

Septuagesima, A ✕ D 2009

Matthew 20:1-16 For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last."

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 No, it's not fair. Sure, those who labored a full day agreed to work for a denarius. But would they have agreed to work for only a day's wage if they had known that some would work far less and receive the exact same amount? Would they even have come at the beginning of the twelve-hour work day if they had known that those who worked nine hours would receive just as much in wages? Would they have endured the heat of the day if they had known that even those who worked from noon 'til six would receive the same wage? And if they had known about this last crew, the ones who sauntered into the vineyard at five o' clock and hadn't even broken a sweat by paytime an hour later, would they have borne the burden of the entire day?

2 If you realized that those who never give an hour of volunteer labor to the congregation would—at the end of days—receive the same reward as you, would you still show up so frequently to labor in the vineyard? If you knew that the ninety-five-year-old man who repents on his death bed after a life of raucous living has just as much of a shot at dwelling with God in paradise as you, would you still work so hard against the sinful desires of your flesh? If you could spend a lifetime in godless rebellion against your Creator, worshipping Mammon or worshipping yourself, getting rich or getting drunk, cheating on your wife or cheating on your taxes, and still enter the vineyard of the Kingdom of Heaven at the eleventh hour, would you still be here on Sunday mornings?

3 This is not a parable about those outside the vineyard. It's not a parable about those who have no faith. It's a parable about you who by the Lord's mercy have been brought into the Kingdom of Heaven. You cannot earn your way into the vineyard. The master goes out relentlessly looking for more people to bring into

His vineyard. He doesn't check their work experience; He doesn't look for the most-qualified; He doesn't track down their references. He simply calls everyone He encounters to enter the vineyard. Nothing you do can get you into the vineyard. Only the Master's call and election will get you in the vineyard, and He calls those who are idle. So the parable is a warning to those already in the vineyard, those who have already received His gift of faith, those who are a part of His Church.

4 You cannot work your way into the vineyard, but you can idle your way out of it. Having received the Lord's gift of faith, having been brought into His kingdom by His grace, you have work to do. The Christian life is one of work. Hard work. Whoever does not take up his cross and follow Christ cannot be His disciple. Every day, you are given good works to do. While the scorching sun of the world beats against your skin, wanting you simply to give up, to surrender your faith and call it quits in the vineyard, you are to work hard. When the blistering heat of your sinful flesh calls you to surrender to lustful passions, to pack it in and take care of your own needs for the rest of the day, you are to work hard. When the devil tells you you'd be just as well to depart the vineyard and come back at the eleventh hour of your life, you are to work hard.

5 No, it's not fair. Fair would be for everyone to get what he deserved, the just reward for his labors. But no matter how hard you labor in the Lord's vineyard, you'll never earn the denarius of His salvation. Not only does He require a full work day, a complete lifetime of obedience, He demands a perfect work day. He demands perfection not just outwardly but inwardly, as well. Anything shy of perfection is sin, pure and simple. And sin has a wage; it's death. If you want fairness, you'll get what's fair, and you'll go to hell.

6 But the Lord, the Manager of the vineyard isn't about fairness anymore than He's about managing the vineyard in a cost-effective manner. It's poor management by our standards, to be sure, to give to each worker an undeserved denarius. And fairness simply isn't what the Master wants to give. Consider the One worker in the vineyard who worked perfectly and tirelessly. He withstood every temptation. He never considered His own best interests. He endured the treacherous toil, the back-breaking work of carrying the cross, the scorching sun that beat down on Him while He hung dying on the cross, the parching thirst from the cross. The One faithful worker is Jesus Christ. But for all His faithfulness, He received your wages: everlasting death and condemnation. The wages of your sin is the death of Jesus. Because He has borne your sin, worked tirelessly until death to atone for your sin, and risen victorious over the grave, the free gift for you is eternal life. Because He the First became the last, you the last have become the first. No, it's not fair.

7 “If you often find it difficult to bear the burden and heat of the day while others live according to the lusts of their flesh; if it often hurts you to fight while others rest; to bear the cross while others have good days; to be mocked, despised, and abused while others live in glory and honor, oh, do not murmur as those first who became last but think of the blessed honor when the Master of the heavenly vineyard will say to His steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their hire.’ How will you rejoice over the wonderful gift of the good Householder! Then for each hour of work you will receive an infinite reward; for each work of love done in faith an incalculably wonderful pay; for every battle no matter how small an eternal glorious triumph; for each little cross an unspeakably wonderful crown; for each little heat of temptation an unending blessed refreshing; for every small insult immeasurably great honor and glory” (Walther, *Evangeliumpostille*, 93)

8 That’s how it is in the Master’s vineyard: not fair. Do you begrudge this generosity, that the Lord would give to you what cannot be earned? No, it’s not fair. The wage is too high. There’s no merit in the vineyard, only grace. And while you’re here, you’re free to work, free to labor in the Lord’s vineyard where the wage is guaranteed no matter the effort.

9 It’s hard work, this Christian life. As you work, you’ll grow weary. As you toil under the blazing sun of temptation, you’ll grow thirsty. As you labor in the bitter heat of a sinful world, you’ll grow tired. As you struggle against the oppression of your sinful flesh, you’ll grow hungry. In this life, you need sustenance. And the only thing that sustains you in the vineyard is what brought you in in the first place: God’s unmerited grace. When your ears are weary from the devil’s accusations, come hear the word of Absolution that refreshes you and declares you forgiven. When your stomach grumbles for want of nourishment, come eat the Body of Him who won the wage of eternal life for you. When your throat is parched from carrying the cross of daily struggle, drink the Blood of Jesus, the Rock pierced for you.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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