

February 5, 2023

Septuagesima

Text: Matthew 20:1-16; 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5

“What does this mean?” How many times did you hear that question studying the Small Catechism in your confirmation class? Now it’s probably something you’ve not only read there, but also asked of yourself when you read certain parts of Scripture.

One of the places I often ask the question is the parables of Jesus, such as we heard in this morning’s Gospel reading: the parable of the workers in the vineyard. What does it mean that all the workers received the same wage? What does it mean that the master does what he wants with what is his?

Now thankfully, the parables don’t exist in a vacuum, by themselves. They are part of the entirety of Holy Scripture, and since Holy Scripture is all written by the Holy Spirit, we can use the rest of it to help figure out those parts that make us ask, “What does this mean?”

In this parable, Jesus teaches us about grace, that which is given to us, like the denarius from the master of the house. If we misinterpret the parable, we can end up with a flawed understanding of grace. However, we are given the entire rest of Scripture, such as our Epistle lesson, to help us understand rightly. Through God’s Word, He grows not only our understanding, but also our faith, which rests on this grace He gives to us.

So I spoke of this parable in our Gospel being misunderstood. I’d say there are two main ways in which that could happen.

The first way is to see this parable as teaching that our relationship with God is based on a sort of contract or mutual agreement. You do something; God gives you what you deserve. It’s a way of reading this parable that is rather sympathetic to the first workers hired by the master of the house.

They had a contract with the master for a denarius in exchange for a day’s work, and when those who put in less than a day’s work get the same wage, it seems rather unfair to us. It seems to us that the rewards one gets should be in proportion to the work he puts in. Those guys were there longer; they ought to get more.

This attitude of grace as something you deserve can carry over to our lives as Christians and how we view things like salvation and the other blessings of God. Sometimes it takes the view that those who do more for the church ought to be blessed more by God. We’re tempted to think that if you put in more time volunteering here, or serving in an office, or putting more money in the offering plate, then you should have a better life than those who do or give less.

When this doesn’t happen, when things don’t seem to improve or we suffer affliction in spite of being faithful, we get mad at God, who seems to be ungrateful for all we’re doing for Him.

This attitude of deserved grace can also go the other way as well. You have people who rarely, if ever, receive the gifts of God that He gives to strengthen faith – hearing His Word, receiving His Sacraments – but they do good things, and so we’re tempted to say that they’re good Christians, too.

This most often pops up at funerals, where someone who hasn't been to church in forever dies, and then at the funeral the justifications are given at they were a good person and did all kinds of good things for people, and so because of this goodness they must be in heaven. Grace is something that the deceased earned, deserved.

The reality is, though, that grace is a gift, freely given by God, never something earned, deserved, or merited. This is seen in the parable itself.

The first group of workers think that they've earned what's theirs, but how does the master respond to their complaints? "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" This attitude of the workers caused them to be ungrateful for what they'd been given. Yes, they had a contract, but the only reason they had that in the first place was because the master had graciously chosen them at the beginning of the day. They didn't deserve the job; they weren't entitled to it. It was itself a gift.

And further, their pride poisons their relationship both with the other workers and with the master. They see themselves as better than the others. They grumble against the master. This grumbling causes them to be sent out from the vineyard, away from the goodness of the master.

A couple verses after our Epistle reading ends, Paul notes that one of the reasons many of the Israelites were overthrown in the wilderness was in fact grumbling against God.

When we start to see grace as something we deserve, our relationship with God goes from being one grounded in love and to one that is self-centered. It's to say that I've done what I needed to do, and so God, you better give me what I deserve. We neither love nor trust in God, but think that He might treat us unfairly.

Saving faith is obviously not compatible with such a view of God. We aren't driven out of His vineyard, His Kingdom, but rather leave it ourselves, thinking that we can earn our own way to heaven according to the rules that we set. This will fail, as no one can dictate terms to God. As the master of the vineyard states, He is free to do what He chooses with what belongs to Him.

So seeing grace as earned is one wrong way to look at this parable. The other way would be to see the parable as teaching "cheap grace." What does this mean?

This would be to hear the parable and figure that, if the master's going to give the same reward to everyone regardless of how long they worked, then why bother to put in more than you have to? If grace is freely given, then why bother doing anything in response?

This line of thought comes to us quite naturally, in part because our culture is very business-oriented, and in part because sinful human nature is afflicted with laziness and ingratitude. It's bad business to put in additional work or investment if it doesn't increase profits. And if you aren't getting anything for yourself by working, then why do it?

Practically, this manifests itself in a search for the bare minimum, or the lowest common denominator. If you're still a Christian if you only go to church once a month, or once a quarter, then why go more? If you figure you still have faith even though the only time you encounter God's Word is on Sunday mornings, then why bother to open your Bible on the other six days of the week? Or if

someone says he believes in Jesus, they why should we bother worrying about what else he believes about things like what the Bible is or what it says about how we're saved, or the roles of men and women, or any other thing?

In a search for these minimum requirements for salvation, this cheap grace, we end up shifting the focus away from grace and the Lord and toward ourselves. Think about it.

If someone is asking how many Sundays they have to go to church, they're asking how many Sunday they have for themselves, to pursue the things they want to do.

