

“I’ll Give You Whatever’s Right”

In the name of him who does all things well, dear friends in Christ: Today’s Gospel, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, is one of the Bible’s head-scratchers. On the surface, the story is simple enough: a vineyard owner hires hands at various times throughout the day. Then, when the day’s work is done, he pays them all the same, regardless of how many hours they’ve worked. Simple. But it doesn’t seem right. And you’d get an argument from both ends of the spectrum. Could you imagine using it as a text to address a labor union? “Unfair! Those guys hired first should be getting paid seniority and overtime! Yeah, and benefits too!” Or how about presenting it at a meeting of staunchly conservative Ayn Rand-style capitalists? “Why, it’s pure socialism! Work only an hour and get paid a full day’s wage? Ridiculous! It will only encourage people to be lazy and unproductive!” By treating everyone equally, it seems that the owner has treated everyone unfairly. So what’s going on here? What is Jesus telling us in this parable that seems so contrary to human expectations?

It will be helpful to consider the context in which Jesus tells this unusual story. What’s happened is that a rich young man has come up to Jesus, and asked what it is he must do to earn eternal life. Jesus tells him that all he has to do is obey the commandments of God. “Which commands?” the man asks. “You know,” says Jesus, “don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t tell lies about people, honor your parents, and love your neighbor as yourself.” “But surely there’s *something* more,” says the man, “I’ve kept all the commands for as long as I’ve lived, but I still feel like something’s missing.”

Now, we can tell that this man was not a Lutheran because he didn’t seem to have any consciousness of his own sin. He figured that since he hadn’t physically choked or beat anyone to death, or stole any camels or goats, and because he generally got along with people, he must be obeying all the commands of God. Though, isn’t it interesting that he still realized that somehow he was falling short of the mark? Jesus wanted to show the man that he wasn’t as perfect as he thought he was, so he said, “I tell you what. You go sell everything you’ve got, give the money to the poor, and come follow me. Do this and you’ll have all kinds of treasures in heaven. Well, the man was very rich. And he thought to himself, “Give it all up? All this property and money I’ve inherited? For who? A bunch of undeserving poor people? No way! I could never give any of my things to *them* ...” And then it hit him: that he really didn’t love his neighbor as himself. And if he hadn’t kept that command, maybe there were others he’d broken as well. We’re told that he went away very sad because he was unwilling to part with his great wealth. And that’s good, in a way, because it means that at least he had begun the kind of self examination that can lead to repentance – and hopefully, to the recognition that what he needed to inherit eternal life was not something else to do, but a Savior from sin.

But the disciples had been listening to this exchange, and their ears had really perked up when Jesus said something about treasures in heaven. With cold calculation their minds fix on the thought of personal reward. “Ah, the payoff! Now we’re talking! Forget this rich guy, we want to hear more about what *we’re* going to get.” It’s Peter who speaks up, “Say, Lord, we’ve left everything to follow you. Tell us more about the treasure there will be for us in heaven.” Behind the question is the desire to do a cost benefit analysis. Will the final reward be big enough to make up for the cost and effort now?

Jesus told them that when he returned in glory, there would indeed be great honor and reward for those who follow him. If you're wondering about your investment, there's no better deal in all of Creation. You can't begin to imagine what wonders await you in the next life. But, at the same time, Jesus warned them, especially in the here and now, things are not what you expect. And the rules by which you would make a simple cost benefit analysis simply do not apply.

It's at this point that Jesus tells the parable of the workers in the vineyard. What seems at first to be a great injustice is intended to demonstrate the error in the way the disciples are thinking. They expect that there should be a direct correlation between the amount of work done now in this life and the reward that comes at the end. "The more I give up now for the kingdom of God, the longer, harder, and more diligently I work, the greater should be the pay off. That only makes sense." But as it turns out, those who come in at the last, who follow Christ for only ten minutes (or ten seconds!), will be given the full reward. Obviously they didn't earn it. They get it only because the owner is a very gracious and generous guy. What they receive, they receive by grace alone.

The mistake made by those who are hired first is assuming that they are entitled to more because they've done more. After all, they think, "we've borne the heat and burden of the day. We are the ones who are carrying this whole operation." It's precisely the same mistake made by the rich man who wanted to know how he could earn eternal life. The answer is: You can't. The only way you're going to get it is to receive it as a gift. If the amount of work you did had anything to do with receiving the reward, no one would ever get it. Those hired first receive what they get just like those hired last: by grace alone.

The whole thing comes into clear focus when we look again at the parable, and listen to what the owner tells the second group of hired workers. When he sends them into the vineyard, he tells them, "Whatever is *right* I will give you." The word translated "right" can mean "just" or "fair"; but it is the same word we also translate as "righteous". That's the key. We hear the word and automatically think, "He's going to pay them what's fair: an appropriate fraction of the wage he promised to the first group." But that's not what the Owner is thinking. He is going to give them not what's fair, but what's "righteous". And the only thing in this fallen world he can give which is truly righteous is the life of Lord Jesus Christ. Now there's a heavenly treasure.

