

Septuagesima
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Rev. David A. Kind
University Lutheran Chapel
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+ Jesu juva +

THE WORKERS AND THE WORK

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

They are paid their promised wages. So why do they murmur and complain? Were they shorted by the paymaster? Were they getting less than the going rate? Had they not gotten the amount they had agreed to? Indeed they had. They had not been cheated, but had been paid a full days wages as agreed to and at the going rate. No, they murmur because the steward has paid them all the same wage regardless of the amount of labor that was done. And these who complain had worked the longest. They had been called in the earliest part of the day, and had a right, they supposed, to more.

But they had forgotten just what their situation really was. They had been called early, it is true; but by having been called in early they were spared from the idleness, the uselessness and the anxiety of not having a job. The land-owner did not have to hire them. Evidently there was plenty of labor to be had. They had been graciously called and graciously paid. They had been hired for a good wage, and should have been happy for it.

Now recall that this parable is one about the Kingdom of Heaven and the wages of a life of faith and of the works done within that Kingdom. There is no question that works play a part of the Christian life. St. Paul says in Ephesians 2:10 that we have been “created in Christ Jesus for good works”. Likewise in Titus 2:14 he says that we are to be Christ’s “own special people, zealous for good works” and again a little later (3:8) that “those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works”. In fact we who are Christ’s are called to do several things. We are called to be faithful to His Word. We are called to do good to all men. We are called to love our fellow man and to love God. We are commanded to pray for all men. We are commanded to be charitable, etc. etc. Hence St. Paul describes the Christian life today in terms of its activity with images of running and of fighting and of disciplining one’s self.

The question this parable raises for us is this: What do the works of Christians earn for them? Many have said that the works of the Christian are counted toward their salvation. So basically Jesus does the main part by saving you from the power of sin, and then you complete the work by doing a certain amount of good works with His help. And if you fail to do enough good, well then you don’t get into Heaven (at least not right away). This, I say, is the theology of



those who complained against the landowner in the parable. And it is the natural theology of mankind, a theology which says that salvation must be earned in some way by those who get it. And those who do more should get more, and those who accomplish less, or who have put in less time, should get less. But this parable speaks against such notions. For the one who came at the end of the day is paid the same as he who worked since sunrise. Clearly the natural theology of man is wrong.

Salvation does not come from one's works. Not even the minutest portion of salvation can be attributed to your works. Why? Because your works are worth nothing before God. They are not pure. They are not without sin, and so even though they may be "good" in a relative sense they are not "good" in an absolute sense. Moreover God requires not just that each work you do actually be good; but that all of them be good. This is why St. Paul says quite clearly in Galatians 2 (:16) "a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ... for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."

Yet St. Paul also indicates that the life of faith in Jesus Christ is not just about receiving God's grace, but also about faith and faithfulness. He warns us today about the Israelites who died on the way to the promised land, condemned by God because of their unbelief. They had received abundant grace from God, but neither put their trust in Him nor pursued works that were pleasing to Him.

But this is not contrary to what was said before; for both faith and faithfulness are gifts from God and do not spring from our own works and efforts. Rejection of God and His gifts, licentiousness, sin, rebellion, unbelief - everything contrary to faith and faithfulness - these we have the power to do. But everything that is positive in God's eyes must be given us before we are able to please Him.

It can be confusing, I know. But consider what the Scriptures say. The book of Hebrews (12:20-21) says: "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead... make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight..." And St. Paul in Ephesians 2:10 (the passage quoted earlier) says: "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." And likewise in Galatians 2 (:24): "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." And our Lord Himself says (John 15:1): "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

So the works that you do as a Christian, whose works are they really? Are they yours? Or are they Christ's done in you and by you? Only through Christ do they ever become your works. Only by His grace are they performed in you and by you. And so we should listen also to what St. Paul writes in Philippians 2 (:13-14): "it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing..." It makes one wonder if the apostle didn't have this very parable in mind when writing those words.

And so we come to our situation; for the parable given by our Lord today is one about the Kingdom of Heaven, our Kingdom by God's grace. So what is your place in this parable? Many of you were called early as infants even, as was I. Others were called into the kingdom later in life; some of you are just being called into it even now. And what was our situation previous to this calling by God? It was not good. We were without hope for a future, with no way to gain entrance into God's Kingdom, with no works that we might do to please Him, with nothing and no ability with which to provide for our selves in matters of salvation and spiritual life. But now God has called us into His vineyard and has given us His grace. He has bestowed on us the gift of faith, the gift of a new heart and new spirit. And He has even given us the works to do and the grace and power to do them.

Let us not now imagine that all of this is somehow of us or of our doing. It is not. And so we have no right to grumble over our place in the Kingdom or over the amount of work we have been given to do, or over the lack of works done by others, or really over any aspect of the life of faith. For there can be no pressing of rights here. After all, were you the one who suffered and was crucified to atone for your sins? Were you the one who burst the doors of the tomb and conquered your death? You have only what you have been given. And these are not your things. They are Christ's to do with as He wishes. Let us not turn to evil in the face of His goodness and mercy toward us, lest we find ourselves counted among those who were called but not chosen.

And thanks be to God that your faith and even your works of faithfulness are not left up to you. If they were of your own doing, they would surely fail, and so would you. St. Jerome writes: "Let us keep before our minds the evil we have done; and 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, who not only forgives our offenses, but having forgiven our sins, promises an eternal kingdom to those that repent of evil-doing. And from the depth of every heart, let us cry out "My God, my Mercy".

Yes, Christ our Lord has been exceedingly and abundantly gracious and merciful to us. And by His grace working through the faith He has given you, and persevering in the faith you will receive the gift of salvation and of heavenly life that He wills to give. For Christ Jesus has done all for your salvation, dying and rising for you, calling you to His Kingdom, giving you both faith and faithfulness. Receive these gifts; and to Him be all thanks and glory. Amen.