

SEPTUAGESIMA

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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. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. 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?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' 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.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, 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.' But he replied to one of them, '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 do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last."

Dear Workers in the Vineyard,

It's not fair. The master of a house went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And after agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day—the normal wage for a full day of work—he sent them into his vineyard. They worked hard, bearing the burden of the day and the scorching heat. They didn't mind when the master went out and hired more workers throughout the day, not even at the eleventh hour. In fact, when evening came, and those who were hired last each received a denarius, the original laborers got excited, thinking they would receive more. They had, after all, worked harder and longer than anyone else that day. If those who had barely broken a sweat had earned a full day's wage, what then would they have?

But when they held out their hands, each of them also received a denarius—the same amount of money for a very different amount of work. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house; they complained that he had made them equal to those who had worked only one hour. It wasn't fair! But instead of negotiating with those hard and faithful workers, the master rebuked them, reminding them of their original agreement and accusing them of begrudging his generosity (literally of having

an “evil eye”). He shut down their grumbling and sent them on their way. So the last will be first, and the first last.

Can you imagine if this happened to you? What if you were one of those hired first? Wouldn't you grumble? What if this happened at your job or at school? What if you studied hard for a test, bearing the burden of the day and the scorching heat (an apt metaphor for school, wouldn't you say?), only to receive the same grade as someone who barely studied at all? Isn't God good? Isn't He just? How can this be what the kingdom of heaven is like? Shouldn't those with perfect church attendance receive more than the casual churchgoer? Shouldn't those who know their Bible back to front be favored over those who don't know Chronicles from Corinthians? Shouldn't Lutherans be first in the kingdom of heaven before Baptists, Methodists, or Romans Catholics? You're the one who has woken up early to come here! You're the one who has put in the hard work! You're the one who deserves the denarius, and then some! And Jesus says the last will be first, and the first last? It's not fair!

Only, ask yourself, *Why* isn't it fair? Is it not fair because you volunteered to be here? No, you were hired. The Master came and sought you out, called you to faith by the Gospel, enlightened you who sat in darkness, and put you to work in His vineyard. You are here by God's invitation, not your initiative. This is not your vineyard, you just work here.

But neither is it not fair because you've earned it. You may be here most Sundays. You may know the Bible back to front. You may be a Lutheran of Lutherans. But you are not thereby worthy of eternal life. None of us deserves that denarius more than anyone else. It doesn't belong to us, it belongs to God, who is allowed to do with it what He chooses.

No, what's not fair is that God chooses to give it to anyone at all. We confessed earlier that we are poor, miserable sinners, who *justly* deserve God's temporal and eternal punishment for our many sins and iniquities. St. Paul writes that there is no one who is righteous and that all have sinned, and no one is justified before God by his works (Romans 3:10, 19, 23). So, if God were truly fair, He'd give us what we deserve. He wouldn't hire us. He wouldn't let us anywhere *near* His vineyard. Like Adam and Eve from the Garden, we'd be shut out, standing idle for eternity, no hope, no purpose, no wages but death. That would be fair.

But it's not fair. God is not fair. He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (Exodus 34:6). He seeks out idle sinners and puts them to work in His kingdom, not to earn their salvation, but as a result of it. “He saved us,” writes Paul again, “not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to

His own mercy...through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5, 6). Jesus, who is not mentioned explicitly in this parable, is behind every word, because without Him *there would be no workers in the vineyard*. Before the Master sought, the Son was sent to open the garden and let workers back in.

But, because of sin, this came with a price. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4). We are here because He bore the burden of our sin and the scorching heat of God's wrath. We get paid because He paid the ultimate price: His blood and life as a ransom for ours. By grace we have been saved (Ephesians 2:8). "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, *and* are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24). And that's true whether we were hired first or last, whether we've broken a sweat or are just getting started. We have all received, grace upon grace (John 1:16). It's not fair, but it is good news.

This means two things for our lives going forward. First, we must be on guard against pride. We are prone to compare ourselves with others, doing everything from rivalry or conceit. This is sin, and it leads away from Christ. But the Scriptures say, "Do nothing from selfish ambition, but in humility count others more significant than yourself" (Philippians 2:3). This is the mind of Christ Jesus, who likewise lowered Himself for us. We must therefore pray with David, "Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me" (Psalm 36:11). We must daily throw cold water on the Old Adam, confessing our sin and remembering that all is of grace, and that even when we have done all that we are commanded, we are unworthy servants (Luke 17:10).

We must also ask our heavenly Father to guard and keep us from despair. That evil eye can be turned inward, causing such harmful thoughts as, "Why did the Master even hire me? I'm not good at this. I don't know enough. Who am I to receive a denarius?" Well, who you are is Christ's. You're a worker in the vineyard. Your name is on the paycheck, and the bounty is yours. Christ earned it, you receive it. Or is He not allowed to do what He chooses with what belongs to Him?

So the last will be first, and the first last. That's what it's like in the kingdom of heaven. It's not fair. And that's the point: by *grace* you have been saved. And this is not your own doing; it is God's gift *to* you. Take it, and come back tomorrow.

In ✠ Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo gloria

