

The Work and Wages in the Kingdom of God

Sermon for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020

Matthew 20:1-16

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel reading read before, Matthew 20:1-16: ¹ **“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ² He agreed with the workers to pay them a denarius a day and sent them into his vineyard. ³ About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, ‘You also go into the vineyard! I shall pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵ So, they went.**

“He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶ About the eleventh hour he went out and found some others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why are you standing here all day long doing nothing?’

⁷ **“They answered him, ‘Because nobody has hired us.’**

“He told them, ‘You also go into the vineyard!’

⁸ **“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his manager, ‘Call the workmen and give them their pay! Begin with the last and go on to the first!’**

⁹ **“Those who began working about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ When the first ones came, they expected that they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ Although they took it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² They said, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who have endured the burden and the heat of the day.’**

¹³ **“He answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. You agreed with me on a denarius, did you not? ¹⁴ Take what is yours and go! I want to give this last man as much as I have given you. ¹⁵ Or do I not have the right to do what I please with what is mine? Or are you envious because I am generous?’**

¹⁶ **“In this way the last will be first, and the first last.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

In His discussion with the rich young man, in the last verse of Matthew 19, Jesus said, *“Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”* Notice how this last verse of chapter 19 is echoed in the last verse of our parable today as Jesus says, **“In this way the last will be first and the first last.”**

Earlier, when Peter, speaking for all the disciples, said to Jesus, *“Look! We have left everything and followed You. What, then, shall we get?”* Jesus assured them that they would be most generously rewarded. He promised, *“Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for the sake of My name will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life”* (19:29). We are reminded of the seed that fell on the good soil and yielded as much as a hundred times what was sown.¹ The seed cannot take credit for where it landed when it was sown. If the seed receives adequate rainfall and adequate sunshine, the bumper crop is due to circumstances that are entirely beyond the seed’s control.

So it is with the work anyone does in our Lord’s vineyard – that is the point of today’s parable. Because of His grace, Jesus offers a job to the unemployed. He says, **“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.”** The workers do not fill out an application; instead, the landowner of the vineyard goes out and finds them, inviting them to come and work in his vineyard. Neither are salaries based on *merit*. All receive a denarius whether they work all day or only for an hour. When Jesus says, **“the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner,”** He points out that God deals with us based on His grace and love instead of based on what we think is fair and just. If we complain about His generosity to others, we despise His grace. If we insist that God reward us based on merit, we deprive ourselves of the abundant blessings of His grace. The consequences are both temporal and eternal.

So it is that this parable contains a great truth which goes to the very heart of the Christian religion today.

¹ Matthew 13:8, 23

This parable was, in one sense, a warning to the disciples of Jesus. It is as if Jesus said to them, “*You have received the great privilege of coming into the Christian Church and fellowship very early, right at the beginning. In later days others will come in. You must not claim a special honour and a special place because you were Christians before they were. All men, no matter when they come, are equally precious to God.*” This is what Jesus meant when He mentioned all those different hours, from **early in the morning** to the **eleventh hour**. The eleventh hour was about 5 o’clock, an hour before quitting time in those days.

Many Christians today like to believe that, because they have been members of a church for a long time, the Church practically belongs to them and they can dictate its policy. Such people will often resent what appears to them as the intrusion of new blood or the rise of a new generation with different plans and different ways. In the Christian Church seniority does not necessarily mean honour. The only thing that truly matters is that the truth and purity of God’s Word are taught and adhered to, and that God is worshipped in a proper and orderly way with true reverence. Any congregation is truly blessed when they can worship together this way.

There is also contained in the Lord’s words today a warning to the Jews. The Jews believed that they were God’s chosen people, and rightly so, but they wrongly looked down on the Gentiles. They hated and despised them and hoped for nothing but their destruction. This attitude threatened to be carried forward into the Christian Church. The Jews thought if the Gentiles were to be allowed into the fellowship of the Church, then ok, but they must come in as inferior to them.

But Christianity knows nothing of the conception of a master race. Paul wrote to the Roman Church, saying, “*There is no difference. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:22-23), and it may well be that we who have been Christian for so long have much to learn from others who are latecomers to the fellowship of the faith. Just because we consider ourselves Christians, does not mean that we know it all. There are things we can learn, and some of these things can be learnt from people who have not been Christians for as long as us.

