seven? How about ... just one?**

When the last group has accomplished its task, give everyone one treat from the sack. Then have kids sit in place and discuss:

- **Was it fair that some of you worked harder and still got the same reward? Explain.**
- **Are rewards always fair? Why or why not?**

Say: **Jesus told a story about a vineyard where grapes are grown and about a boss and his workers. Let's read the story aloud. As you listen, see whether you think the boss's payment to the workers was fair or unfair, loving or unkind.**

Read aloud Matthew 20:1–12. Invite older kids to take turns reading aloud if they'd like. When you finish reading the passage, ask:

- **Do you think the boss was fair or unfair? Explain.**
- **In what ways can something or someone seem unfair, but still be kind and loving?**

Read aloud Matthew 20:13–15. Then ask:

- **Would you rather someone in charge be fair or loving? Explain.**
- **Would you rather God be absolutely fair or loving? Explain.**

Say: **God is fair *and* loving. And it's a good thing for us that he's loving, because if he gave us what we deserve, we'd all be in trouble. Romans 3:23 says that we've all sinned and disappointed God.** If you have older kids, read aloud Romans 6:23 to remind them of God's loving grace through Jesus.

Say: **Good news, though: God sent Jesus to save us!** Read aloud Romans 5:8. Then say: **Life isn't always fair, but God is always loving. And for that we can be deeply thankful!**

CLOSING PRAYER

THUMBNAIL PRAYER

Time: about 5 minutes

Supplies: 1 cup or basket, 10 coins per child (you'll get them back)

Raid your piggy bank. You'll give each child at least ten coins. Be clear you'd like the coins back.

Explain to children that in a few moments they'll stack coins on their thumbs. Say: **Hold your hand in a fist like this (demonstrate) with your thumbnail up. Stack as many coins on your thumbs as you can. How many you can stack depends on how flat your thumbnail is, how steady your hand is, and how big your thumb is. You may be a one-coin stacker or a ten-coin stacker. It all depends. Let's give it a try.**

Once children have finished stacking coins, say: **Hey, it's not fair if someone has a flatter thumb than you or a bigger thumb! Life's not fair!**

Ask children to very slowly open their hands while keeping their coin stacks on their thumbs. It's hard, so some stacks will tumble!

Say: **It's not fair that some of us have steadier hands than others. Life's not fair!** Collect all but one coin from each child. Say: **Life's not fair, but no matter how God made your thumb, he loves you. He loves us all—whether we're one-coin or ten-coin stackers!** Ask children to each hold their coins in their palms with palms up and open.

Pray and thank God for loving us no matter what. Thank him that he hasn't made us all the same. Thank God that he treats us with love and grace, not just punishing us for doing what he says is wrong. Invite kids to take turns thanking God for his love.

When children have finished praying, ask them to drop their coins in the cup or basket as a sign of thanking God for his love.

EXTRA-TIME ACTIVITY—OPTION 1

STAND UP, SIT DOWN

Time: about 5 minutes

Supplies: none

Seat kids on the floor. Say: **Life's not fair. Some of us are good at one thing and not another. But we're all good at something—God has given us each at least one talent or gift we can use to help others and to praise God.**

I'll call out a list of things we may be good at or enjoy doing, even if we're not yet all-stars. If something I mention describes you, jump up—then quickly sit down.

Read this list and add items you know will touch on what your kids enjoy doing. Read quickly with just a brief pause between items: **Reader, writer, runner, singer, actor, dancer, scientist, mountain climber, room cleaner, math whiz, hiker, biker, kite flyer, painter, ice-cream eater, and—ta-dah!—list reader.**

Say: **Good job! What's something else you enjoy doing?** After kids make suggestions, say: **Life's not fair. We aren't all good at the same things. But isn't it great that God made us all different? And that he loves us?**

EXTRA-TIME ACTIVITY—OPTION 2

RULES, RULES, RULES

Time: about 10 minutes

Supplies: 1 sheet of paper and 1 pencil per child

Ask children to write or draw (or simply discuss) what they feel is the right punishment for breaking each of the house rules listed below. Then have kids share their answers.

- **Trashing the house and refusing to clean up**
- **Saying, "Yuck! I won't eat this slop!" when dinner is served**
- **Blaming someone else for something you did**
- **Not doing schoolwork and lying about it later**

AGE-ALERT TIPS

If you have **younger children**, explain what the word *punishment* means. Remind them that even though we sometimes make wrong choices and receive punishments, God still loves us—and loves it when we tell him we're sorry!

Say: **Wow, sounds like punishments are different in different homes. Is that fair?**

Parents don't always respond the same way to situations. But something they pretty much have in common is that they love us enough to discipline us and help us behave properly. They may not always be fair, but they always love us!

(Note: Be on the lookout if a child describes an over-the-top punishment, perhaps even abuse. If that's the case, tell someone in authority, such as your pastor or children's pastor. Don't use this as an excuse for gossip, but do let someone appropriate know your concerns.)

EXTRA-TIME ACTIVITY-OPTION 3

INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW

Time: 5 minutes

Supplies: none

Gather kids in a circle. Ask: **Describe a time at school that something didn't seem fair. How did you feel? Describe a time something wasn't fair—but you came out ahead. How did you feel then?**