

1 Septuagesima – Matthew 19:16-20:16

The law will always tell us what we lack. It will show that we don't want to give up our bragging rights. It will leave us only with what is ours as it sends us away with nothing but sadness and condemnation. But the gospel is a free gift. And it turns everything in this life – both the good things as well as the seemingly bad things – into gifts as well. All the duties in this life, all the trials and afflictions, all the joys and hardships – they are all free gifts of God centered in the precious gift of eternal life earned for us by Jesus Christ and proclaimed in his gospel. Those who don't trust this gospel will see their hard work and toil as their own merits, and they will not be able to give them up. But those who cling to this gospel will not cling to their own works. They will gladly count it all as loss for the sake of Christ and his righteousness, which covers all their sins. Those who are under the law will always look at God's gifts with envy. Those who rely on the gospel will be satisfied with much more than they deserve.

Jesus tells a parable about an owner of a house who hires people to work in his vineyard. He first hires people early in the morning, agreeing with them on a denarius for their wages. He then goes out several times throughout the day and hires more people, all the way to the last hour of the day. He gives everyone his wages, starting with those who were hired last. He gives them each the same thing: a denarius, a full day's wage. Those who were hired early in the morning were upset about this, and they grumbled at the owner of the vineyard for treating them like those who only worked one hour. Jesus ends his parable by saying, "In this way, the last will be first and the first last."

Jesus tells this parable immediately after a conversation he had with a young man. The man said to Jesus, "Teacher, what good thing should I do to get everlasting life?" The man is asking Jesus about how he can earn eternal life. Of course, no one can earn eternal life. It's impossible. So Jesus tells him that if he wants to enter into life then he should keep the commandments. The man asked a question about the law, so Jesus gave him an answer about the law. If you want to talk about earning eternal life, then you need to look to the law. The law requires complete obedience. Love your neighbor as yourself; don't murder, commit adultery, or steal. As a good teacher, Jesus is leading this young man to a very important and sad conclusion. You see, the man claims that he has kept all these things from his youth. He is like those workers who were called into the vineyard early in the morning, bearing the heat of the day for hours and hours. It's here when Jesus tells the rich young man that he lacks one thing. He says, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have, give the money to the poor, and you'll have a treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me."

The law requires much more than just outward obedience and outward work. It requires perfect love and devotion to the Lord. This young man had gained a lot already. He was outwardly obedient to the law, and it had gone well for him. He had acquired great wealth through it all. But he couldn't stand before the most important requirement of the law. He wasn't able to give up everything he had. In other words, he couldn't count all of his accomplishments, all of his earnings, as nothing before God. Jesus tells the man to give all his money to the poor. Jesus cares about the poor. He doesn't say, "Give all your money to me." He doesn't want the man's money. No, Jesus wants him. The law not only requires you to love your neighbor. But it also teaches you that all you have earned and stored up – every bragging

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right you have accomplished for yourself – is worth nothing before God. God’s law requires complete devotion from the heart, soul, and mind.

The rich young man walked away sad, because he had a lot of wealth. It’s difficult especially for those who have lots of money to enter heaven. No one can, by his own strength, sincerely say with Job, “Naked I came into this world, and naked I will go out. The LORD giveth; the LORD taketh away. Blessed be the name of the LORD!” This is because money is a powerful force. It’s very difficult not to depend on it and worship it. In fact, it’s impossible to give it up. But with God all things are possible.

After this, Peter pointed something out to Jesus: “Look! We gave up everything and followed you. What will we get?” Peter was right. He and his fellow disciples left their jobs when Jesus called them. They had been with Jesus from the very beginning of his earthly ministry. They had been traveling with him the whole time. They were like those hired to work in the vineyard early in the morning. Therefore, speaking on behalf of the rest of the disciples, Peter asks, “What will we get?”

It's at this point when Jesus gives three promises. First, he promises that those who follow him will be highly exalted with him on the last day. He talks about them sitting on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. This is a great mystery, which we won't fully understand until the last day. But it gives us a glimpse into how great our heavenly inheritance will be. How many of you think you are wise enough to judge like this? St. Paul tells us that we are going to be judging angels (1 Cor 6). Are we qualified for such great things? Certainly not in our own reason and strength. But our wisdom is not found in our own understanding. Our wisdom is in Christ. His cross, which this dying world calls foolish, is the wisdom and power of God to us who are being saved. It seemed unjust for the owner of the vineyard to give a day's wage to those who only worked one hour. But what the world counts as fair and just is nothing but foolishness in the sight of God.

