

God's Grace Is Illustrated In The Parable Of The Labourers In The Vineyard.

Text: Mat 20:1-16

1) God's grace in the call

Suggested Hymns:

2) God's grace in the reward

851, 330, 329, 840, 159

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 20:1-16, ¹ *“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² “Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ “And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ “and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. ⁵ “Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.*

⁶ *“And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ ⁷ “They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’*

⁸ *“So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ ⁹ “And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. ¹⁰ “But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. ¹¹ “And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, ¹² “saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’*

¹³ *“But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ ‘Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. ¹⁵ ‘Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’ ¹⁶ “So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.” (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Grace is the most remarkable of all of God's attributes. It is the source of the greatest wonder in heaven and on earth. It is the theme of the grandest sermons ever preached by Paul, Luther, and other great preachers and of the humble Christian's talk who tells a fellow-sinner of God's love.

It is the central thought of some of the grandest hymns of the Church. It is the very heart of the Gospel. Our text is a wonderful presentation of the great all-embracing, never-failing grace of God.

In the owner of a vineyard it pictures God as going out after the sinner, calling him early and late to enter into His vineyard, and at the end offering rich and undeserved rewards to those who have entered into His service. Let us consider God's grace shown in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. God's Grace In The Call

The Vineyard. The Christian Church is frequently pictured as a vineyard. We read in Psalm 80:8-15, ⁸ *You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations, and planted it. ⁹ You prepared room for it, And caused it to take deep root, And it filled the land. ¹⁰ The hills were covered with its shadow, And the mighty cedars with its boughs. ¹¹ She sent out her boughs to the Sea, And her branches to the River. ¹² Why have You broken down her hedges, So that all who pass by the way pluck her fruit? ¹³ The boar out of the woods uproots it, And the wild beast of the field devours it. ¹⁴ Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts; Look down from heaven and see, And visit this vine ¹⁵ And the vineyard which Your right hand has planted, And the branch that You made strong for Yourself.*

The Lord's vineyard is thus a picture of all the rich blessings of salvation, and the call is an invitation to come into the vineyard and to partake of its rich fruit. We read in Psalm 92:14, ¹⁴ *They shall still bear fruit in old age; They shall be fresh and flourishing.*

And in Isaiah 5:1-2, ¹ *Now let me sing to my Well-beloved A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard On a very fruitful hill. ² He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes.*

The Call. The parable pictures the owner as going out to hire labourers in the vineyard. God calls labourers into the Church. But the call is one of grace.

Firstly, God needs no workers. God who by His almighty Word *“made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them”*¹ is not dependent upon poor mortal man to build His kingdom. God needs no preachers, no mission boards, synods, and collections. That God makes use of us is pure grace.

Learn to appreciate the privilege of being a co-worker *“together with God,”*² to be permitted to contribute toward the support and extension of His Church, and to tell fellow-sinners about the Saviour.

Secondly, we are called even though we were idle. If some one seeks employment, he goes out after it. However, the parable pictures men as standing idle in the market-place. They are idle in spiritual things. They are *“dead in trespasses and sins.”*³ In earthly matters they are very much alive, always up and doing, planning, scheming, and plotting.

But spiritually they have not taken one step toward the Lord, performed no good work. Yes, on the part of man there is only rebellion, and resistance. What wonderful grace which brings unwilling sinners to the Gospel blessings!

Thirdly, the call is extended without any merit or worthiness in man. When Paul begins to speak of grace, he can hardly find enough words. Notice in Eph. 2:8-9 the heaping of expressions which emphasise that salvation is by grace: *“not of yourselves”; “it is the gift of God”; “not of works”; “lest any man should boast.”*

Grace and works exclude each other. It is either by grace or by works. We read in Romans 11:6, ⁶ *And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.*

And in Romans 5:15, ¹⁵ *But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many.*⁴

We read in Deuteronomy 9:5 that Israel was not called *“because of [his] righteousness or the uprightness of [his] heart.”* Likewise we read in Titus 3:5, ⁵ *not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.*

The hymnist makes it clear that the call is extended without any merit or worthiness in man in these words,⁵

Not the labours of my hands
Can fulfil Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears for ever flow,
All for sin could not atone:
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

Fourthly, it is a call of the pure grace of God in Christ. We read in Ephesians 2:7, ⁷ *that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.* And in Ephesians 1:7, ⁷ *In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.* And in 1 Timothy 1:14, ¹⁴ *And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.* Think of the criminal on the cross who was plucked as a ‘partly burned piece of wood’ out of the fire. Think of the fanatical Saul made into a zealous Paul.

The hymnist wrote⁶

Grace first contrived the way,
To save rebellious man,
And all the steps that grace display
Which drew the wondrous plan.

