

Septuagesima 2017

“So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.**

I trust each of you woke up this morning and immediately wished your loved ones a “Happy Septuagesima!” No? Well, I guess that’s understandable since this is one of the more obscure times in the Church year. Actually, this season, the three Sundays before Lent, are known collectively as the pre-Lenten season. Yet each Sunday has a particular name: Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima, which means 70, 60, and 50. They represent roughly the number of days until Easter, that central event of the Christian year around which everything pivots. These “gesima” Sundays are preparation for that austere and holy time of Lent, and reflect that spirit in their collects and Scripture readings. And on this “third” Sunday before Lent, St. Matthew gives us a glimpse into what life is like in God’s Kingdom.

Now I have to say, the parable our Lord tells this morning is not a well-liked story, especially by those who do not have a good knowledge of Scripture, because it hits at our sense of what is fair

and just. Some might even be angry at the thought of two workers receiving the same wage when their work hours were significantly different.

But here is what you must remember: The parable is NOT about life in this world. It is, in fact, a description of how God treats his people. Our Lord says, "The Kingdom of heaven is like..." Not earth, but heaven. Keep that in mind as we continue.

In the parable, our householder divides up the workers into two general groups: those that work for a wage, and those that depend upon the faithfulness of the householder. To the first group the owner promises a specific wage, but to the latter all he promises is to do what is right. The first are diligent, working through the heat of the day while some of the latter are idle most of that time.

Compare this parable against Aesop's fable of the ant and the grasshopper, where the ant worked hard all summer and the grasshopper simply played. In the end, the ant reaps the reward of a good life in the winter while the grasshopper perishes. Using that same logic for this parable, we expect the owner to similarly reward his workers-the harder workers get more, the slackers, less.

Yet both are paid the same. If that wasn't bad enough, the harder workers are sent away and rebuked. But this is simply another example of how Kingdom economics is so backwards according to the world-or perhaps I should say, the world is backwards according to the Kingdom.

The problem with imposing the order of this world upon the next is that try as we might, we can never place God in our debt. It is always the other way around. Not that he hasn't given us our chance: In that first vineyard of Eden, God gave us our task list when he laid out Adam's responsibilities to him. However, Adam immediately "sold his soul to the company store", thus depriving him and his posterity of any chance of paying their debt. When the owner of the vineyard promises a day's wage for work done, it is His Grace that we receive, regardless of our own efforts. Our debt to Him is so great that no amount of work on our part can begin to pay it off, much less earn a wage. When God promises us anything for our works, it is always because he has mercy on us, and NOT because our works earned anything in his sight.

These two groups of workers, one promised a wage and the other promised what is right, also represent the two major covenants, or

bargains, that God has made with his people: the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace. The first is typified in Leviticus 18:

“So you shall keep my statutes and my judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord.”

God gives us his requirements; if we keep them, we make it to heaven. However, he also gives us a couple of more promises related to the covenant, both recorded in Paul’s epistle to the Romans:

“For all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God.” (3:23)

And,

“For the wages of sin is death.” (6:23)

You see, God gives us all he has promised, and usually more. Yet to think our efforts have merited any eternal favor puts us in the same category as the first laborers hired by the landowner. We get what is due us and then we are sent away. The most deserving, as it appears to us, earn God’s sternest rebuke.

Why? Why does he reject those that seemingly deserve his favor the most? Well, simply put, God is in debt to no one. Be careful of

demanding justice for yourself from God. Remember our second quote from Romans? It says we are worthy of nothing but death. But what of this other group? What was so special about them that they received the householder's approbation in spite of their lack of effort?

Their major advantage is that they work under a different bargain, a different covenant. Their relationship to the landowner is based upon trust, and not just due. When they agreed to work, it was only that the householder would do them right. In other words, they trusted the householder. And it is through this trust that they get their reward. Note also that this trust is the motivation for their work. So it is with us. Just as the earlier part of that verse from Romans states that the wages of sin is death, so it's second half promises:

"but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus."

You see, when our reward is based upon the goodness of the giver and not the merits we earn, he is free to give to each as he chooses. The final words of the householder is the climax and key to interpreting the parable:

“For the last shall be first and the first shall be last. For many are called, but few chosen.”

In the Kingdom of God, our perceived position makes no difference because God shows no partiality. In God’s economy, nothing about us counts, nothing we DO qualifies us to receive such a favor. And that’s what the workers in the vineyard didn’t understand: God’s favor upon us is a free gift that cannot be earned.

We do not receive what we truly deserve, rather, we receive what we don’t deserve; that Gift above ALL Gifts: Grace.

In case you haven’t figured the parable out by now, the “householder” in the story is God the Father; a Father who dispenses Grace freely and equally.

Those workers first hired say to the householder, “and thou hast made them (the later workers), equal to us.” In other words, those who worked less should be given less. This thinking comes out of a selfish desire, a self-centeredness-being envious at the blessings others have received.

Avoid being a performance based Christian. Performance based Christians are the Pharisees of today. Instead, focus on WHO we

have rather than what we can do. We have a Lord who saved us and a Father who loves us.

On the last day when we stand before Him, there will be no distinction between rich or poor. There will be no difference between priest and garbage man. The gift of salvation will be available to all.

The first vineyard workers in today's Gospel started out comparing themselves to others. This led to coveting, which led to complaining, which ultimately led to criticizing. And that's the way sin works: it builds. But thankfully, God's grace is ever present to take that sin away.

The very last thing that Jesus reminds us of is that well-known phrase, "For many are called but few are chosen."

You see, as freely as God's gift of grace is given, it must likewise be freely accepted. This means that we say with all confidence, 'I accept you Lord Jesus and come to do your will.' For it is only when we seek his will that we receive the fullness of his Grace and Mercy.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.