

Septuagesima

28 January, Anno Domini 2024

St. Matthew 20:1-16

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

Blessed and beloved laborers of the Lord's vineyard,

By your Baptism you have been called out of the idleness and vapid selfishness of unbelief and into the rich and fulfilling and blessed work of the Lord's vineyard. In the devil's kingdom there might be a lot of working but it serves no real purpose because in the devil's kingdom your efforts are focused on trying to accomplish the demonic and useless work of promoting yourself rather than the loving and life-giving work of Christ. It might be that you are striving to simply make yourself better because you believe that is your responsibility. Or perhaps you are working to make other people think better of you or be impressed with you. Or, worst of all, maybe you are slaving away aimlessly spending time and energy and resources trying to prove to God that you really are good so that He won't hold your failures against you or reject you because of your weaknesses.

Don't get me wrong. Working hard is good. It is even necessary. The apostle James writes in no uncertain terms that faith without works is dead. There is no idleness in the kingdom of God. Faith is busy. Each and everyone of us are appointed to our vocations and stations in life. Living life according to faith and the Ten Commandments doesn't leave time for idleness. Notice what Luther puts

at the end of the Small Catechism - the Table of Duties. But good, God-pleasing work that is filled and blessed with joy is not work that you do to promote yourself.

At the time of the Reformation, the papists accused the reformers of teaching against good works. They claimed that telling a person that they were saved by faith apart from works is to tell a person that they are free to abound in sin and have no obligation to do good works. Indeed, in the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent it is decreed “If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ’s sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified; let him be anathema (that is cursed, eternally condemned).” (Canon XII) Later, as Pietism, which is simply works righteousness by another name, threatened to swallow up the true faith, those who held that salvation is only by faith in the forgiveness of Christ were accused of obsessing over right teaching to the exclusion of good works. That is absolute rubbish! There is nothing that teaches the proper role of good works more soundly and in such a way as to elicit truly good works, that is, good in God’s eyes, than the true Christian confession to which we hold.

The one who has been invited by the Gospel into the vineyard of God’s grace and mercy, who is fully assured in his heart that his sins are forgiven entirely on the basis of Christ’s works and that there is nothing left for him to add to his salvation, is precisely the one who rejoices to take up his work in the vineyard! His work is no longer filled with the hopelessness of attaining enough goodness. Instead, he knows that God has made him good and that being in the vineyard is salvation itself. He isn’t working to get himself there. The first workers called in today’s parable got into the vineyard the same ways as those who came at the 11th hour. They were invited. All were idle in unbelief until they were brought into the

vineyard. Your works can't MAKE you good. Rather, your works are made good by Christ's work of pulling you out of the devil's kingdom, cleansing you from the death of your sins, and declaring you righteous and holy on account of His death. The works of Christians are counted as good by God because they are done by those whom God first made good through forgiveness. The life you live you live by faith in the Son of God and it is He, by His Spirit, who works good in you and through you.

Children of God, there is nothing left for you to strive after. Made new and good in Christ, you can gladly use your talents and abilities, your money and time, your strengths and even your weaknesses to benefit those around you. Lord willing, you will be blessed to be the means by which Christ draws others out of the darkness of the devil's marketplace into the joy of the His vineyard. That's why this is such a beautiful and intensely important parable from our Lord. It teaches us to rightly distinguish between the Law and the Gospel and to properly understand the role of good works in the order of salvation according to God's Word.

