

Many members. One body united in Christ.

Septuagesima

St. Matthew 20:1-16

25 January, Anno Domini 2026

Beloved workers of the Lord's vineyard,

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

The kingdom of man is a kingdom of winners and losers. Someone always has to come out on top. The company that produces the higher quality car for the lower the price, wins the lion's share of profits. The athlete that puts in more time at the gym and spends more time studying the techniques and weaknesses of his opponent will get more playing time and be the desire of coaches and sponsors everywhere. But only one wins. There is one president. There is one Super Bowl champion. There is one CEO. There is one valedictorian. Many others will work hard – and most will end up with nothing and it will seem unfair. This world runs on principles of rewards and consequences. It invites ruthless competition. The lust for victory and gain drive some to cheat, to steal, to play dirty, and even to kill.

The kingdom of heaven is nothing like the kingdom of men. It is a kingdom of grace where merit and reward are meaningless. It is like a man who has a vineyard to tend and harvest. That's what matters. There is seed to be sown, tender shoots to nurture and train, more mature vines that have fruit to be harvested and are still in need of pruning. There are children who daily need to learn the Scriptures, to be prayed for, and taught how to pray; who need to be shaped and molded into the image of Christ and trained to be faithful hearers of the Word, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, citizens and workers. There are boards and committees that need to be run so that the congregation can faithfully and as a good steward provide for Christian preaching, the distribution of the Lord's sacraments, the care of the poor. There are sermons and Bible classes to be prepared so that the faithful might continue to make the good confession of Jesus Christ in a dying world filled with false doctrines, and slipping ever faster into the darkness of hell. There are shut ins who need comforting and encouraging. There are dying who need the cross of Jesus held before their closing eyes. There are breakfasts, lunches, and dinners to be made, diapers to be changed, neighbors to be served. There are prayers to be prayed, responses to be sung, readings to be heard, offerings to be given.

And so the first workers had agreed to do for their wages. And while they think they have negotiated a great deal, they show their arrogance and ingratitude in the end. They fail to acknowledge the grace of the One who invited them to work in His vineyard in the first place. They had nothing before – no prospects, no interviews, no unemployment insurance to draw on. They think they have deserved anything from the master. In fact, they think they should receive more than what they agreed to, as though they actually worked harder. They believed their reward should be measured by the work of another.

And if we do the things the owner of the vineyard has called us do, if we sweat and toil, if we show up more than the next person, we think our wages should be higher, we should receive greater honor and more recognition. God should love us more because we have earned it. We have obeyed more, given more, and loved more. That's how we work. Repent.

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Standing in stark contrast to our greed is the master's mercy. He WANTED to pay everyone a good wage. Their work didn't matter. His generosity did. The Lord Jesus wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth – it's we who hesitate. He wants every last sinner to know and believe that He has shed His blood for their sin, that He will provide for all their needs of body of soul. His eyes are not like ours, judging by what we see, judging by the output of the individual. If we believe in any way that we are more worthy of being saved, if we think that our sacrifices have been greater, if we believe that we have tried harder and contributed anything to our redemption from sin, death, and the devil, then we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Not a single one of us is worthy of the Body and Blood of Jesus, except the one who knows that he is completely unworthy, the one who knows that there is nothing about him or anything that he has done to merit such love and grace. For I want you know brothers and sisters that all of us were under the Law and all of us were baptized into Christ Jesus in the water and the Word, and we all eat the same Spirit-filled food the same Spirit-filled drink because we all drink from the same Spirit-giving Rock who is Christ. Together, young and old, rich and poor, men and women – we receive these gifts that are freely given to us. But they can be taken away and they will be if we take them for granted, if we no longer treasure them as the means of God's grace, if we approach them as though we have earned the right to receive them or to reject them. We can be overcome again by sin and death and fall in this world if our hunger and thirst for God's grace dries up and we grow callous to it, foolishly imagining that we no longer need it.

The Gospel proclaimed and administered in our midst is not a reward or wage or a trophy earned. It is the very author and finisher of our salvation. These priceless treasures are given to the losers - those who know and confess that they have done absolutely nothing to earn them, who look back at the time they spent in the field and acknowledge that they spent a lot of time leaning on the shovel, stealing fruit, and gossiping about their fellow workers. They are the repentant tax collectors, prostitutes, drug-addicts, murders. They are the repentant gossips, lusters, and coveters. They are the ones who do not turn up their nose at the condemnation of the Law but humbly say "Amen. That is me. That is who I am if not in deed, most certainly in thought. I have been loveless and merciless. I have refused to be reconciled to my neighbor. I have been angry. I have been lazy. And I should be cast out of the vineyard." The Gospel is for you.

The mercy of God is for fools, not for those who are wise in their own eyes. The mercy of God is for you and it is freely offered to you. He gives you what you never helped to produce. This vineyard is the product of His sweat, blood, and tears. He gives you the entire vineyard, every blessing of His kingdom. Though we once in our sin only despised God's Word and spent our days being about the business of the tyrant of hell, bearing fruit for his kingdom of darkness and selfishness, Jesus called us into His field. Jesus has made you alive by the water that He poured out of His pierced side even though you worked as hard for it as the infant who couldn't even bring himself to the font. Without asking for so much as a penny, Jesus nourishes you with the Body and Blood that now sit at the right hand of the Father and that will soon be seated upon this altar to be given as true food for you.

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Having received such heavenly treasures from the pure and underserved mercy of God, what joy it is to be about the work of such a kingdom! It is joyous work because it flows from the full certainty of Jesus' love and our place with the saints around Jesus' throne. Our lives are spiritual sacrifices not for our benefit, but for our neighbor's. They need our toil and sweat. We need Jesus' toil and sweat who in grace has run the race, done the work and given all the benefits to us. Come, receive the full reward of Christ's work for you, the free gift of the forgiveness of all your sins, rescue from death and damnation, and the peace of God which passes all human understanding.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

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