

The Kingdom of Grace

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

Our text for today is the Gospel according to Matthew in the twentieth chapter:

“The last will be first, and the first last.”¹

Jesus teaches us in this parable today that the Kingdom of God is defined by grace. The owner of the vineyard desired to pay all of his workers not according to what they deserved, but instead according to his mercy and generosity. Unlike the businesses of this world that reward work, making the first first and the last last, God would have the opposite. In His Kingdom, He gives grace to sinners and good wages to those who haven't done any work.

I suppose that this is hardly a surprising message for us Missouri Synod Lutherans. If we remember nothing else from the Bible, we can probably still rattle off St. Paul's classic words to the Ephesians:

“By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”²

Not only are we familiar with the concept of “grace alone,” but no doubt we expect it to dominate the church's teaching and preaching. For that reason, we are quick to label a sermon “bad” if it has too many Law imperatives or if it leaves us feeling convicted instead of forgiven. Recently, some Lutheran pastors have even downright refused to end sermons with exhortations to Christian living, thinking that such commands will only serve to muddle the Gospel. And while we are right to think that the Gospel in all its sweetness should be the central focus of the Church's message, we should be on our guard that such outrage over Law-heavy content doesn't morph into hatred for the Law, or worse than that, entitlement for the Gospel.

In our parable, that was the problem of the first workers who worked all day and grumbled. They both despised the contract they made with the owner and they thought that they were entitled to the same grace that the other workers received. The ESV expresses the idiom that closes today's text as

“Do you begrudge my generosity?”³

While this rendering does capture a portion of the meaning, the literal translation sounds more like this:

¹ Matthew 20:16.

² Ephesians 2:8-9.

³ Matthew 20:15b.

*“Is your eye evil because I am good?”*⁴

It wasn't just that the first workers begrudged the owner's generosity. It was that their begrudging left them unable to see anything clearly. Their eyes were evil; and so, every good thing that they saw, they hated – the owner, their contract, the work they got to do in the vineyard, the warmth of the sun, their own wages, and the grace received by the other workers. Yet, these things weren't evil at all, the workers were. Their eye was evil because the owner was good.

The law application from our text today is an obvious one. For how often do we come along and act the same way as these first workers? We rant and rave against Law-heavy sermons forgetting that the Law is not evil, people are evil. We grumble about our temporal sufferings, acting as if God doesn't work through such burdens and scorching heat to draw us closer to Himself. And we meditate on dangerous questions like “why some and not others” falsely concluding that everyone deserves a chance to hear about Jesus and be saved...

Repent. The Law of God is the most salutary doctrine of life. Any sermon that leaves us convicted is not the Law's fault. It's our fault. The mirror isn't ugly, our sinful reflection is. Likewise, the Gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ. It is both about Jesus and belongs to Jesus. Grace is God's alone. And like the vineyard owner, God is allowed to do what He chooses with what belongs to Him. This goes for things temporal and for things eternal. No one deserves God's grace. If we deserved it, then it would no longer be grace. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away all for His own reasons. Blessed be the Name of the Lord. He is good, even if our eye is evil.

Yet, even amidst such rebukes, Jesus teaches us in this parable that the Kingdom of God is defined by grace. This underserved mercy is a foreign concept to sinners because God isn't like us. His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts. God doesn't take pleasure in the death of the wicked. He doesn't join in the revelry over another sexual deviant brought down. He eats and drinks with prostitutes, tax collectors and Pharisees alike. God loves and welcomes even the worst of this world into His Kingdom – not for free, but by the bloody death of His only begotten Son. This is the essence of the Gospel: God forgives sinners and punishes Jesus in their stead. God has mercy on those who don't deserve it. He gives good gifts to those who grumble against Him. He rewards idle workers who haven't done anything all day. And He

⁴ Matthew 20:15b.

pours out His Kingdom on perverts, murderers, phonies, and bums. The Firstborn of all creation humbles Himself to death and hell so that sinners might be exalted to heaven. The last are first and the first are last. This is not fair. It might not even be just. Even so, it is good in the eyes of the Lord.

The truth from our parable today is that, really, God is the only One Who suffers true injustice. Despite their grumbling, the first workers who worked all day got what was just. If you notice at the beginning of the text, the owner of the vineyard,

“agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day.”⁵

These first workers came to the vineyard on the basis of the Law and when the day was over they got what was fair and what they had agreed to.

But laboring in the heat of the day is always somewhat of a farce. Even if we think we’ve borne the scorching heat faithfully, still, all have sinned, all have been idle, and all have broken the Law of the Lord. Jesus reminds us elsewhere that even when we have done everything we were told to do, even so, we should say,

“We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.”⁶

The first laborers who sought a reward for their work received what was theirs. They were sent away with the wages they had agreed to and the wages they had earned. In the end though, this is a terrible and awful thing. For what is ours, what we have earned, is damnation for our sins. The wages of sin is death.

By contrast to these first workers though, the other workers came to the vineyard on the basis of a promise. The owner simply said,

“You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.”⁷

The owner didn’t tell them how much to expect. No doubt, the workers expected to receive less than the others. But nonetheless, they came in faith trusting in the mercy of the owner. They came trusting that in spite of their idleness, in spite of their sins, the owner would be gracious to them. They came believing that even though their eyes were evil, the owner was good. They came in faith. For faith is expecting God to be good despite our short comings. Faith is receiving from God whatever He sees fit to give, trusting that His way is always best.

⁵ Matthew 20:2.

⁶ Luke 17:10.

⁷ Matthew 20:4.

For there is no guarantee that life in God's vineyard – that is, the Church – will be free from pain and heartache. In fact, Jesus says elsewhere that in the world you will have tribulation and that all Christians must take up their cross and follow Him to Calvary. And no doubt, at times the burden of these crosses will feel heavy on your shoulders. No doubt, at times the scorching heat of this life will feel unbearable. But God hears your prayers and as He knows your suffering. Your Father in heaven sees exactly what you need and exactly what you are capable of bearing. And His promise to you is the same promise made by the owner of the vineyard:

*“Whatever is right I will give you.”*⁸

Whatever happens, God promises that He will work it for good. His Kingdom is defined by grace. He shows mercy to sinners and gives good things to those who grumble against Him. Even if your eye is evil and cannot see it – still, He is good.

And in this goodness, our Lord invites all who are weary and heaven laden with the burden of their own pride and idleness – all those who are weighed down by the scorching heat of this life – to come and leave the wages of their sins on His shoulders and to receive from Him the wages of His death and resurrection – the Denarius of Eternal Life. Christ has prepared the table before you. Go into His vineyard, feast on the fruit of His labor. Eat His body broken and His blood shed.

*Taste and see that the Lord is good!*⁹

Amen.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Midweek of Septuagesima

Matthew 20:1-16; Psalm 95:1-9; Exodus 17:1-7; 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5

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⁸ Matthew 20:4.

⁹ Psalm 34:8a.