The Gospel is that you have been invited into the kingdom. It's not the denarius at the end of the day. The Gospel is that God doesn't leave you to languish and die eternally in the marketplace where everything you do has no true purpose and is not pleasing to God, where even those things that you and the world judge as your best works are filthy rags, where the most glorious deeds are sin because they do not proceed from faith but from the vain notion that anything is good apart from faith in Christ. (Romans 14:23) None of the workers merited the invitation. How could they? None of them had worked. They were dead, doing nothing. That is what unbelief is - death, separation from God. Christ beautifully and clearly teaches on this in John 15 when He says "I am the true vine, and my Father is the

vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” (John 15:1-6)

All who think that their works contribute in any way to their salvation believe that they deserved to be in the kingdom by their own merits and that the denarius is the Gospel that is only obtained at the end of the day, their reward from God for their righteousness. They are the ones who grumble at the master of the vineyard because they think that their works are something He should take note of. They believe that they are better than those who originally rejected the invitation and only heeded it later. The first workers don't care anything for the vineyard or its fruit, namely the wine of Christ's righteousness that makes glad the hearts of men. They only care about getting the reward for what they put in.

That is absolutely NOT the Christian faith. And all who believe and teach that WILL receive from the Lord exactly what they have earned and then be cast out of the vineyard at the end of the day into the outer darkness where not a drop of God's goodness or mercy will ever be found.

Being in the Lord's vineyard is a blessing. It is life and salvation. It is the vineyard which has been planted by Christ's scourged, beaten, and pierced body. As the psalmist writes “The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their

furrows.” (Psalm 129:3) It is watered with His Blood and we who have been called into it are invited to drink deeply of its fruits. That there is a vineyard and that we have been invited into it - that is Gospel; that is the great good news that the Lord proclaims again to you this day.

And we are blessed to labor in this vineyard knowing that in the Lord our labor is NEVER in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58) Sometimes, even often, the labor does require sweat and blood and tears, even as Christ planted it with His own sweat and blood and tears. Sometimes we don't see the fruits of the labor as we labor on this side of glory. Sometimes we grow faint and tired. Not all, perhaps even most of the work, is not glorious nor does it garner the attention that our flesh and the world would like. Quite often the labor goes completely unnoticed or is even despised by the world. Sometimes your denarius for your labor is ridicule and persecution from those who still despise the Lord's gracious invitation. But that is all okay. You are still in the vineyard. We only plant and water. It is God according to His infinite wisdom who gives the growth. As the apostles writes to the church at Corinth “He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellows workers. You are God's field, God's building.” (1 Corinthians 1:8-9) In the immediate context, Paul was speaking of the Office of the Holy Ministry but the same certainly holds true for all Godly vocations. Do what you are given to do where you are given to do it and let God worry about the outcome. Again, your labor in Christ will never be in vain. There is nothing left you have to worry about gaining or accomplishing for yourself because in Christ, you already have all things. Christ and His kingdom are your joy, your inheritance, and your great reward and nothing can even begin to equal that!

But what is the work of this kingdom? First and foremost it is to receive the the fruits of the kingdom. Christ says to those who ask about doing the works of God “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (John 6:29) The chief work of everyone called into the vineyard is faith, placing all your hope and trust in Christ alone and despairing of all your works and the wisdom of men. Believe in Christ. And you can only do that, or, more properly, that can only be worked in you through the word of Christ. Therefore you MUST be a hearer of the Word - daily. You must hear God’s holy Law and have your Old Adam daily be put to death. You must hear the absolution of Christ and be drawn back to the promises of your Baptism. You must take and eat the food which Christ gives which strengthens you in the true faith and in fervent love toward one another. Devote yourself to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers. Having been forgiven you must forgive all who trespass against you. You must pray and seek from God all wisdom and understanding and commend your whole body, soul, heart, and mind to His Word and Spirit who equips you with strength and makes your way straight and blameless.

