

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't know a thing about running a business. I do know; however, you don't run it like you do in the parable Jesus tells you in the Gospel reading. But that's not the point. Jesus isn't giving you a lesson about the best business practices. No, he's teaching and proclaiming to you who your master is, what is his character, and how he operates. It's seeing this master of the vineyard that you see how God operates in his kingdom and you find consolation. God is merciful to you on account of Christ. You are saved by his grace alone.

Let's explore this a bit more. Two things jump out at us here in this first part of the parable. The first is who owns the vineyard. The second is what this owner does. We go astray when we forget these two things. The master of a house owns the vineyard, and he is the one who says he will give a denarius to each set of workers. He owns the property and it's his money he pays to the workers. This comes out clearly as Jesus concludes the parable. He said, "Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'" So the last will be first, and the first last."

Our sinful man has two reactions when we hear this parable, then, and think about the grace of God. It's either to abuse God's grace or begrudge his generosity. Both mindsets are sinful and need to be repented of lest we perish.

When it comes to the abuse of God's grace that's all too easy and maybe seen more from those outside the church. It looks at God's grace in terms of "what or how much can I get away with." It's the mindset of "I will continue to live in sin because I am saved by grace." It lives by viewing sin as just an "eh" it's no big deal kind of thing. "Everybody sins, nobody's perfect" is the mantra of excuse. The thing is though, this is really a rejection of God's grace and an attempt to save oneself apart from Christ.

Here's the thing. We don't simply go through life living as if sin isn't deadly or that God is a pushover who will just look the other way when it comes to our lives lived apart from Christ, his work, his bride, the church, and his word. The Lord cannot be mocked, nor will he let his name be dragged through the mud. We will not remain in sin that grace may abound as Romans 6 teaches and in Hebrews 10 God says, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries."

We are also called to see that called gives us work to do, not to earn our salvation, but work to do as his servants in this world. The laborers are working. They are laborers after all. All of them are working in the vineyard of the Lord and, in fact, the master keeps calling more men throughout the day to work in this vineyard. So how is that work plays such an important part of this parable if it's all about grace?

That's a good question and one that, is often answered incorrectly. In fact, there is whole article of our Lutheran Confessions, Article IV of the Formula of Concord, which deals with a controversy about the role of good works in the lives of Christians. It boiled down to an error that taught if good works aren't necessary for salvation, then works must be detrimental to salvation. Clearly, this is wrong. That jump can't be made because the Scriptures don't teach this rather, they teach Christians are to be doing good works in their lives as God instructs them. They are a fruit of faith.

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This is where our Gospel reading gets us to think about this role of works which is the background of God teaching salvation by grace alone. In the parable, Jesus lays out the scenario from the beginning. Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’” The master calls the laborers into the vineyard and the laborers work.

The other reaction our sinful man has when he hears this parable is to begrudge the generosity of God. Our sinful nature doesn’t think it’s fair that those who worked only at the end get the same wage as those who worked all day. And why is that? Well, our sinful nature thinks he not only can save himself but that he’s entitled to salvation. Another element in this too is the fact that we get jealous when others don’t have to do the same work we’ve had to do or if their work assigned to them is easier, in a sense, than what we have been given to do. Deep down we would rather be those who didn’t have to work all day in the scorching heat.

You see how that works? For those of you, which is the majority here, who were baptized as an infant and have been in the church for your whole lives you endured things like this such as the work and commitment of getting up on Sunday and taking time out of your weekend to sit here in this place. You’ve given and still do of your time and money. Or think about how in your life you’ve sacrificed to follow what God’s says while there are those who have been sitting idle by and not paying any attention to the Kingdom of God. Sin, then, starts to redefine these things as burdens and then resentment toward God. The devil sees that as an opportunity to pounce and draw you away and lift your eyes from the plow and think, “the grass is greener on the other side or rather outside the vineyard.” But don’t be fooled. When God has called you into the Christian faith, he calls you not to be idle or lazy. It doesn’t mean these things save you but as a Christian you look at this all differently. God frees you to serve him as he has assigned you different tasks to do. We call these things vocations, and they are ordered in the three estates of church, family, and society. God has given specific tasks and vocations to do for the sake of your neighbors or for the sake of the vineyard, the sake of the church.