The second promise Jesus gives is that he will compensate them a hundredfold for what they have lost when they followed him. If they lost brothers and sisters, father, mother, or children – if they have lost land – then Jesus will give them a hundred times more brothers and sisters, father, mother, and children. In other words, Jesus isn't going to leave you alone while you are working in his vineyard. While you are bearing the heat of the day, being mocked and threatened by the world, which looks down on you for confessing your Savior – even if your family members abandon you and call you foolish for following Christ and clinging to his Word – your Lord will not leave you there alone. No, he is always out searching for more people to call into his vineyard with you. He is so generous that he won't stop bringing in more servants to bear the heat with you, confessing the same gospel with you, taking comfort in the same promise with you. He will keep providing you with fellow Christians, brothers and sisters in Christ who bear your burdens, fathers and mothers in the Lord who remind you of the wisdom of God's salvation. And he will provide a place for you to gather, whether it is here in this place, in someone's house, or in someone's basement. He will not let you bear your cross alone. As surely as he himself remains with you in his Word and Sacraments, he provides for you the mutual conversations and comfort of fellow Christians. He is so determined to provide you with these people that he doesn't stop until the eleventh hour. So when your eyes are about to

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close in death, he surrounds you with the fellowship of the saints who sing hymns to you, speak the gospel to you, and confirm you in the sure promise of your inheritance.

The third thing Jesus promises is eternal life. This is truly the entire package. It's the main gift. Some Christians are entrusted with more responsibilities than others. Some have a lot of Christian friends to encourage them. They will be surrounded by a roomful of saints strengthening them with the good news of salvation when they are in their last hours. Others don't have as many friends. Perhaps when they are dying, they will only have one Christian or a visit from a pastor reminding them that Jesus died for their sins and rose from the dead to give them eternal life. However much or little Christ's sheep have of these things here on earth, he gives the same inheritance to all who believe in him. Everyone, from the smallest to the greatest, from the last to the first, will receive eternal life. This is the denarius, the day's wage, given to every worker at the end of the day.

Jesus compares eternal life to a day's wage. And yet, he reveals at the end of his parable that it was never earned by their work. It was always only by God's free grace and favor. In fact, the entire act of hiring them and sending them into his vineyard was itself an act of grace. When he saw people standing around doing nothing, he had compassion on them. He didn't leave them with no purpose. He gave them a life. He sent them into his own vineyard, promising them that he would give them what was good and right.

And this is what he does with us. He calls us to faith. He gives us work to do. Some people are called to faith when they are infants. Others are called later on in life. Some do what seems like more important work. Others don't seem like they do much at all. But it's all God's gift. The day's wage, the denarius, is his and his alone to give. And he is generous with it.

This parable served as a warning to Peter and the other disciples that they should not boast in their status as his first followers. It serves as a warning to all of us not to boast in our status either. We who were born and raised in the church, who spent hours and days and years teaching our children the Catechism, who went to work to support our family and the upkeep of the congregation – we were never worthy of any of these things in the first place. Maybe you have had to suffer for the faith. You aren't worthy of that either. The heat of the day, the hard work and blazing sun – these are all gifts from God. He has given us this work and labor, not so that we would earn his favor, but to teach us to look to the work and labor of his Son. Look at how much it cost him to be favorable toward you. The denarius was much more than a day's wage. It was the wage earned by the obedience, suffering, and death of the only begotten Son of God.

Those who are under the law can't see the gifts of God for what they are. They see their fellow Christians and workers in the vineyard as nothing but competition, and they see the work God gives as a way to gain honor for themselves. But those who are under the gospel know that they could never earn what God has won for them in Christ. As they battle against temptation, strive to love their neighbor, even losing strength and confidence in themselves, their faith rests on the sure promise of God: "I will give you what is right." They count all as loss, finding rest from their labors in their crucified and risen Lord Jesus. And in this way, their labors are not in vain. Amen.