

✧ Jesu juva ✧

FAITH AND FIGHT

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

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

The parable we have just heard has much to teach. In this parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to a landowner. The kingdom is likened to a person because the Kingdom of Heaven is found in the person of Jesus Christ. He is both one who does the calling of the workers into His Kingdom, and who gives the reward at the end. He is both the source and the goal of the Christian Faith, which is what this parable is really about.

Now at various times during the day workers are called in. There are a couple of ways to look at this. In the ancient Church the various times of day were often interpreted as different stages in the history of the world. The early morning being from Adam to Noah, the third hour being from Noah to Abraham, the sixth from Abraham to Moses, the ninth from Moses to the coming of Christ; and the eleventh hour being the New Testament age. The application of this parable was thought to pertain, then, to the welcoming of the Gentiles into the Church, and the grumbling of the Jews who thought they deserved better reward than the Gentiles who came in at such a late time in the world's history.

I can see how this parable teaches this and see the value of the point made; but I myself, and many others including Luther and also many of the ancient fathers of the Church, have said the various times of the day pertain to the stages in a person's life, some coming into the kingdom as infants, in the early morning of life. The later morning is seen as childhood and adolescence, when people begin to have to deal with the "heat of the day" and the desires of the flesh. The sixth hour, noon, is early adulthood, the ninth hour, middle age, and the eleventh hour old age. And the point, of course, is that it doesn't matter at what age you become a Christian. And Christians should not begrudge those who have come in late at life their full share in Christ and His salvation.



But today I want to focus your attention on the ending of the parable. It is here that Jesus makes a rather startling and frightening statement: "For many are called but few chosen." Evidently this parable is about much more than the vari-

ous times at which a person might become a Christian. It is also about the fact that many who think themselves Christians, who believe they will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, are not really Christians and will not enter into Heaven. And so the lesson for you, who are rightly called Christians, is that you need to be careful to remain in the Faith and to maintain your faith so that you do not find yourself numbered with those who are cast out on the Day of Reckoning.

You see, in the parable, there is a problem with some of those who had come into the kingdom early on. We find them, at the time when they were to receive their wages, murmuring against the goodness of the landowner. And what do they say: "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." Not only do they speak against the one who brought them into the Kingdom and saved them, but also they exhibit their lack of faith by these words. Understanding that this vineyard is the Church, they should have rejoiced that they had for so long had a part in Christ's grace and salvation. But instead they forget about grace, and think only in terms of their works.

There is no doubt that living as a Christian is a life of labor. While faith is a gift, the life that flows from faith requires effort and struggle. The devil is always seeking to accuse you and bring you into despair. And the world is always trying to tempt and lure you to its way of life. But above all you must fight against your own flesh and the sin and unbelief that still dwells in it. You must bear the heat of it, so to speak, and not faint or grow weary in fighting. You must, as Paul says, "discipline your body and bring it into subjection". And Paul speaks of this as if you were in training for a marathon, running to obtain a prize. And in training you are not only to practice your running, but also to be temperate, in control of what you do and take in to yourself. And Paul speaks of this as a fight, one where you must fight with all your heart, not swinging wildly, but aiming and delivering your blows to the enemy.

And so there is work to be done in the Christian life. But do not for a moment think that your struggles to live in a faithful manner earn you a place in heaven. That is the mistake the early workers in the parable made. They forgot that the wage they were given was a gift to them, something far greater than what they could ever earn. And so they show that their faith was in their works and efforts, not in Christ. And so it is with many people who call themselves Christian, who think their salvation is in some way the result of their work and effort, something they deserve for the sacrifices they have made over the years and the struggles and battles they have undergone. And these will find that they are not Christians at all; for Christians put their faith in Christ, not in themselves or their own doings.

And this is something that we need to be on guard against, especially those of us who have been Christians our whole lives. Your faith and your salvation is and remains a gift of Christ, whose alone it is to give; for He alone has the right to it, earned through His faithfulness and sacrifice, His life, suffering, death and resur-

rection. And so He reminds us in the parable when the landowner says: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?"

But whereas we are never to trust in our labors, but in Christ alone; we are also never to give up laboring. The labors, remember, are not cause of our heavenly reward. But the life of the one who has been called to faith, is also to exhibit that faith in the way it lives. For this reason both Moses and St. Paul give us the example of the children of Israel who, though they had received such great miracles and such a great salvation from Christ, were found in the end to be without faith, and were condemned. We see a picture of this from Moses today who shows how contentious the people were against God. And Paul says "I do not want you to be unaware that 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. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness." They were certainly called by God, but in the end they proved themselves not to have been chosen.

And so Peter says in his second epistle: "Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (II Peter 1:10-11). And what are the things Peter says we should be doing? "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love." (II Peter 1:5-7)

And so we see today the two aspects of the Christian life: faith and fight. On the one hand faith always looks to Christ for salvation and strength. When Peter says add to your faith virtue, knowledge, self-control and the like, he is directing you back to Christ and His grace; for only by Christ's gift and the Holy Spirit's power will you be able to do these things. And so you are to return to Christ's grace through meditation on His Word, you are to seek His help by prayer, and you are to come to this place where He comes to bless you and be strengthened by Him. It is just as we chanted in today's Introit: "The sorrows of Sheol surrounded me, the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the Lord, He heard my voice from His temple" (Psalm 18:5-6).

Your flesh would have you do something entirely different! It would have you serve only its desires and seek its pleasures. But by the help of Christ's grace you are strengthened in faith and in the fight against the flesh.

And faith, once received, becomes active by the power of God it has been given. And so you are to fight with all your might, to work hard at faithfulness, to put off the desires of your flesh, to live in penitence and struggle against sin. And this is

not something that can be neglected. Sin, you see is not only something you do, it is a force within you seeking to draw you away from Christ and away from faith. And it can draw you two ways, either through licentiousness on the one hand or through prideful piety on the other hand. The one has no room for Christ because it seeks only pleasure and has made of it an idol. The other has no room for Christ because it thinks its own pious efforts worthy of God's acceptance and has made its own piety an idol. But both are sin. And both must be fought diligently.

Moreover, you are not to judge one another in these matters, but only yourself. St. Gregory the Great once preached: "What a man is today you can see, but what each one will be tomorrow no man knows. Often he that was seen to be behind us, has in his zeal in doing good come to outstrip us; and he who today we excel, tomorrow we may scarce follow... Let no one presume on his own salvation; for though he be called to faith, whether he is worthy of the eternal kingdom he knows not. .. [And] let no one presume to despair of his neighbor, whom perhaps he sees lying in sin; for he knows not the riches of divine mercy" (Gregory the Great, Sermon for Septuagesima, Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, 382-383)

And it is in this mercy alone that we must all put our hope. This mercy of Christ is the only thing that can make our calling and election sure. And it is freely given, just as the denarius was freely given to the workers in our parable today. It is bestowed not just at the Day of Reckoning, but now through Christ's word and through His supper, where the penitent receive forgiveness and are strengthened so that they might also live.

I'd like to close with a few more words from Gregory the Great: "What tongue can speak of the bowels of the divine mercy? What soul is not awed and the riches of the divine kindness... [Remember] that He sees our evil-doing, and suffers it in patience, that He is unmindful of our offenses, and with all this brings us through repentance to the final reward... Let us think of the great kindness with which we are suffered in patience; and let us consider what are the deep sources of the mercy of God, that not alone forgives our offenses, but having forgiven our sins, promises an eternal kingdom to those that repent" (Gregory, 384-385). And this deep source of God's mercy is Christ Jesus, who innocent Son of God who died that the guilty might live; to whom belongs all glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