To be sure, not all work is the same and some is a burden at times and it’s a tough burden. But lest we forget Adam was given work to do before the fall into sin as God assigned to him to tend the Garden and give names to the animals. Work is not sinful nor is it bad. We, though, since the fall would rather sit idle by and not do what we have been called to do. We even institutionalize this all with programs that promote and encourage people not to work and do their duty. In 2 Thessalonians 3 God said through St. Paul, “It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.” Being a person in this world has work assigned to it. The Lord worked and still works. Being a Christian has work assigned to it as well. God teaches you to crucify your old lazy self and to rise to the new man who has been freed and called into the vineyard. Examine your lives according to the Ten Commandments. See where God has placed you and where you are called to serve your neighbor which is serving the Lord.

St. Paul brings up this notion of disciplining your bodies in the Epistle reading. He writes, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” This self-control, which is a fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians, St. Paul speaks about is for the sake of something, receiving the imperishable wreath. Your eyes are fixed on the one who calls you rather than simple going through the motions and paying lip service to

God as one boxing the air with no real purpose. No, God calls you to run the race and fight the good fight. He calls you to turn from our sin and desire the things above, the things which are true, good, and beautiful. He calls you to delight in what we have been given to do by the one who has saved you from everlasting meaningless. He calls you into his vineyard and you are his laborer, however that may be.

And that brings you back, then, to the parable. The generosity of the master is great, and thanks be to God for that wonderful mercy found in Christ. Don't lose sight of the master and his generosity. He who called you is faithful. The days may be long at times and the work may be hard, but you know the promise of the master and it's good and righteous what he has promised. You know the one who did the work you cannot do and has the paid the price you owe but cannot fully pay. You know Christ and his promises look toward the end of the day when no one can work any longer. You look forward to that day when you stand before the Lord and with your calloused hands and the sweat dripping down from your brows the Lord only sees the crucified hands of the Son and blood dripping from his thorn pierced head. You find your confidence solely and completely in him and know he has promised you will see the day of glory where our joy is complete and because of Christ the Lord says, "well done good and faithful servant" and you will reply, "I have only done what is my duty."

And on that day too you will look to around and see those who may have only been working for a short time, perhaps only a few hours or moments, but you will share in their joy. You will see those who have sinned against you and God worked repentance. The martyrs of the faith will stand shoulder to shoulder with some of those same people who brought about their earthly end. And you, you will all stand together around the throne of the Lamb washed clean in his blood and you will sing his praises for he has done marvelous things not just for you but for those who are in your company as his saints. There will be no evil eye that day but eyes which see the Lord and behold him as he has graciously saved you by his blood. The joy will be a shared joy even as the Lord has shared his great and glorious work for your redemption and gives it to you freely. The work in the vineyard will be over and the fruits will be consumed as the choice wine which overflows at that great feast. And that is no generosity to begrudge but a generosity that knows no end and enlivens your hearts with a joy which springs from this salvation which has come unto you by God's good grace and favor in Christ alone.

When it comes to God's grace it rests in the fact that God is merciful toward you in Christ. Your starting point for understanding God, then, is not his sovereignty or control rather it's his mercy and desire to save. From the get-go, then, everything about God is seen through the Person of Jesus who is God in the flesh. This is a fundamental thing for you to see. This master of the house, in the parable, is chiefly a generous man. His generosity extends out and is shown to all these people.

There's great comfort in this parable for you today dear people of God because it means that God is true to what he says, and he is generous toward you in Christ. God promises you what is yours and it all depends on what Jesus has done. True there will be those who don't receive the denarius at the end of the day, this parable, however, doesn't address that here but next week you will hear about that. Those who were summoned to work at the end of the day were standing idle because no one had called them not for the fact that they refused to work. The point here, today in this reading from Matthew, is that all received the same because God is good. He is gracious and merciful and gives them all a denarius, a day's wage. In faith, your response to all of this, is "amen, thanks be to God."

God's grace is a wonderful thing indeed. The favor of God is toward you because of Jesus and his work done on your behalf. God's face looks and shines upon you because your sin has been atoned for by Jesus and you are baptized into his name. This life is lived under the cross and sometimes the work is backbreaking. Sometimes it looks as though the day will never end and that promised denarius will never be seen. But the day will end, and the night will come when no one will be able to work. On that day, though, you will rest with Jesus and all his saints reaping the fruit of Christ's labor for you. You will sit and drink the fine wine of salvation which overflows at the eternal wedding feast.

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Until that day, you put head down and to the plow. You live as God has called you. You confess this hope that is within you to all those around you and tell them of the generosity of the Lord who is your Master. And you rejoice to see when there are more workers around you. You bid them welcome, and your heart is glad when the day will end, and they will receive the same wage which has been promised to you. The Lord is good and gracious, and thanks be to God for that now and forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.