It is these works which prepare you for the works which move outward toward the neighbor. Truly, it is impossible to love your neighbor without them. Here you consider your stations in life according to the Ten Commandments. Receive the teaching and admonition of your pastor and support the work of your church to preach the Gospel to all sinners and to care for the poor, the sick, the widowed, and the orphaned. Pray for those in authority and submit yourself to them in faith until they command you against the word of God. Then be prepared to suffer for your confession as did your Lord and patiently endure injustice as you commend yourself to God. If you are a husband love your wife as Christ loves the Church, sacrifice yourself for her, be faithful to her and honor her in the eyes of all, pray

with her and for her, read the Word of God to and with her and talk about it together. It is your duty and joy to bring your family to church to be with Christ every week and receive life and salvation from Him. If you are a wife place yourself under the authority of your husband in faith as you do to your Lord. Receive his headship, his protection, and his provision with joy as the Church receives these things from Christ. If you are blessed to be parents, above all, make Christ the center of your family's life through family devotions and training in godly virtues. Do not let the unbelieving world teach or raise your children for that is to let the devil teach and raise them and you can be certain that he will only teach and raise them away from you and from Christ. Make your home a fortress for the oppressed and a place of mercy and peace. Be teachers of all that is good and holy and pure. Be in church weekly and teach your children to love and seek out the precious gift of confession and absolution.

If you are children, receive the authority and instruction of your parents with joy and humility as from the Lord God Himself. Do not despise or anger them. Learn cheerfully from them. Pray for them. Approach your studies with diligence and humility as the Lord is training you for further work in other vocations in His kingdom.

If you are a worker, work faithfully and cheerfully at the task before you as you would for the Lord, freely from the heart, not simply so that someone will take notice and give you a gold star. Employers, likewise treat your employees with honor and respect and do not abuse your authority. You know that you both are under God's authority and that He always uses His authority to bless you and do you good. Rather be a blessing to those who work for you and seek their good.

And let us all be careful not to take pride in our work in such a way that we look down upon those who have not suffered as we have nor who are able to “do as much” as others. It is easy for those who have labored harder or longer to grumble against those who have not and yet still enjoy the same blessings of the kingdom. It is demonic arrogance to see as inferior the laboring of the infant lying in the crib, the toddler who can’t seem to do much more than get in the way and slow you down, the disabled whose minds and bodies we measure to be less capable than our own, the elderly whose bodies have suffered the decay of life and can no longer do the heavy lifting. Shame on us for imagining that our work is better or that their labors are just not as pleasing to God or important. Just because a person either doesn’t have the ability or the opportunity to do the same works we may be given to do, doesn’t mean their works aren’t equally as precious in the sight of God. Indeed, the moment we think that, our works are cast onto the dung heap of hell. If we would think that of anyone in the kingdom of God, take a moment to consider how incapable, foolish, and worthless we are next to the holy angels let alone God Himself. Yet God does not despise the works of His children! He delights in them and rejoices in them and even rewards them even though they deserve nothing and accomplish nothing without His blessing.

How foolish of the first laborers to grumble at the master’s generosity! They had been blessed to be enjoying the richness of the vineyard longer than those who came later. They had been blessed to not suffer as long under the emptiness and hopelessness and darkness of the devil’s kingdom as those who came at the 11th hour. What is a denarius compared to that? And yet God even still gives the denarius. Your works of faith are noticed and rewarded by God! To slaves who owe Him every ounce of obedience and trust and faithfulness and yet who bring Him such imperfect and impure works as ours, God gives rich blessings and



rewards. When we seek to order our lives, our homes, and our churches according to the Word of God there is certainly great reward. There is peace and joy even when there is hardship. There is mercy and forgiveness when there is sin. There is the promise of god's blessing and presence.

You, dear Christian, by God's mercy have been called to labor in His kingdom. You have been called out of the darkness of unbelief and in the waters of Holy Baptism you have been made a child of God, blessed to be about the work of your father completely free of the need to try to earn His love because you have it in all its fullness. May God the Father bless each of us with joy as through our labors, as small and insignificant as they may seem, as unnoticed as they may go, He carries out the glorious work of growing His vineyard and filling it with more laborers. May we repent of our desire for glory and our dissatisfaction with the gifts God has given and the stations to which He has called us and may we be filled with the constant and fervent desire to work always and only to the glory of Him who has called us into His vineyard.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.