

Septuagesima
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

WORKING THE INNER VINEYARD

Exodus 17:1-7; I Corinthians 9:24-10:5; Matthew 20:1-16

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

The parable our Lord speaks to us today does not make a lot of sense in terms of the way people conduct business. The ones who work the longest, and presumably the hardest, get paid the same amount as those who do almost no work at all. It seems like it isn't fair. And in terms of the workplace it probably isn't fair and wouldn't work very well. Those who are hard workers would have no encouragement to continue working hard, and those who were lazy would have no incentive to improve. The failed communism of the Soviet Union showed us that when this sort of thing is put into practice it just doesn't work out too well.

But Jesus is not talking about how to run a business or improve labor relations. He is not concerned here with the way the world works. He is speaking about the Kingdom of Heaven, where no human being is able to earn and all is dependent upon Christ's giving. This parable, then, is not a story about working and earning, but a story about grace.

Now it is true that the workers in the vineyard were called into the vineyard to do work. And there certainly is work involved in the life of faith. But saving faith, that trust in Christ and His salvation, is not something that is easily quantified. And perhaps we should not try to quantify it. For in the end, one either has faith in Christ or one does not. In this world we speak about faith that is stronger or weaker, but once sin has been finally and completely removed and the sinful flesh put into the grave at death, the faith that is alive in the soul of the Christian is complete and untarnished. So here and now we can quantify faith to a certain degree, but in heaven we do not make such distinctions.

After all, it is not about what one has done, or about how much one's faith has accomplished, but is about Christ and what He has done and what His faith has accomplished. And so in terms of the grace all are equal, for there is one Christ of whom we all partake. As St. Paul says, "there is one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all..."

And here is the problem in the parable. Those who came into the vineyard early and worked the hardest, think they should receive a greater reward. But they don't. They receive the same denarius that is given to those who came in at the last hour. And Jesus, who is the owner of the vineyard, says to them: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" Both the vineyard and the denarius are Christ's. The reward is not earned, but given by grace to those whom He calls into His Church. Christ's reward is not given you on



the basis of how much volunteer time you have put in, or how faithfully you have tithed, or how religiously you have said your prayers. Such things are certainly pleasing to God, but they do not earn you a better place with Him. They do not improve upon the gift that Christ has already earned for you.

And so our Lord warns you Christians: "So the last will be first and the first last, for many are called, but few are chosen." Do not think yourself among the first, priding yourself on your faithfulness and efforts in the Church or in your life of faith. Claiming the grace of Christ, do not secretly be self-righteous. For if you think yourself something before God, you will be made nothing.

We have an example put before us today by St. Paul of those who thought themselves first, the Israelites at the time of the Exodus. Here was a people that had been called by God from out of slavery, had been singled out as His own special nation, had witnessed His presence and works to a degree unrivaled until the advent of Christ; and yet died in the wilderness in unbelief. They were the Church. They had the Word of God delivered to them by Moses and Aaron. They had been baptized in the sea. They had the sacramental presence of Christ with them in the cloud and in the spiritual food and drink they received; for St. Paul says: "all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ." So what went wrong? Being first, they became last. They did not put their trust in Christ or in His gifts. They wanted something else. They wanted to have God on their own terms or else to go back to Egypt. They rejected His grace in the end, preferring their own thoughts and ways. And so, St. Paul tells us: "But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness." These, Paul says in the subsequent verses became our examples so that we would not fall into the unbelief and sin the way they did. And he concludes by saying: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." Take heed lest you have been first in receiving Christ's grace make yourselves last in prideful unbelief.

And so we are to work, to labor, to struggle against the pride of our human hearts and the frailty of our sinful flesh. Paul says: "Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." The imperishable crown of life is already earned for you, now run, now fight, now discipline yourself, so that you do not lose it.

And so the labor that we are called to in the vineyard of God's Kingdom is not only an outward one of works, but an inward one, cultivating one's own soul. We are not to be lax in our faith. For though what we have is a gift from God, it is a gift that ought to be cherished and protected. The devil is trying with all his considerable might to turn you away from the grace of Christ. He would love to have you think highly of your spiritual maturity and progress and grow prideful in your faith. He would like to see you set yourselves over against others so that you can look down upon the struggles and sins of the lesser Christian. In fact He would like you to become so spiritual that you no longer need to hear God's Word so often, so that you no longer hunger for the sacrament, so that you put your trust only in the spirit within you or some other source of supposed spiritual nourishment. And of course the sinful mind and flesh are eager for this kind of spirituality, for they are always seeking to claim their place with God and over others. But Christ will not have that kind of faith in heaven. He has no place for those who put their trust somewhere other than Him.

And so the Christian must struggle against the devil and against the pride of the flesh, even in the realm of faith. We must open our eyes and see the reality of our condition before God. Of ourselves we have nothing of value to offer. We do no work that could not be accomplished by Him through others. Of ourselves we have no spiritual qualities in us that are superior to those of others.

Before God we must rather plead guilty of our sins and throw ourselves upon His mercy alone. For nothing else can save or help us. Knowing the frailty of our condition and the severity of our sinfulness we must say with the Psalmist: "The sorrows of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me." "Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!" And so we also pray with our fellow Christians: "O Lord, we implore you favorably to hear the prayers of Your people that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness, for the glory of Your name." We are not deserving, O Lord, but you have called us your people, and the gift is Yours to give, and the glory Yours also. And we recall that while God puts down the haughty, He "will save the humble people." He will be a refuge for the oppressed and we can put our trust in Him.

He has called us by His own name and made us His own special people. He has brought us out of the bondage of sin and death. He has led us through the sea on dry ground. His presence has been with us guiding and protecting. And He has feed us spiritual food and drink. But wait a minute, pastor, that sounds like what He did for the Israelites... Yes, and He has done the same for you. In Holy Baptism He has brought you out of Egypt and through the sea of death. He has put you safely on the other side already in the promised land of His Kingdom. He has been with you guiding and protecting through His Holy Word. And He has fed you in this wilderness with the heavenly bread of his flesh and the life-giving draught of His own blood.

And because of all that He has given you, you can put your trust in Him completely. You must struggle in faith, but you struggle with His help, not on your own. And so long as you struggle you are victorious. No, I do not mean that you will put down every sin and pass every temptation unscathed. I mean the victory is already yours in Christ.

For He also felt the sorrows of Sheol surround Him. He also was confronted with the snares of death. And He entered into that sorrow and overcame it. He took on those snares of death and burst them asunder! For having been crucified for your sins and for mine, He rose again victorious over them. Having paid their blood price completely, He destroyed their power utterly. Putting your hope and your pride in Him alone you have the victory too. Making yourself last through humble penitence, He will number you with the first. For not only will the first be last, but the last will be first.

Putting your trust in Him alone you will receive the promised denarius, no matter when you entered the vineyard no matter how much or hard you have labored. Therefore let us be thankful as we struggle. And let us work, labor, and struggle faithfully, seeking the grace and help of Christ, to whom belongs both the gift of grace and the glory of it. Amen.

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

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