Some of you have been Christians all your lives. You've long supported the work of the kingdom by your prayers, your gifts, your time, and the special abilities God has given you. The danger our Lord Jesus warns us against in this parable is the sin of thinking that the sacrifices you've made for the kingdom are in any way related to the great reward he gives you. Every day he gives to each of us the same thing: the forgiveness of sin, the righteousness of Christ, and everlasting life. And when we start thinking, "it's not fair that God should give to that fellow who's done so little the same thing he's giving me", we only show that we don't recognize our own sinfulness, nor do we understand or appreciate the grace of God. Trust me on this one: you don't want God to give you what's fair. Instead, thank him that he doesn't.

But we who understand this part of parable are exposed to another danger. What if those hired at first had known what was going to happen at quitting time? Why show up early in the marketplace at six o'clock in the morning to be the first one hired, when you could sleep in and go to the market and get hired at nine? Or noon? Or lounge around all day, slip in at the last hour, and still get the same thing as everyone else? Sadly, many people who really should know better try to play this game of spiritual "chicken" – trying to show their reckless independence from the Lord by waiting until the last possible moment to turn. Sadder still, is the

fact that many of them “win” the game, and never turn at all. But when the sun sets on their life, they won’t be remembered for how brave and daring they were; but rather for what a foolish waste they made of their lives.

But if you’re here today you’re already in the vineyard. And whether you were brought in by the Owner at dawn, when you were an infant, or at the eleventh hour of your life, there’s a lot of grapes for you to pick. You can detect a real sense of urgency in the way the Owner keeps looking for more workers. And if you know anything about harvesting grapes, you know that when they come on and are ripe and ready, every day – every hour – counts. But knowing, as we do, that everyone receives the same “wages”, another danger we face is the sin of thinking, “Why knock myself out? Why should I break my back doing the work of the kingdom when so many others are doing so much less – or nothing at all?”

This sort of evil thinking manifests itself in many different ways. Take, for example, the “fair share” mentality, that says, “Forget about what I could be doing or what gifts and talents God has given me, I’ll do only what I think is my part, and not a bit more.” Closely related is the “retirement” mentality, which says, “I’ve already done my fair share, now it’s time for someone younger to take the burden.” I have to wonder how many productive years of work have been wasted by these self-determined limits and retirements. What do you suppose would have happened if the overseer of the vineyard had come across a few of those hands who had been hired first, who had taken it upon themselves to knock off in the mid-afternoon because “they’d already done more than their share”? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not suggesting that we need to burn ourselves out by volunteering to single-handedly do everything that needs to be done. What I’m saying is that we should never set our own work quota based on what we perceive to be the equitable standard. God hasn’t called you to judge anyone else’s performance, or measure your own work against what others are doing. He’s called you to work in his vineyard: to see the work that needs to be done and to put forth your best effort.

Another more subtle way people sometimes rationalize killing time in the vineyard is by the “special gift” alibi. That’s the one that says, “Here’s my talent. It’s what I do best. Take it or leave it. But if I can’t use it, then forget it. There’s no work for me here.” And so all kinds of jobs go undone, and all kinds of opportunities are lost, because able hands are unwilling.

The common denominator in these ways of thinking is, once again, a failure to understand and appreciate the grace of God, and the great gift he has given us in Jesus Christ. Because if we had only a vague comprehension of the infinite value of the gifts God freely gives us in Christ every day, not to mention what glories he will one day shower upon us, thankfulness alone would impel us to devote every moment to his service. But the truth is that we have more than thankfulness to motivate us. When he invited us into his vineyard, he filled us with his own Holy Spirit to work in us the desire to do his will. Our Lord is so gracious that not only does he reach into the lost world to save sinners, he actually makes us his partners in helping to serve and save others.

Paul understood that. In today’s Epistle we hear him anticipating martyrdom. He’s soon to go to trial, and he believes that this might be the end. Paul has worked hard in the vineyard of the Lord. He’s done “his share” a hundred times over. He’s done plenty of jobs he’d rather not have had. And for his trouble he’s been whipped, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned, starved, and humiliated. He’s an old man now, and very weary. On one hand he longs to have it over with: to depart and be with Christ in eternal rest and happiness; to receive his final reward. But then he thinks about it, and writes to the believers at Philippi, “No, it’s better for you that I remain. I’ve still got lots of work to do to help you and many others – and because of that,

I'm certain I will remain – and I'm glad of it." You see, for Paul, doing the Lord's work was itself a great reward.

And now, today, the master calls us to work in his vineyard. And he calls us to repent of our sinful ways of thinking about his service: of thinking that somehow we've earned his grace, of begrudging it to others we judge to be undeserving, of holding back effort, and of failing to make the most of the opportunities he gives us. For the sake of his Son, he does forgive us, and he sets us to work once again. May he give us Paul's passion for his work, as he continues to give us what is righteous: that is, his own Son – his perfect life and his sacrificial death for our sin – so that we may be pure and blameless from now until the day of the Lord Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!