These are the original lessons of this parable, but there are three further points we can touch upon.

First, from these words of our Lord, we can see the *grace* of God. We can see that no matter when a man enters the Kingdom, late or soon, in the first flush of youth, in the strength of the midday, or when the shadows are lengthening, he is equally dear to God. There is an old saying that goes: “*Some enter the Kingdom in an hour; others hardly enter it in a lifetime.*” Some have borne the heat and the burden of the day, just like those in our text which had worked the longest; they have laboured most diligently all their lives, they have been diligent in all good works, and have left and denied many things for the sake of Christ’s name. Others have been converted later in life; they have spent a vast amount of their life following the vain dreams of the world. In the very evening of their life, they have heard and heeded the call of Jesus and don’t have much time left to show their faith. Yet so far as their relationship to God is concerned, they are on the same level as the first. Just like those whose labour is long and hard and tiring, they are saved by Christ alone through faith alone.

Here, also, is the infinite *compassion* of God. There is an element of human tenderness in this parable.

There is nothing more tragic in this world than a man who is unemployed, a man whose talents are going to waste because there is nothing for him to do. “**About the eleventh hour he (the landowner) went out and found some others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why are you standing here all day long doing nothing?’ They answered him, ‘Because nobody has hired us.’ He told them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’**” In his compassion, the landowner gave them work to do because he could not bear to see them idle.

Is this the way it is with us when it comes to working in God’s vineyard? The Christian Church is often pictured throughout the Bible as a vineyard. The Lord’s vineyard is painted as a picture of all the rich blessings of salvation, and the call is an invitation to come into the vineyard and to partake of its rich fruit. This is where God wants us to work. Instead of standing around idle, not doing any work, God has given us the task to take His Word to all the nations.² Even though we are sinners, and deserve nothing but eternal condemnation, nevertheless, God has shown His compassion to us and has invited us to share in this great work. Make no mistake about it, the almighty God who created the heavens and the earth and all that they contain could carry out this work all by Himself without any help from us. But in His grace and compassion, He has given us the privilege of being co-workers with Him. He has given us the opportunity to bring other sinners to the foot of the cross, to look up and see the Saviour hanging there also for them. Because God has done this, why should we remain idle?

² Matthew 28:19

Also, from this parable, we can see the *generosity* of God.

These men did not all do the same amount of work, but they did receive the same pay. There are two great lessons here. The first is that all service ranks the same with God. It is not the amount of service given, but the *love* in which it is given which matters. A man who has plenty may give us a gift of a hundred dollars, and in truth we are grateful; a child may give us a birthday or Christmas gift which cost only a couple of dollars but which was laboriously and lovingly saved up for - and that gift, with little value of its own, touches our heart *far more*. God does not look at the amount of our good works, for no amount of good works is enough to save us. Instead, it is faith in Jesus' work that saves. Christ has already won salvation for us and offers it as a free gift. Knowing this, we shall be compelled to do good works simply out of faith and love in our Lord, and when we die and face our Maker, we must not think that because we did so many good works, there assuredly is a place for us in heaven. Remember, Jesus said that not everyone who says "*Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 7:21). No! It is only faith in the Saviour that saves, through the grace of God.

This leads us to the second lesson, which is even greater - all God gives is of grace. We cannot earn what God gives us; we cannot deserve it; what God gives us is given out of the goodness of his heart; what God gives is not pay, but a gift; not a reward, but a grace.

Surely that brings us to the supreme lesson of the parable - the *whole point of work is the spirit in which it is done*. The servants are clearly divided into two classes. The first came to an agreement with the landowner "**to pay them a denarius a day**" and were sent "**into his vineyard**." They had a contract; they said as such, "*We shall work if you give us so much pay*." As their conduct showed, all they were concerned with was to get as much as possible out of their work. But in the case of those who were engaged later, there is no word of contract; all they wanted was the chance to work, and they willingly left the reward to the master.

A man is not a Christian if his first concern is what he can get out of it, of what's in it for him. A Christian works for the joy of serving God and his fellow men. That is why "**the last will be first and the first last**." Anyone who insists upon the recognition of his works and merit before the judgment of the Ruler will find himself woefully inadequate for the capturing of first place. Instead, this demand will result in a person being made the least and the last in the kingdom of God, with the danger of being lost forever.

