

Sermon – Matthew 20.1-16 (Septuagesima – 2022)

Lord God, heavenly Father, through Your holy Word You have called us into Your vineyard: Send, we beseech You, Your Holy Spirit into our hearts, that we may labor faithfully in Your vineyard, shun sin and all offense, obediently keep Your Word and do Your will, and put our whole and only trust in Your grace, which You have bestowed upon us so abundantly; through Your Son Jesus Christ, that we might obtain eternal salvation through Him; who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

² "Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

³ "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace,

⁴ "and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went.

⁵ "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.

⁶ "And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?'

⁷ "They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.'

⁸ "So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them *their* wages, beginning with the last to the first.'

⁹ "And when those came who *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.

¹⁰ "But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.

¹¹ "And when they had received *it*, they complained against the landowner,

¹² "saying, 'These last *men* have worked *only* one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.'

¹³ "But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?'

¹⁴ 'Take *what is yours* and go your way. I wish to give to this last man *the same* as to you.

¹⁵ 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?'

¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed,

Today's general theme is God's grace. Grace means God's undeserved, unmerited love and favor. God's grace was one of emphases of the Lutheran Reformation: sola gratia, that is, we are saved by grace alone. Scripture is very clear about this. To the Ephesians, he wrote, "**For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast**" (Eph 2:8-9). It is by God's grace that He even desired to save us and it is by His grace that He sent His Son into the world to redeem us. The words of the hymn say it well, "By grace God's Son, our only Savior, / Came down to earth to bear our sin. / Was it because of thine own merit / That Jesus died thy soul to win? / Nay, it was grace, and grace alone, / That brought Him from His heav'nly throne."

Our salvation is totally a gift of God's grace; our works have no place in the attainment of the salvation of our souls. Those who put their trust in their works forfeit their salvation, as Paul says, "**You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace**" (Gal 5:4). Those who trust in their kindness, their good deeds, their piety, their faithfulness, are putting their trust in their own works, and therefore have fallen from God's grace. They have despised the free gift of salvation in Christ Jesus, and are under God's wrath.

It is this grace of God that is the focus of the parable in our Gospel reading. Because of the grace of the landowner he calls people to come and work in his vineyard. The reward the workers get at the end of the day is not dependent on their work, but again is a reward of grace, a gift given to them.

The meaning of the parable is that God, by His grace, has called us to come and live and dwell in His kingdom by faith. The reward that comes either at the end of our life, or on the day that Christ returns again, is a reward that is not earned nor is dependent upon our work in the kingdom, but the reward is a gift of His grace. The prize for all believers is eternal life with God, regardless of whether one was a Christian for 80 years serving the Lord faithfully all those years, or whether the individual was a deathbed convert, who had cursed and defied God most of his life.

This is grace alone! God loves us and goes to such tremendous lengths to save us who are completely unworthy! While we were still sinners, while we were still hostile and rebellious toward God, and while our sinful flesh was utterly offensive to His justice and righteousness, He loved us and sent His eternally begotten Son to suffer the justice we deserved, so that we may be saved eternally. We have come to know this. That is why we're Lutherans.

So then, what's the deal with all the working that is taking place in our Epistle and Gospel readings today? What is that work that those in the vineyard were doing? And what about Paul? He talks about disciplining the body, and fighting, and racing, and striving in order that he and us Christians may obtain the imperishable crown of eternal life.

This is the work, the striving, the fighting of holding on to the free gift of God's salvation. It is a fight of self-denial. Striving against our sinful flesh which would despise Christ and the

heavenly gifts that He has won for us.

You have probably heard of people who, after hearing that eternal salvation is a free gift of God's grace, reason that since salvation doesn't depend on works, we can do and live however we want, and we're still saved. Well, that is false. God's grace is not a license to sin. God gave His only begotten Son to suffer and die to save us *from* our sins, and to willfully continue in sin is to despise Christ and His sacrifice.

Paul, in the context of the epistle reading today, was talking about his freedom as a Christian. By God's grace He is free from sin, and free from the curse of the law. But this freedom doesn't mean that he can live however he wishes. It doesn't mean that he can indulge his sinful flesh. He said that if he were to do that, he would disqualify himself from receiving the prize.

Shall we despise the God's grace and His salvation, by serving sin? He saved us from sin and the laws condemnation. Shall we run back to our filth? What wickedness there is in our hearts that threaten our possession of that gift? Will you indulge? There's the selfishness, the pride, the lovelessness, the covetousness, the lying spirit, the laziness, the greediness, the lust, the self-righteousness, the destructiveness, the rebelliousness against God.

We are redeemed by the blood of Christ. We are regenerated by the waters of holy Baptism. We are given a new heart and new will by the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God! But, while we remain on this earth that horrible sinful flesh is still in us. How we hate it!

How we must fight against it. How we must mortify the sinful flesh. "By daily contrition and repentance we must drown the Old Adam with all its sins and evil lusts." This takes the fight, the determination, the perseverance of an Olympic athlete. This is part of our labor as we work in Lord's vineyard.

It's hard. Our sinful flesh is constantly enticing us. "Give up. Give in to the desires of your flesh. You deserve it. This is where you will find freedom. This is how you will find fulfillment. This is your right. This is your life. It won't hurt you. You can obey your flesh and still be saved. It's a gift."

Lies. Deadly and powerful lies. It is too much for us. We fail. Lord, help us.

The Lord is our Helper. He makes haste to help you. He is with you. God doesn't give you the free gift of salvation, and then leave you on your own to keep it, as though our striving and fighting is a requirement for the keeping of our salvation.

Salvation is totally a gift of God's grace. Our preservation in the faith is gracious work of the Holy Spirit, as we confess in the meaning to the Third Article of the Creed, "the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me the true faith, just as He calls, gathers, sanctifies the whole Christian Church and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." This is indeed a gift of God's grace, as Paul says, "**He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ**" (Phil 1:6).

He is your strength and life in the vineyard. He nourishes you with the gospel and feeds you with the body and blood of Christ to renew your strength. Though we get dirty with our sins, through the proclamation of your forgiveness, he makes pure and clean that baptismal robe of Christ's righteousness.

That vineyard is a blessed workplace. There, we have those free gifts of God's grace, forgiveness, righteousness, victory over sin, death, and the devil. And the Lord is there with us sustaining us and keeping us, so that when our last day comes, the Lord will give us the reward of His grace, the gift of eternal life Christ has won for us. That is the prize. Amen.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.