

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³ “About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵ So they went. “He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶ About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ⁷ “ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ ⁸ “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ ⁹ “The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ ¹³ “But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” – NIV84

Prayer of the Day:

Lord God, You call us to work in Your kingdom and promise to reward us according to Your grace. Help us to rid our minds of worldly expectations and rejoice that You freely pour out the blessings of salvation to all people; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. Alleluia. (Ephesians 2:8)

Sermon Text:

I know of a professor in a college who at some point in the year makes a crazy hard quiz that the majority of his students will fail. He administers it, grades it, and returns it. He wants each one to know how they did on it. Some excelled though not perfect they passed with high grades, the majority did as expected. They tanked the quiz. He then asks for the quizzes back and proceeds to walk to the trash can where he tosses them in without a second thought and announces that none of the quizzes will be recorded to the great relief of the majority. It’s then however that something interesting happens. Those students who passed begin to realize that their hard work and effort amounted to nothing and each year someone’s hand darts up in frustration. “That’s not fair” is the cry from the student. His response is always the same, “No, that’s grace!” It’s the beginning of an important lesson on the exact thing that Jesus is pointing out in our parable for the disciples.

Those workers seem to have a point, don’t they? After all, if someone gets paid a certain amount for an hour of work, then shouldn’t doing that same work for eight hours reward one with eight times the pay? Ah, how easily we get it all twisted up. Go back to the beginning of our parable. A denarius is a day’s wages, regularly received and agreed upon by those who willingly bore the labor of the day and the heat of the Sun. In effect, these workers are saying to the landowner, “I know we agreed upon one price but that was when I needed some work, and before I knew you were a fool. Now, I believe you should

pay me for a week of labor, even though I worked but a day.” The issue is not one of fairness but of amazing generosity on the part of the landowner.

The landowner’s response is quite simple and to the point. “I have not mistreated you but instead have given exactly what was promised to you.” These idle men were called into the vineyard and treated quite fairly by the landowner, who even brought them help for the work they were doing. Work, which we should remember, could have been done by anyone else. You see, they were called into this vineyard because of their impressive resumes and proven work ethic, but by their idleness. One could then declare that every one of those workers made their way to the vineyard simply and only because of the mercy of the landowner, who refused to allow these men who needed work to go without. Only after receiving this gift of fruitful labor, do they proceed to grumble and complain about what was given.

Do we act like that at times? I’m not talking about your jobs, although we could probably go off on a tangent there. Jesus doesn’t speak this parable so that workers grumble less about their employers, other portions of scripture speak very pointedly about that. No, this one is spoken in response to a question brought up by the disciples. It’s Peter who once again plays mouthpiece for the twelve. “*We have left everything to follow you ... what then will there be for us* (Matthew 19:27)?”

Kinda makes you grimace a bit, doesn’t it? Really Peter, really guys, you’re going to sit there and ask Jesus that crass question, “What’s in it for me?” So Jesus lovingly tells them how they will be blessed with 12 thrones, that all who leave the traps of the world and follow after Him will be blessed and receive eternal life on the Last Day (Matthew 19:28-30). But then come the words of our parable. None of this was given because they were so great, grand, or glorious, but because of the goodness of God. His mercy, His grace, and His generosity made it all possible. Nothing these men were or did contribute even the tiniest bit to that.

But before we get ready to pounce on the disciples again for their disturbing behavior, remember that we do this too. Jesus Christ first comes to us in our idleness, in our unbelief, and solely through the power of the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Him. Remember Paul’s words to the Ephesians? We don’t get to boast about our labor or work. It’s all a gift of grace from God (Ephesians 2:8-10). But then, while we may not be so crass as to say it out loud, do we begin to think it? “Surely, I’m in the top 10% of people here at St. Paul’s. Always here each week for worship, always ready with a fat check as the offering plates come around, and always willing to help out when it’s asked of me. My family has been a member here since the beginning of the church, surely that says something!” And you know what, you may even be right, for all of those are wonderful things. God has blessed you within His vineyard to do much work for Him. What a blessing that is but be careful.