If someone is wondering what are the minimum parts of the Bible they have to agree with to still be considered Christian, then they're asking how much of God's Word can they ignore and instead go with their own ideas or feelings.

If someone is asking how close they need to be to Christ and still be saved, they're asking how far away from Him can they get.

This cheap grace ends up destroying faith by making God into someone that you have to be with, not that you get to be with. It makes the worship of God something that we are grudgingly obligated to do, not something we are blessed to be able to do. It makes the gifts of God objects that you put up with, rather than treasures you constantly seek more of. Such a view works to break down faith, not build it up.

Another tragic effect of this cheap grace, this minimal approach to the Christian faith, is that it poisons the church over generations.

As one example that we can see all too clearly: One generation insists on going to church every Sunday. The next generation says most Sundays, but allows for some exceptions. The generation after them comes to church every once in a while, and the generation that follows never does.

There are plenty of other areas we could apply this to, but the point is that when the faith becomes an obligation that you have to do, then parents will never be zealous or joyful about teaching it to their children, and children will see it as something that is a negative and not to be desired. Every generation will justify lowering the bar of cheap grace just a little further until its lost in the dirt.

Now viewing grace cheaply doesn't mean that those gracious gifts of God stop working, and so the fault is God's, but rather that cheap grace causes us to despise those gifts and take them for granted. That's the example Paul gives in our Epistle reading, where he thoroughly debunks the idea of cheap grace.

The ancient Israelites were, as he writes, "all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ."

Those ancient Israelites all received the blessings of Christ Himself, and yet they took them for granted, grumbling against Him when He didn't allow them to do what they wanted, figuring that God had to bring them into the Promised Land even if they ignored His Word and chased after other gods.

The result? “With most of them God was displeased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.” Looking for the minimum led to the destruction of many of the ancient Israelites, and doing so leads to the destruction of many still today.

So we must not see grace either as a contract we’re bound to, or as something to be taken for granted or despised. How then are we to see grace? What do we make of this parable? The truth lies in the opposites of what we’ve just discussed.

First off, grace is a gift, freely given to us by our gracious master. Now, there is a contract, like those first workers had – namely the Law. Our God tells us to be holy as He is holy. If you want to be in the presence of the Sinless One, then you need to be sinless. If you want to be treated with perfect love, then love others perfectly. If you want to be judged justly by others, then make just judgments yourself.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

Obviously, none of us have kept this contract. We all have broken it, over and over again. If we were workers in the vineyard, we should have been thrown out long ago for sleeping on the job, harassing our fellow workers, stealing grapes and selling them on the side, and mocking the master to those outside the vineyard. None of us deserve that denarius, that gift of the master.

And yet the master doesn’t throw us out. No, instead His Son comes and works in the vineyard with us and for us. Christ is the one who bears the burden of the day and the scorching heat, as the workers say. It’s no coincidence that the very next thing St. Matthew records after this parable is Jesus telling His disciples that they are going to Jerusalem, where He will be mocked and flogged and crucified. Jesus bear the burdens of us all, the obligations we all fail to uphold.

In the parable, the master tells the workers hired throughout the day that he will give them whatever is right, whatever is just. If it were only us and our efforts, the right and just thing would be that we be thrown out of the vineyard into the outer darkness.

But Christ keeps the Law in our place, washes away our sins by His holy, innocent blood, so that when the end of the day comes, we are given the reward which Christ has earned for us, which the Father gives to us. That is grace.

When we rightly understand what it is that we’ve been given, when the Holy Spirit opens our hearts and minds to the treasure we hold in our hands, we cannot take it for granted.

When those workers received a denarius at the end of the day, the ones who had been there only part of the day realized that the master had chosen to give them far more than they deserved. The master had chosen to provide what they needed, that they might be sustained, even though they had in no way earned it.

How could they not come back the next day and work all the more, knowing that the master was so gracious? How could they not speak highly of this man who had given to them out of his generosity, and direct others to him? This vineyard, under this master, offered them what they needed, gave them security and provision.

Paul speaks of it as athletes running a race. No good, worthy runner would show up at the Olympics and just walk his race, satisfied with some sort of participation trophy. No, each competes to the best of his abilities, seeking in part to honor all those who have brought him to that point, be that his family, his country, or God. All recognize what a great opportunity they've been given and seek to make the most of it.

You have been brought into the Kingdom of God and given eternal life. You've been snatched from the fires of hell and promised the eternal peace of God. The Lord of glory has sworn to you that you can face this life with absolute confidence and boldness, both because not even a hair will fall from your head apart from His allowing it, and whenever you die in this life, you'll immediately go to something infinitely better.

You don't have to run this race. By grace, you get to run this race. It will be a challenge, as any race is. You'll get blisters and side-aches. You may trip on a hurdle and crash into the asphalt. The crowd may mock and boo you because they don't like your form.

But the Lord has told you what awaits you at the finish line. As Paul writes to Timothy, "there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing." By grace, we love His appearing – His appearing in His Word, His appearing in His Sacrament – for He has put that love in our hearts.

We rejoice that our Master has given us freely out of His riches, and we seek to share those riches with others, that they might have joy as we have joy. We work with joy in His vineyard, we run with joy the race He has placed before us, for we know that what awaits us is the imperishable wreath of eternal life.

In the name of Jesus, amen.