

Septuagesima  
5 February, Anno Domini 2023  
St. Matthew 20:1-16

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

Workers in the Lord's vineyard,

What does God owe you? What is right? That is the question that is put before us today. There are two ways to answer, two means of measuring how you should be paid.

The first is against the work orders you have been given - the Ten Commandments. Jesus said to the rich young ruler who asked what must be done to inherit eternal life "What do the commandments say? Do this and you will live." If you obey the commandments and do the work you agreed to do - all of it perfectly - you will be rewarded according to the contract. If you keep your end of the bargain you will receive your wages. That's how economies and businesses are run.

Have you kept up your end of the deal? Have you labored faithfully in the master's vineyard? Have you reconciled with your neighbor? Have you always cheerfully given your very best efforts to your employer or employees? Do you daily study the Word of God and call out to Him with petitions and thanksgiving? We certainly want to think of ourselves as good and faithful stewards, hard and productive workers. Perhaps you have served diligently in the church sitting on boards and committees, volunteering countless hours, teaching Sunday School, going to conferences. Maybe you see that you have with very rare exception been in the Lord's house every Lord's Day or been consistent and generous with your offering. Perhaps you have given a great deal of time to your community to help those in need. The Lord certainly did not claim that the workers hired first didn't do the work. He gave them their wages just as they had agreed - nothing less and nothing more. "Take what belongs to you."

But that was it. Having received their wages they were told "Go." In other words, "Leave the vineyard. Leave my presence. You no longer have a share in this vineyard. Depart from me." If all you desire from God is what you deserve, what you have worked for and earned, on the Last Day you will receive it. You will be rewarded according to your works. And St. Paul tells you exactly what that is - "The wages of sin is death." You may have indeed worked hard and tried to be a good person. But you still have not met the requirements of the Law to receive eternal life. You have only paid lip service to God by trusting in your own works rather than in His mercy. And any work done outside of faith in Christ is sin as the Holy Spirit clearly teaches in Romans 14 when He causes Paul to write "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." You assume that you have earned His mercy and a place in the vineyard because you did something. You arrogantly

believe that you deserve to be invited to work in God's kingdom in the first place, let alone receive further rewards. That's the problem. We are more concerned with the reward than with being in the vineyard at all. We obsess over the denarius when God has already gifted the kingdom. The workers hired first hated that the Master wanted to be generous and merciful with what was His. They didn't like that He took just as much joy in those who came late and those whose works weren't as grand as theirs. They didn't want sinners and those weak in the faith and those who didn't have to bear the same crosses to enjoy the kingdom of God.

But, what more could the Lord give you than to invite you into His vineyard, His kingdom? What greater gift could He bestow than all His goodness and tender mercy? The first concern of the Master clearly isn't the vineyard itself. It's the workers and the fact that they aren't in His vineyard. He wants them there! He wants sinners to be in His kingdom! That's why He returns again and again and again to see if there are more standing idle in the market place. Of what real business value are workers who only work for an hour? They are barely trained by the time the whistle blows.

But that's not how the kingdom of heaven works. God's concern is that you are in it. No one deserves to be in it. It doesn't matter if you were baptized as an infant or only come to faith on your death bed. No one deserves salvation and therefore all must receive it as gift. No one was invited in because of work they had done. They were idle. The invitation is the Master's mercy. You can imagine that the Master went out every day inviting workers into His kingdom. He continues to go out, day after day, calling out to those wasting away trading in their own unrighteousness in the world's marketplace. He gives them a place in His vineyard of life, producing works that are truly good and truly beneficial because these works are fruits of His mercy, done by those who know their place in the vineyard was a gift to them.

That brings us to the second way to think about what God owes you, what is right. By doing the works of the Law perfectly in hand and heart and then bearing the full heat of God's wrath against your failure to, Christ Jesus has earned for you a kingdom of life and salvation. By His work, you who would be mere workers are made sons who will inherit this kingdom. As the Baptized with God as your Father, you are owed all the rights of sons of the Most High. You certainly didn't earn these things they were given to you. But you are urged to lay claim to them and make full use of them. You are in the kingdom of God! All things are yours because they are your Father's! God withholds no good thing from you.

This is the only right way to consider your place in the kingdom. All that you have from God is pure gift, even the faith that trusts that what God has promised is true. You earned none of it. You deserve none of it. It is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." What you deserve is God's wrath against your sinful works. But what God

freely gives is forgiveness and eternal life, a place in His kingdom and a seat at His banquet table. God wants you to have what He toiled and suffered to earn. Day after day as His Word is proclaimed, He issues the invitation again, declaring that His forgiveness is available to all who repent, even those who once left the kingdom because they then hated His generosity or because they were lured back to the marketplace. To you He calls as well “You go into the vineyard too and inherit the kingdom I have prepared for you from before the foundation of the world.”

And then what joy to be invited to labor in that kingdom - to love and to forgive, to share in burdens and tears and laughter, to pray and to sing. Most certainly we don't remain idle in God's kingdom. God's kingdom is busy. We are to be about the work of the vineyard that our Lord has given us to do - not because our work earns us the kingdom but because faith is always busy in love. Faith is always busy receiving what God gives and sharing with our neighbor the love and mercy we have received. And what do vineyards produce? Wine which gladdens men's hearts. And what wine gladdens men's hearts more than the Blood of God's Son which quenches our thirst for righteousness?

To you this day God says “Go into the vineyard and drink deeply of its fruits.”

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.