

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

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.”

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.

The parable of the labors in the vineyard teaches you how God has saved you by his grace alone which is in Christ and his work for you. That's what this Sunday in the Church Year is all about, salvation by grace alone. When you hear this today, see Jesus crucified and risen for you. That's what the master of the vineyard your Lord has done out of his generosity, and it is righteous that he does so even as he himself is the righteous one for his work is your salvation and for all people.

There are two warnings you hear, and dangers the devil, the world, and your own fallen flesh want you to fall into when you listen to Jesus this morning. They both come back to when you lose sight of begrudge the master's generosity or more accurately as the Greek puts it, “your eye is evil because of the master's generosity.” That's because the old man, the sinner in us doesn't want God to be generous.

The first danger is we don't want to give to others the same as he has given to us. Ok, maybe we are fine with people we love, like, or even tolerate. But then we think about people who have sinned against us in some way, maybe even a terrible, unspeakable way. For those people we have the mindset of Jonah that doesn't want them to repent. We want them to remain outside the vineyard. We rejoice each hour that passes, and they aren't called into the vineyard. We look forward to the end of the day and hope in the darkest places of our hearts that when we line up to get our denarius they won't be in that line of laborers. Don't think we do this? Ask yourself these questions, “how often do I think about and hope for the success of other people?” or “how often do I pray for my enemies, those who persecute me, sin against me, and people I hate?” That's an evil eye created by an evil heart. You don't want the generosity of the master, remember who you are in all of this and need that same generosity, that same grace. Repent. Pray for others, forgive them, and confess the faith to them.

There's another thing going on as well and tempting for us to forget when we hear this reading. 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.

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.’”

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, as I said a few minutes ago we don’t want God to show generosity. 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. Somewhat of this sentiment we have seen the past few years during this whole ordeal with the pandemic. One thing the pandemic sadly taught too many people is what unbelievers have known and loved for years. It’s nice to sleep in Sunday morning or do something else as opposed to get up, get your kids moving and fight to get ready, and then sit in church. That’s hard work. It’s much easier to not go or just sit on a couch and think “I’ll watch things virtually.”

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. 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 things retirement when it’s viewed apart from the Christian faith as “now I no longer have to work. I am free to really live.” Being a person has work assigned to it. The Lord worked and still worked. Adam worked before the fall into sin. 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.

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. 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 we reply, “I have only done what is my duty.”

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 of these people.

There’s great comfort in this parable 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 we 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, our response to all of this, is “amen, thanks be to God.”

So, God’s grace is a wonderful thing indeed. The favor of God is toward you because of Jesus and his life and 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 of 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.

And on that day too we will look around and see those who may have only been working for a short time perhaps only a few hours or moments, but we 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 our 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 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.

You are saved by grace alone through faith alone. Salvation is a gift given to you and so is faith. Faith is a gift worked by the Holy Spirit. How salvation and Christ is given to you is also by grace alone as God teaches you. Today four children of God are baptized into Christ. It’s God’s action that he works for them. Baptism is a means by which God works the forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation. It’s a passive thing in the Bible, it’s something done to you. God the actor out of his grace and mercy in Christ alone and he is the one doing the work.

Likewise, this is the faith these four adults are confessing today. They are confessing before God and men what God has done for them in Christ and what the Lord has given to them by his grace alone. Their confession is speaking what the Scriptures have revealed and taught them. Their confession is a confession of God’s grace alone in Christ alone.

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Rejoice today dear people of God, 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. 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. God is gracious and merciful, amen, thanks be to God.

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