

1 Septuagesima – Matthew 20

Our Lord's parable of the workers in the vineyard teaches us the difference between the two kinds of religion. There is the religion of grace, which is the one true religion. And there is the religion of works, which is every other false religion.

The one true Christian faith teaches that we are saved only by God's grace apart from any of our own works. You receive God's free gift of salvation only by believing his promise that your sins are forgiven and you are saved eternally for the sake of Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son. By God's grace, he was born in the flesh, died for your sins, and was raised to declare you righteous. He even gives you the faith to believe this by the grace of his Holy Spirit. It is all a free gift, which completely excludes your own virtue, strength, merits, and works.

Every other religion – whether it teaches there is one god or many gods, whether it uses the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit or it speaks of some sort of enlightening force, whether it promises heaven, nirvana, or reincarnation – every false religion has one thing in common. They rely on human works.

Now, these false religions won't always speak of works in the same way. Sometimes they speak of escaping your desires and getting in touch with some deeper, enlightened state of being. Other times, they speak of finding your true self through discipline and meditation. Other times they simply talk about doing good deeds and following religious or philosophical principles. However they describe it, every one of these false religions is relying on human powers, virtues, and reason to get to whatever higher blessing they promise. In other words, they rely on works.

Only the Christian faith teaches that God freely gives eternal life to poor sinners, without regard for any of our own merits or worthiness. But of course, the religions of works are much more popular in this world. This is because it is how we naturally think and operate. Even when we hear the gospel of God's free grace in Jesus Christ, we have the natural tendency to turn the gospel into a work. The saving power of baptism is turned into a mere outward sign that we perform to show that we believe. The Supper of Christ's body and blood given for us for the forgiveness of sins is turned into our sacrifice that we offer to God. Or it's turned into a mere memorial meal, as if we are remembering an absent Christ who is as far from us as heaven is from earth. Saving faith is turned into a decision of our own human will. Even the grace of God is turned into some kind of quality God pours into us, which helps us do enough good works to help us get to heaven.

Every one of us has that Old Adam – the dead sinful nature – which still thinks that it can earn something before God. This means that even Christians who know the free grace of

2 Septuagesima – Matthew 20

God in Christ must constantly battle against this false religion within their own flesh waging war against their souls.

Our Lord's parable is a warning against this false religion of works. A landowner hires people to work in his vineyard. He agrees with them on a denarius, which is a day's wage. He then goes throughout the day finding others who have no work to do. He hires them as well. He does this until the last hour of the day. He then gives everyone the same wage, whether they worked one hour, six hours, or twelve hours.

This parable is troubling to anyone who has ever done business. We obviously wouldn't do this, at least not knowingly. Maybe you would give the guys who came in the middle of the day the same amount if you noticed that they were working harder than the ones who were hired first. But even this isn't what the man in the parable did. It had nothing to do with how hard the later workers worked. It was simply because he was generous. He gave what was his to give. This is how God's grace operates.

God sent his beloved Son to take on human flesh. He gave his dearest treasure and his own glory as a sacrifice for sin. It was his life, his light, his wisdom and honor. It was his to give, and he gave it freely for all. He calls some to faith early in life. He calls others to faith later in life. He gives us all the same faith and the same treasure. Because it belongs to him.

The false religions are religions of works, because they are inventions of men. And all of us humans think in terms of works and earnings. Even the lazy man imagines that he is somehow entitled to eat and live comfortably because of some other hidden qualities within himself.

But isn't it true that God rewards good works? After all, Jesus himself says that a worker is worthy of his wages. St. Paul says that if a man does not work, nor shall he eat. The Fourth Commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother so that it will go well with you and you may live long on the earth." Yes, God does reward good works. He teaches us that we should pay a fair wage to those who work for us. This is because God loves good works. He loves honorable and honest labor. So he tells us that a laborer is worthy of his wages.

