

Sermon for Septuagesima Sunday – Matthew 20:1-16

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

With today's Gospel parable of the vineyard owner and laborers, Christ shows us how things work in the Kingdom of heaven. His kingdom is veiled mysteriously in the Church here on earth. God works in His usual unusual way: making the first last and the last first. Why? He humbles us who are something, so that we would trust in nothing but God's pure goodness and mercy. On the other hand, He says to us who are nothing, "Do not despair. Trust in God's goodness."

The main point of the parable is this: Pay attention to what the Lord has in mind. His goodness alone is greater than us; His goodness alone is greater than our works; His goodness alone is greater than anything we do. The focus is how we can acquire God's goodness – the gracious payment given out by the Lord at the end. The ones hired first in this parable thought they had acquired it (and more) by their own works and by what they did. Yet the last ones hired received it by the Lord's goodness. God freely gives out of His pure goodness. Not one of us should think of himself above others. The Lord says as much, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or is your eye evil because I am good?"

For us who want to fight our way to heaven through what we do, for us who take no other interest in God's Law other than to do it with works for a reward, we do not know or have God's pure grace. Our lives are bitter. There is no peace. There is no contentment. How will we ever change? The only way we can change: by the Gospel, God's redemption at Christ's expense. The Word of God equalizes everything: "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." So we who have done many great things have no more value than the most notorious public criminals. In fact, we ourselves are criminals and must bow at the words "all have sinned." No one is holy before God by what he does. Even the greatest deeds count no more than doing nothing at all. So Christ tells us to take our earthly reward for which we served for pay, for we get nothing more.

We must confess that we have deserved neither the denarius, nor the Lord's delight in us, nor the Lord's goodness to us. Yet, this is where we want to be. More will be given to us than we thought was promised. We remain in grace and are saved. In this life we have enough because all depends on the goodness of our Lord.

The temporal rewards of this life fade away. Yet, the goodness of the Lord is an eternal gift. Some have worked long and hard in the burden of the day and the scorching heat. They work with a heavy conscience and a reluctant heart, forced and driven by the Law. Yet, the short hour worked by those hired last is our unburdened conscience willingly led by the Good News, out of thankfulness for God's rich grace.

Earthly gifts are given to both works-righteous people and people who live by God's grace. Both have the denarius. Those hired last did not seek it because they sought first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Grace and eternal life are added to them. Those hired first seek a temporal reward. They live and serve for it, and in the process lose eternity. The last hired do not presume to deserve earthly things, and yet they obtain much more. Those hired first presume to obtain more and lose everything. They pay no attention to the Lord's goodness, but look to their own works, thinking it's owed to them, so they grumble. The last hired pay no attention to their works, but enjoy the Lord's goodness.

Trusting the Lord's goodness and mercy in humility has been characteristic of God's saints for all time. Mighty King David says, "Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother; my soul is even as a weaned child." St. Paul says, "So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh ..." But very many admirable people were seduced away from trusting God's mercy. His people Israel whom He rescued from slavery in Egypt fell into this trap, thinking: "We are so close to God that there is no need for us to know God, because we are doing it on our own." King Saul fell. David fell. Peter fell. Some of Paul's disciples fell. So we too must consider ourselves not immune to the allure of making ourselves righteous by what we do.

A litmus test for the truth is this: Where do you turn first when you make a mistake? Do you try to even things up? Do you make up for your fault by trying to do something good and right and so turn to your works? You know the law's "Do this and you will live" is never done, right? All the while we try to mend a breach; all the while we try to rebuild a relationship by the works of our hands, we're taking an axe to the root of what we need to hear: God is never found in what we do. He is found in what Jesus did with His birth, life, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and His current preached Word and administered Sacraments for you. Rely on the free gift of Jesus instead of relying on the works of your hands.

No one is so holy, no one will be so holy that he does not have to be afraid that he will fall. At the same time, no one is fallen so deeply, no one can fall so deeply that he cannot hope to have God's grace and mercy. "The first shall be last," takes away all our arrogance and makes it impossible to exalt ourselves over any guilty sinner, even if we're Abraham, David, Peter, or Paul. So likewise, "the last shall be first," stops us from all despair and prevents us from placing ourselves below any saint, even when we are the worst sinner.

We have no reason to be arrogant. We have no reason to despair. We don't look to our works, but to the Father's goodness in Christ: our only trust in this life. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