

Sermon for Septuagesima – Matthew 20:1-16

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

A master goes out to hire laborers to work in his vineyard that day. There was much work to be done and it was not light work. On top of it all, this was a scorcher of a day. So hot it was that you wouldn't want to be out in direct sunlight too long and unfortunately, there is not much shade in a vineyard.

The master goes early to the marketplace to hire workers. He finds some and they agree to work for a denarius, an amount of money that would be the usual wage for a day's work. So he sends them into his vineyard to get to it. They arrive and the foreman explains the tasks for the day. After working a couple hours, the dew has all but burned off the vines, a good sweat is starting on the foreheads and in the clothes of the workers. But wait—look on the horizon—more workers are on their way into the vineyard! They were also hired by the master. They will lighten the load as the day gets hot.

Another couple hours pass. Clothes are soaked through with sweat. The sun is on full blast now. The foreman barks his orders. A couple wisps of wind is the only relief. But look again—more laborers joining the crew, hired by the master. Good to have some more fresh bodies to work with us!

The afternoon wears on. Legs and arms cramp. Nicked and bruised hands lock up from extended hours of work. The only thing keeping them going is the thought of the payout at the end of the day. Was it a contract or a covenant we made with the master? And look—more workers! Have them help us shoulder the load!

By this time questions start to arise among the early workers. "We agreed to work for a denarius. What about you guys; what are you getting?" "Don't know. He just said, 'whatever is right I will give you.'" "That makes sense. That's good enough. As long as it's less than us, who have born the burden of the day."

The sun starts its slow decline. The air is still hot, but in an hour, the work will be done. Wait, what's this? More workers hired by the master? What are they doing here? They come into the vineyard. They stand around. Some try to look busy. But none really work. Not, at least, like we have.

Next, the foreman calls out: "Quittin' time!" The master returns to the vineyard. He has the foremen line up the men, in order, last hired to first. And now comes the payout. Those last hired, clothes almost entirely clean, a little dust on their hands, who hardly worked, they receive a denarius. That's what the master gave them. Okay, this guy's a moron, but at least it looks like he's a generous moron. Next workers. Men that worked for more and much of the day. They receive a denarius. That's fine. They didn't work as long as us. And now for the all-day workers, the battered, broken, and dirt-covered bunch. What will it be? Two denarius? Maybe even three?!?

Nope. Just one. That's it. "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." We can feel the frustration in their voice, can't we? Have you ever grown weary of special treatment given to someone who was underserving, especially when you did all the work?

God's way is no way to run a business. Businesses can't afford to pay workers who don't work. But this is the way God runs the universe. Even the unbelievers benefit from His grace. The worst existence on earth is better than what we deserve in hell. Even unbelievers enjoy good things in creation, like sunshine and water and food. The Lord owes us nothing. Every good thing – coffee and pizza and 5G and the Royals and movies and soft blankets – is a gift and comes from God's mercy.

Those who worked all day got what was just. They got only what they had bargained for. In the end, however, this was a terrible thing. For even if they did bear the heat and brunt of the day, they were sent away with only what was theirs. Perhaps they enjoyed some glimpses of good in the vineyard while they worked, but they are sent away with only what they earned. They didn't ask for grace. They asked for justice. That's sad. That's terrible. For what is ours? What have we fully earned? Death and condemnation for our sins!

We want to settle for a contract. We want to keep up our end and God will keep up His end for a one-time event. When it's done, we can walk away. God will not have it. He's made a covenant. He wants to give and give and give. Physically. Spiritually. Eternally. He gives you a kingdom. Not for free, but for the bloody, tortuous death of His beloved Son. He has borne the burden of our sins and the scorching heat of the Father's wrath on the cross. He's made His covenant with you and signed and sealed it in blood.

He's made a promise to us. The owner simply said, "Come to the vineyard, and what is right I will give you." Like the later workers, we come by faith, trusting the owner will be good to us. Not only are we given more than we deserve, but, like the workers, we remain with the master. We are not sent away. We come by faith, are paid way more than we deserve, and then remain in the master's on-going goodness and mercy.

This is the defining character of God's kingdom. His grace is undeserved and unearned, even unexpected. For when we're caught in our selfish thoughts of entitlement, we don't have the ability to expect the full goodness and generosity of our Lord. His grace exceeds even the desires of our selfish hearts. Our cups overflow. He gives us His Son, His risen body and blood. The workers didn't expect a full day's wage. They got an unexpected, undeserved wage plus more. They got a place at the table, an inheritance, and honor.

We are no longer mere workers being overpaid. By grace, we are now members of the family, co-owners of the kingdom. God grant that His grace and mercy remain ever new to us, that our hearts would not turn cold, or take His grace for granted. God grant that we are ever mindful of the cost of His love in the death of His Son and the fulfillment of His love in the resurrection of the dead as He provides for us once again in His risen body and blood. Amen.

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