

Sermon for September 24, 2023 – 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 19:30-20:16 EHV

Theme: God's call to discipleship...

- 1) Attracts two kinds of workers,
- 2) Who view his grace in two different ways.

³⁰Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

"Indeed the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing to pay the workers a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³He also went out about the third hour and saw others standing unemployed in the marketplace. ⁴To these he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶When he went out about the eleventh hour, he found others standing unemployed. He said to them, 'Why have you stood here all day unemployed?'

⁷"They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.'

"He told them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸When it was evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last group and ending with the first.'

⁹"When those who were hired around the eleventh hour came, they each received a denarius. ¹⁰When those who were hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But they each received a denarius too. ¹¹After they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner: ¹²'Those who were last worked one hour, and you made them equal to us who have endured the burden of the day and the scorching heat!'

¹³"But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not make an agreement with me for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what is yours and go. I want to give to the last one hired the same as I also gave to you. ¹⁵Can't I do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶In the same way, the last will be first, and the first, last."

Why do you follow Jesus – working hard to spread his Gospel and to keep his commands? Are you motivated by His grace and mercy for everyone or merely to get the blessings he promised? You see, even our diligent, dedicated labour for the LORD can be dangerously sinful if done for the wrong reasons. Because Jesus knows this to be true, he told his disciples a shocking parable – meant to get us to examine the attitudes of our hearts when it comes to our life on this earth as his followers. Let us consider the warning and encouragement Jesus offers us, under the theme: **God's call to discipleship...** 1) Attracts two kinds of workers, 2) Who view his grace in two different ways.

Part One: Attracts two kinds of workers.

To understand Jesus' parable correctly, we must consider why he spoke it. Shortly before our text, a rich synagogue ruler asked Jesus what he could do to get eternal life. Since the man was focused on earning heaven as a reward and not receiving it by grace, Jesus pointed to the commandments

– telling him that he needed to give up everything he had and follow him. When the man went away sad at the thought of losing his earthly wealth, Jesus lamented how hard it is for the rich to be saved. Understanding correctly that lust for worldly things was not just a rich person's problem, the disciples asked: *"Who then can be saved?"* Jesus replied: *"With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."* In other words, salvation and its blessings are all a matter of God's doing, not our own. We are saved by grace.

Then Peter came to the astonishing realization of what God's grace had accomplished in their lives and said: *"Look, we have left everything and followed you! What then will we have?"*

Jesus answered Peter's question by describing the earthly and everlasting blessings God graciously grants all believers. However, since Jesus also saw a danger in how Peter asked his question (how, like the rich ruler's inquiry, he seemed to view the blessings God grants as something we merit through our actions), Jesus added a warning to his response.

³⁰*Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." "Indeed the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing to pay the workers a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.*

There are two types of disciples in God's Church: those who view God's blessings as something they earn and those who trust the LORD to give them what he promises - rejoicing in his grace. The first type is illustrated by these first workers hired to labour in the vineyard.

As the landowner looks for workers, the LORD calls people to be a part of his kingdom. The first group of labourers agreed to work for a specific wage set by the landowner, which, according to ancient practices, was not only fair but somewhat generous. Their day now had purpose and meaning – let alone the promise of reward! Sadly, they focused solely on the wage, not the landowner's generosity. Like mercenaries with no loyalties, this group of labourers represents Christians who view their devotion to Christ and service to the church as a means to an end: to earn God's blessings for themselves.

³*He also went out about the third hour and saw others standing unemployed in the marketplace. ⁴To these he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶When he went out about the eleventh hour, he found others standing unemployed. He said to them, 'Why have you stood here all day unemployed?' ⁷"They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' "He told them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'*

Ever desiring to give people true salvation, purpose, and hope – the LORD never stops calling disciples to his vineyard. He offers no contract but just promises to do what is right. The workers who respond to the master's call throughout the rest of the day represent everyone who turns to God in faith because of his grace – not to earn a reward. At various times in their lives (represented by the multiple times of day), they realized their lives have no true purpose or meaning. But the LORD came to them repeatedly through the proclamation of his Gospel- calling them away from their idle, fruitless lives to find true purpose for their lives now and everlasting salvation with him in heaven. Even though the devil, the world, and their sinful natures would cause them trouble as

Christians, the LORD promises to do what is right: to graciously forgive, bless, protect, and deliver them.

Therefore, these disciples heed God's call to repent and follow him – some early in life and others later. They do not do it to earn God's blessings but because the LORD graciously called, forgave, and saved them. For just as there was no other employer offering the labourers work, no other god offers humans any real hope for the future except the LORD.

Part Two: Who view his grace in two different ways.

⁸When it was evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last group and ending with the first.' ⁹'When those who were hired around the eleventh hour came, they each received a denarius.