“Surely, God will reward me, love me, appreciate me, more than the other 90%, more than those who have not done all that I have done in service to the Lord.” Such thinking is ripe for the sly serpent who very well may hang out of the tree and whisper, “It’s not fair”. “It’s not fair that you give so much and others do not. It’s not fair that those deadbeats hang on your generosity, and take advantage of all you have done while doing nothing themselves. It’s not fair that as we labor on we still get sick, ill, and even die just like everyone else and sometimes worse than everyone else, doesn’t God see what I do for Him, where is my reward!?!”

“Wrong,” says Jesus. Glad that faith has moved your hearts to such labor, He is concerned that we have allowed this temptation of the serpent to cloud our thinking. Should we not be glad, that God has brought them in, just as He once did for us? Should we not be thankful for the opportunity to work in the vineyard for a wage we do not deserve? Should we not burst from the seams in awe that God would use us as examples here and in our communities, helping our brothers and sisters to do the same as we work together in this vineyard of the Lord? Should we not trust all the more in Him even in hardship and trial, knowing that He not only can but is using it for good even if we cannot see it ourselves?

Oh, how we struggle with this one concept. If you are anything like the sinful sack of flesh that stands before you today, those final words of the landowner have you a bit worried at this point. *‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’* ¹⁴ *Take your pay and go. I want to*

give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." It should be noted that these are not words of condemnation but words of warning. Condemnation would have taken back even the denarius and cast them out of the vineyard, we do not hear that. The grace of God is still there, even as we tremble because of our sinfulness. This is good because it is precisely when the law sits heavily on the heart that it is good to remember how those workers came to the vineyard.

We made a point of it, didn't we? We said this work wasn't given to these men because of their impressive resumes or their incredible work ethics. The landowner doesn't look at people as we do. A truth once taught to Samuel as he stood before David's brothers (1 Samuel 16:7). For vineyard work I would look for strong, capable individuals with endurance to outlast the hard labor and heat. The landowner simply walks up to those standing idle and invites them in, no tests, no interviews, just why are you standing here? Come work for me.

In my sin, I often find myself idle. That's what sin does, after all, I'm not active helping those who need encouragement in stewardship, regular church attendance, or some other aspect of Christian living. No, I'm not active because I'm too busy thinking about how much better I am than they are. Thankfully, Jesus did no such thing. He did the exact opposite. Scripture is full of passages that remind us of his work on our behalf. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Corinthians 5:21). *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

While you and I deserve every trouble we encounter in this life and even worse, we have earned for ourselves the eternal punishment of hell, we do not get it! Jesus Christ, the only One who ever earned and deserved heaven suffers hell for us and He doesn't grumble and complain that His heavenly Father is treating Him unfairly. Instead, we hear that perfect and glorious prayer, "*Not my will but yours be done* (Luke 22:42)!" The only Man who may ever have had the right to call God unfair, willingly listens because He knows that God is not unfair, He is generous and its exactly what we need. Even though we have grumbled and complained, The vineyard owner has sent His One and only Son that we might not face condemnation but rather that we through faith, can call His righteousness our own, His death our payment for sin, His Resurrection our assurance of far more than a denarius but of life everlasting in heaven.

Oh, I suppose I could try to complain that those who haven't been in the kingdom as long as I should be treated differently than myself. I suppose I could think I somehow deserve more than someone else by time spent in service or the positions in the church I have held, but then even that's an undeserved gift from God. So, instead of being overcome by all the anxiety, frustration, and anger, I will focus on the Word. It is there that I see the cross once more and by grace and through faith, fix my eyes on Jesus. It is only then that God's generosity to me becomes evident and who knows perhaps it will change the way I look at just about everything. Amen!