

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Septuagesima

January 28, 2018

Text: Matthew 20:1–16

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

After a very long hiatus, the gesima Sundays have returned to our congregations. These 3, pre-lenten, Sundays are a transition out of the Christmas/Epiphany season into the Lenten/Easter season. Our focus and attention are beginning to shift from the birth and early life of the Lord Jesus to His work of saving the world through His perfect life, suffering, death, and resurrection. Today's collect beautifully sets the tone for today, Septuagesima, and for the next several weeks.

Let us pray. O Lord, graciously hear the prayers of Your people that we who justly suffer the consequence of our sin may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness to the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Do we, as God's baptized children, desire God's mercy or His justice? Or to put it differently, do we seek God's grace, His undeserved favor, or do we desire that He would be fair and equitable? Grace and mercy? Or justice and fairness?

Since we are in church, we're supposed to answer God's grace and mercy. We've been trained to think that way since Sunday School and catechism classes. But let's be honest with ourselves. We like the idea that everybody gets what they deserve. Don't we live our lives according to such thinking? Fair, decent wages for good, honest, hard work. The early bird gets the worm. A penny saved is a penny earned. Early to bed and early to rise. Aren't those the kinds of proverbial sayings that we use to teach our children (and ourselves) about the value of work, perseverance, and diligence? Sure we do. And well we should.

But when it comes to God, His works and His ways, I think we struggle with the teaching of grace and mercy. Today's parable from Matthew 20 is illustrative. Keep in mind the question. Do we want God's justice/fairness or His grace/mercy?

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard” (vs. 1). The master represents God. He seeks out laborers to work in the vineyard during the harvest. Don’t overlook the fact that the master is the one doing the seeking and hiring; the workers don’t go knocking on His door looking for him! At any rate, the master goes out to the marketplace and hires laborers early in the morning – the early bird catches the worm – for a denarius, a day’s wage. For the sake of ease, let’s say \$120. Twelve hours of work at \$10/hour. That’s the agreement.

In the parable, the master of the house goes out to the marketplace at various times in the day to hire more laborers. He hires workers at the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> hours, times roughly equivalent to 9 am, noon, and 3 pm. But with this group, there is no agreement made, just a promise (vs. 4), “You go in the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.” Notice the condition: the vineyard owner will give according to his own sense of justice, what he thinks is right.

Now the final group. The vineyard owner goes out again at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, roughly 5 p.m.; More work needs to be done. More workers will be sought. Sure enough he finds more standing idly around. “Why do you stand here idle all day?” They answer, “No one has hired us.” The owner says, “You go into the vineyard too.” No promises; just a call to the vineyard. Are they the lazy, rabble-rousers that nobody else wanted to hire? The late to bed, late to rise crowd not interested in catching the proverbial worm of prosperity? It’s fun to imagine them as such.

Things get really interesting in vs. 8. The foreman gathers the workers together in order to give them their wages. But the owner wants them paid in a particular order. Those hired last are paid first. Strange indeed! And then shocker of shockers. The workers who labored but one hour are paid a single denarius (vs. 9). That’s the amount of money the owner agreed to pay the workers hired early in the morning. Wow! A full day’s wage for one hour of work!! \$120 for an hour’s work!

Do you want God’s justice/fairness or His grace/mercy?

Can’t you just imagine these other workers making the logical conclusion about how much they will be paid? It’s got to be more than a denarius. I’ve worked 3 hours. Will he really pay me 3 denarii (\$360)? I’ve worked 6 hours, 6 denarii (\$720); I’ve worked 9 hours, 9 denarii (\$1,080)? I’ve worked 12 hours, 12 denarii (\$1,440). All that sounds fair. If that’s the hourly rate, then I should be paid for all the hours worked.

This is, in fact how they think according to vs. 10, “Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.” The master pays those who worked 12 hours the same as he paid those who worked but 1 hour, 1 denarius (\$120). The parable doesn’t tell us what the foreman paid the other groups; the implication is that they received a denarius as well. Regardless of the time or quality of work, all are paid the same. Does any of this sound fair and just?

This is a parable about God’s kingdom, not workplace ethics. And that’s where the rub comes in for us. We so naturally, maybe even innocently, foist worldly standards upon God’s kingdom. God’s grace and mercy, undeserved favor and kindness, are the primary characteristics of His heavenly kingdom. God the Holy Trinity desires to be merciful and gracious to us. His justice will be satisfied. Make no mistake about that. But we won’t be the ones to satisfy it. That must come from Someone else. But I’m getting ahead of myself a little.

Listen to the master’s response to the first group of workers, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (vs. 13–15).

Do we wish to grumble at God’s generosity? Complain about His grace? Do we dare make comparisons among ourselves? I was baptized when only a few days old. For some of you maybe just a few hours old. I’ve cut my teeth on a Lutheran church pew. Gone to catechism classes, memorized the catechism, was examined by pastor and congregation with great solemnity, served as congregational officers, worked on committees, served as ushers, cleaned the church, cut the grass, painted the walls, vacuumed floors, scrubbed toilets, brought food for potlucks and funeral luncheons, led VBS and taught Sunday School, raised my kids in the church, made them do all the things I did growing up in the church, I’ve prayed, fasted, given, lived a Christian life according to the 10 Commandments, sacrificed for the gospel, maybe even suffered for the name of Jesus. Surely I merit more of God’s grace and favor than the adult convert. More than the person who squandered his/her life in sin only to come to Jesus lately. I have borne the heat of a life lived in God’s kingdom while others haven’t lived and worked nearly as long or hard. Do we not relate to that first group, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

The fact of the matter, dear saints of God, is that none of us deserve to be workers in God's kingdom. Our heavenly Father calls us into His Church as a sheer act of grace. What we deserve from God, according to His strict judgment, is His fierce wrath and judgment. "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? (Ps. 130) Do not seek God's justice in matters related to His heavenly kingdom. Seek His grace. The same grace that gives forgiveness and salvation to the life-long Christian and to the late-in-life Christian and everybody in between.

The price of our salvation – the denarius in the parable – is the precious blood of Jesus shed on the cross to appease God's wrath against our sin. Our Lord's perfect life and innocent, suffering and death are the ground and foundation for our salvation. In fact, what Jesus did in living and dying for us is the only payment that secures God the Father's grace and favor. Our work in the kingdom, whether long or short, does not earn the denarius of salvation. That comes from Jesus alone who died for you, who lived righteously that you might be righteous, who graciously and completely earned salvation for us. "But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared" (Ps. 130).

Because of His Son Jesus, God the Father desires to be gracious and generous to all. "Salvation unto us has come, by God's free grace and favor" is what we sang with such gusto at the beginning of the service. Grace and favor established in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The hymn continued, "Good works cannot avert our doom, They help and save us never. Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone, Who did for all the world atone; He is our one Redeemer" (LSB 555:1).

What Christ's atonement means is that our entire life of faith is one of receiving and living in God's grace and favor. All Christian faith and devotion flows from this atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Our desire to keep the 10 commandments, our willingness to live righteously, to serve graciously our neighbor, to suffer patiently, and to die faithfully comes from the unmerited grace given to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Live in God's favor. Receive His generosity. And rejoice when others receive it too. "Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone And rests in Him unceasing..." (LSB 555:9).

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.