Fifthly, that the man hired works for all the day is another mark of God's grace. Not only once but time and time again God seeks to save the sinner. The third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hour may be interpreted as referring to the various periods in the history of the world.

Man had hardly fallen into sin, when God immediately extended to him the promise of a Saviour. Again and again the Lord pleaded with the children of Israel to return to Him.⁷ This continued throughout the period of the Old Testament. And it is no different in the New Testament. Early and late the Lord is calling both Jews and Gentiles to receive the blessings of salvation.

Also in the individual's life we find the same grace of God at work early and late. Early in infancy the Lord calls through Holy Baptism, again through Christian parents, Christian instruction, confirmation, through the public preaching, private admonition, through friends and acquaintances, and a God-fearing spouse.

Even in the eleventh hour, at the eventide of life, the Lord is still eager to win the sinner. We read in 1 Timothy 2:4 that *God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*. And in 2 Peter 3:9, *'The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*.

2. God's Grace In The Reward

The evening has come. The steward is instructed to give the labourers their pay. But what a strange procedure we notice here! The last are made first and, stranger still, the last receive much more than they expect.

Although they were hired near the close of day, they are given a rich reward. Even the others who had been hired earlier in the day and had worked much longer realise that the master has dealt very generously with these last workers. They were treated too generously, in fact, according to their own opinions.

When we think of all that God has done for us in body, soul, and mind, must we not say with Jacob, as written in Genesis 32:10, ¹⁰ ***“I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies?”***

Call to your attention to the temporal blessings which have come to you by God’s mercy, *“without any merit or worthiness in me.”* Above all, this shows that the entire work of salvation from first to last is a work of God’s grace.

As we stand before the Lord at the close of life’s day, we must confess that we are unprofitable servants. But instead of well-deserved punishment in hell the Lord gives rich rewards. Not only does He take us to heaven, but He fulfils the promises of a special reward which He has made. Heaven is not the *“denarius”* for which the labourers bargained with the householder. We are rather to think of the many special rewards which God has promised.

Nothing that a child of God does by faith to the glory of God and the benefit of his neighbour shall go unrewarded. We read in Luke 6:35 ³⁵ ***“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High.*** And in Matthew 10:42, ⁴² ***“And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.”*** And in Revelation 14:13 ¹³ ***“Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.”***⁸

The song of the redeemed in heaven will be to the praise of God’s grace, Revelation 5:12, ¹² saying with a loud voice: ***“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!”*** What an inducement to joyful service for the Lord! Gladly bear the toil and burden of the day, for we have a most gracious Lord.

God’s rewards are so undeserved that even the dissatisfied must acknowledge it. But they do so with jealousy and bitterness. That is a sad note in this story. Instead of rejoicing over the goodness of their Lord, they grumble and murmur.

We are to see our own picture in these complaining labourers. We, too, have that spirit! Our self-righteousness crops out, we have labored longer; we

have suffered more; we have contributed more; we have been members of the church since infancy; we have shouldered the duties and responsibilities of supporting the church, have taught in the Sunday-school, held offices in the church, which required much time and effort, etc.

In short, we do not like to see these last, who have done so little, suffered so little, for Christ, contributed so little, perhaps have just been confirmed in an adult group, have repented on their death-bed, etc., be treated exactly like us by our Lord.

Friend, do you know what grace is? Oh, be on your guard against the spirit of the elder brother, in Luke 15:29, *'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends.*

The landowner justifies his action by addressing one of the complainants, *Friend, I am doing you no wrong.* He points to the agreement. You demand that I deal fairly and justly with you. So be it. *Take what is yours and go your way.*

If we want the Lord to deal with us according to justice rather than grace, we shall be sent away as written in Psalm 130:3, ³ *If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?* or Malachi 3:2, ² *“But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire And like launderer’s soap.”*⁹

The Lord, furthermore, has a right to deal this way because He is the Lord of all. Who are we to dictate to the Lord? Take note of Romans 9:15-16, ¹⁵ *For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.”* ¹⁶ *So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.*¹⁰ Our text says *Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?*

Finally, the Lord once more emphasises His goodness. It was His goodness that called us into the vineyard. It is His goodness that prompts the reward. Grace from beginning to end.

Open your hearts wide to receive God’s bounteous grace. Ward off all self-righteousness and jealousy. Serve God diligently in grateful and unselfish

service. Let grace be the impelling force of your Christian life and your sweet comfort in death. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Exodus 20:11

² 1 Corinthians 3:9

³ Ephesians 2:1

⁴ See also Rom 3:24, Acts 15:11

⁵ Hymn 330

⁶ ALHB 342 v2

⁷ Joel 2:13; Isa. 1:18; Ez. 33:11; Jer. 35:15

⁸ See also Matt. 25:23; Rom. 2:10; Eph. 6:8

⁹ See also 1 Samuel 6:20

¹⁰ See also Rom. 11:20-22