But this doesn't mean that our works contribute to God's grace and favor toward us. God rewards good works, because he adorns and praises what is good. If you raise your children in the faith, training them to fear and trust God and to love their neighbor, then God will reward you with godly and loving children. If you treat your neighbor with kindness and honor, then God will reward you with a good reputation. And even if you are impoverished and deprived of blessings in this life, or you are slandered and persecuted for Christ's sake, then God will cause other people to see your good behavior in Christ and glorify him in the

3 Septuagesima – Matthew 20

day that he comes to judge the earth. This will be to your honor. But eternal life, forgiveness of sins, and salvation are not rewards that God gives to works. No, God declares us righteous and gives us his kingdom only by grace, apart from any of our own merits.

Jesus says that a worker is worthy of his wages. When we hear this, we naturally think of hours, days, and other human measurements. We agree on a wage, because this makes sense. If you hire someone, you must think about what you are trying to accomplish, how much time and manpower it will take to accomplish it, and how much you can afford to make it happen. And of course, you're going to have a budget, an estimate of how much you will spend and how much profit you will bring in. Each year you will need to evaluate it, make necessary cuts and add necessary workers. But God doesn't operate the way we do. God doesn't call us to faith to help him accomplish anything he hasn't already accomplished for us.

Good works are therefore a gift of God. They serve our neighbor and glorify God as a sign and witness to what he has freely given us by his grace. This is what is so sad about the false religions of works. These religions lead people to trust in their works rather than in God's grace in Jesus Christ, leading to their condemnation and eternal death. But they also rob people of the true joy of serving God. The false religions of works might be able to earn their wages. But they forget that even these wages come from God. He causes it to rain upon the just and the unjust alike. If you treat God's grace as something you have earned, then God will let you have what is yours. You can have your works. You can seek peace and fulfillment in what you manage to accomplish. But such peace will never last.

Those workers who were hired early in the morning thought that they would receive more than a denarius. This showed that they had no joy in their work. They saw it all as nothing more than a chore and a job to gain them their wages. The whole time they were working and sweating and bearing the heat of the day, they could only compare themselves to the other workers who kept coming in.

But the owner of the vineyard agreed on a denarius even before they started working. This is how God operates. Before you ever served him, he already promised you eternal life. He already gave it freely. In fact, while you were still his enemy and a sinner lost in darkness, Christ died for you and reconciled you to the living God.

So when you do the work God has given you to do while it is day, you can rejoice in the fact that the light of his grace is shining upon you. You can be certain that when the darkness comes you will still have this light of Christ. You are serving the Lord who loves you, forgives you, and already declares you righteous apart from any of you own works. You

4 Septuagesima – Matthew 20

don't need to walk on eggshells, worried that he will fire you at any moment. He doesn't keep a file or record of all your sins and mistakes. He knows that all your works fall short and are tainted with sins, but he already placed it all on his Son long before he gave you any work to do.

This is the kind of Master you have. So when you find that others are called into this vineyard with you, no matter how late, then rejoice with them. Bear their burdens with them. And be content to receive with them the greatest treasure of all – access into God's kingdom through the blood and righteousness of his Son.

Some people do work that has a higher demand, and an hour of one person's labor is sometimes worth more than ten hours of another's labor. These measurements are based on various factors, which come down to how much people are willing to pay. Meanwhile, the law says that we must work. God says that a worker is worthy of his wages. And yet, if we try to measure the value of the work based on our wages, then we are only putting ourselves under the law.

But you not under the law. Jesus Christ has fulfilled all righteousness for you. He covers all your sins, even as he bears with you throughout the heat and sweat of this earthly life. God has already counted you worthy, not because of your works, but because of his grace and the merits of his Son. This is your greatest treasure, which outweighs any other wages or rewards you might get along the way.

Therefore, as we serve in the vineyard of our Lord, with the fruit his own Spirit produces, we live under his grace. We live under Christ in his kingdom, serving him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Even as he is risen from the dead, lives, and reigns to all eternity, we can depend on him who called us. Amen.