Wow, what grace is offered to these workers! As mentioned before, a denarius was a generous wage for a full day's work, let alone a partial day. And these workers' reactions? They are content with what they receive. Those hired at the third or sixth hour do not complain that those employed after them got the same reward. No, they all rejoice in the Landowner's grace – understanding none of them didn't deserve to be hired, let alone receive such a great wage from the gracious landowner.

These workers represent Christians who follow Jesus for his mercy's sake and not as a means to "earn" a reward. They don't look at what others receive from God and grumble that they deserve more. No, they are content that God forgave their sins, called them to faith, and blessed them with more than they deserve. Not only that, but they rejoice that others get to share in the same forgiving grace they received from God.

¹⁰When those who were hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But they each received a denarius too. ¹¹After they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner: ¹²'Those who were last worked one hour, and you made them equal to us who have endured the burden of the day and the scorching heat!'

These first workers reveal their mercenary spirit. They find no joy in the grace the landowner showed others. Instead, they demand more by selfishly comparing themselves to others and complaining about how arduous their labour was throughout the day. They accuse the landowner of being unfair and unjust – exhibiting no understanding that, had the landowner not called them to work in his vineyard, they would have ended the day with nothing because no one would have hired them!

These workers represent people who follow Christ merely to get a reward. While they might outwardly express happiness over the undeserved blessings another person receives, they are inwardly envious. They feel that God owes them for their pious living – that life should be easier for them than it is for others and that they should receive some public recognition for being so good. And when they don't get those things, they complain. Instead of seeing their service in

Christ's kingdom as a blessing – giving their earthly lives true purpose and meaning – they complain about how hard their life is and how they deserve more.

¹³*“But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not make an agreement with me for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what is yours and go. I want to give to the last one hired the same as I also gave to you. ¹⁵Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’*

God is not unjust: He always does what he says and gives what he promises. He never promised to reward people based on merit. Every reward he provides is a reward of grace. Just as the landowner didn't have to hire those first workers but did so out of grace, God didn't have to call those selfish-minded Christians but did so because he was mercifully inclined towards them. If they were not willing to accept the fact that he is free to do whatever he wants with his blessings and have mercy on whomever he wants to have mercy, then they should leave his vineyard and join those idlers who did not heed the LORD's gracious call, and whose lives have no true meaning or purpose. At the end of the day, such people are left with nothing but a fearful expectation of the future because they cannot pay for the debt their sins have incurred.

¹⁶*In the same way, the last will be first, and the first, last.”*

When I think about this parable, I can't help but recall Paul's mission journeys – recorded in the book of Acts. Time after time, Paul would go into the Jewish Synagogues – preaching that the Christ promised in Scripture had come in the person of Jesus to forgive all sin and establish his kingdom of grace. The Jews often received Paul's message joyfully – looking to Jesus in faith. But when Paul started welcoming Gentiles, their attitude changed. “Why do those Gentiles get an equal share in Christ's kingdom? They didn't keep God's law as we Jews did. They aren't even circumcised!” Envious of the grace shown to the Gentiles, many Jews not only stopped following Jesus but went on to persecute Christians. Those who were first in God's kingdom became the last – leaving Christ because they were envious of the saving grace God showed the Gentiles. But the Gentiles, who were once apart from God, started to become the primary people composing Christ's kingdom. Why? Because they received the grace God offered in the Gospel with faith – not believing they deserved anything but rejoicing in the undeserved, forgiving mercy God showed them in Jesus.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus didn't tell this parable merely to explain why the Jews became jealous of the Gentiles. No, he said it to warn us: to prevent us from becoming like those selfish workers who only serve him to earn a reward. As Peter's statement reveals (*“Look, we have left everything and followed you! What then will we have?”*), we all have a selfish nature that believes it deserves God's blessings instead of understanding that they are only given because of his grace. Just as Jesus' disciples often fought with each other regarding which of them was greater than the other and more deserving of higher honour in Christ's kingdom, so we might sinfully condemn other Christians in our hearts, wondering: “Why is God allowing difficulties in my life, when so-and-so over there has it easy? I come to Bible class and worship more than him. I also volunteer a lot more for the church than he. It's so unfair; I should get better blessings!” Such thoughts betray a heart that compares itself to others – believing it is better and more deserving. Such thoughts reveal that we need God's reminder that service in Christ's kingdom is not about earning his favour

and blessings. No, Christ's kingdom is all about grace – the undeserved love he exhibited to all by paying for the world's sins and that he exhibited to us personally by calling us to faith to receive his salvation and blessings.

Therefore, whenever you are tempted to consider yourself more deserving than others instead of rejoicing in the grace God shows all, look in the mirror of God's law to see if you have lived up to the perfect obedience God demands. Seeing your sins and the hell you deserve because of them, go to the cross in repentance to seek Christ's forgiveness. Then, in the peace of His gracious forgiveness, ask the LORD to give you a proper attitude that does not compare yourself to others but realizes that everything you have and are is a gift of God's grace. With that attitude, we will find ourselves like the angels: rejoicing in God's mercy to all and not sinfully complaining because we aren't getting more than others. Amen.