Dear friends, we must work for the kingdom of God, and when we do, we must do so out of the joy of our heart, and out of love for our Lord. Our God is a God of love and goodness. It was His goodness that called us into the vineyard. It is His goodness that prompts the reward - grace from beginning to end. Open your hearts wide to receive God's bounteous grace. Throw off all self-righteousness and jealousy. Serve Him diligently in grateful and unselfish service, and let grace be the impelling force of your Christian life and your sweet comfort in death. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Heavenly Father, we worship You as the creator of all things and the preserver of our lives. In Your goodness You care for every one of Your creatures. We come before You in prayer with sincere and trusting hearts.

We thank and praise You for all Your goodness, but especially for the gift of Your only Son Jesus, whom You sent to suffer and die to rescue us from sin, and to rise again to guarantee the final crown of life for us in heaven. Through Him, we are Your children, enjoying the fullness of Your goodness and care. Give us firm faith in Your power and guidance, that we may continually trust You for all our daily needs, and carry out our daily tasks without worry about the future. No matter what may happen, give us the conviction that You direct all things in heaven and on earth by Your Word, and care especially for Your children.

Grant us Your grace that we may not live for the worthless values of this world or for the accumulation of wealth. We thank You for Jesus Christ, our most priceless treasure. Teach us to seek above everything else the blessings of Your kingdom in a life of loving obedience.

Make Christ's Word in all its richness live in our hearts and make us wise. Increase our love toward all people. Give us a special concern for those of the family of faith, and make us eager to help one another with our burdens and weaknesses. Fill Your Church with Your Spirit, that the compassion of Christ may be evident in the love and kindness we show to the fallen, the erring, and the heavy-laden. Let us never grow tired of doing good.

Grant that we, whose ears have been opened spiritually to hear Your Gospel, may speak it plainly to those who should hear it from us. Let Your light shine among the nations, so that the very ends of the earth may see Your glory, and people everywhere may learn to worship and serve You alone.

Bless our own country. May those in positions of government and authority honour You. May Your truth hold sway in politics, business, industry, education, and the mass media.

In every day's needs and crises, help all families with Your presence. Be with them in sorrow or joy, sickness or health, disappointment or success, and make them safe and content in Your love.

Continue to direct our lives in your loving providence. Give us opportunities to use your gifts as Your grateful stewards. Keep us in the faith by Your grace and power, that we may attain to eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)

Isaiah 55:6-9

⁶ Search for the LORD while He may be found! Call on Him while He is near! ⁷ Let the wicked person forsake his way, and the sinful man his thoughts! Let him return to the LORD, that He may have compassion on him! Let him return to our God! For He will abundantly pardon.

⁸ "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts are higher than your thoughts.

Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30

¹² I want you to know, my fellow-Christians, that what has happened to me has really turned out to advance the Good News. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear to the whole palace-guard and to all the rest that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ So, my chains have given most of the brothers in the Lord the confidence to speak the Word more boldly and fearlessly...

¹⁹ For I know that this will result in my deliverance, through your prayer and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, ²⁰ as I eagerly expect and hope that I shall in no way be ashamed but that, by speaking very boldly, I shall now, as always, glorify Christ in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I live on in my body, that will mean results from my labour. Yet I do not know which I should choose. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. ²⁴ However, it is more necessary for you that I should remain in my body. ²⁵ Since I am convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all, that you may progress and be joyful in the faith, ²⁶ that my coming to you again may cause you to rejoice more over me in Christ Jesus.

²⁷ Only let your conduct be worthy of the Good News of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am away, I may hear how you are, that you are standing firmly in one spirit and striving together with one mind for the faith of the Good News! ²⁸ Do not let those who oppose

you frighten you in any way! This is a sign for them that they will be destroyed and a sign that you will be saved, and this is from God. ²⁹ For it is God's gift to you concerning Christ, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake, ³⁰ since you have the same struggle as you have seen me have and as you now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20:1-16

¹ "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ² He agreed with the workers to pay them a denarius a day and sent them into his vineyard. ³ About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go into the vineyard! I shall pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So, they went.

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