

**The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 20, 2020**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

**More than Wages—Grace!**

Matthew 20:1–16

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*


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Hear again the final words of the master of the house from today's parable: **“Friend, I’m doing you no wrong. Didn’t you agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”** And the last word belonging to Jesus: **“So the last will be first, and the first last”** (vv 13–16)

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The Gospel of Matthew shows a special interest in the parables of Jesus that have to do with debts, wages, and money matters. That makes sense. Before becoming an apostle, St. Matthew had a first career as a tax collector. So he had the mind of an accountant—you know, the kind of mind that won't rest until the accounts are balanced to the last penny. I wonder if these particular parables—last week's Parable of the Unforgiving Servant and this week's Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard—I wonder if these parables stuck with Matthew because they don't quite add up. Because they're kind of head-scratchers, especially for people who like math. Accounting can handle pennies just fine, but it does a terrible job with grace.

In today's parable we see how

THE MASTER IS GRACIOUS WITH ALL WHO LABOR FOR HIM,  
NO MATTER HOW LONG OR HOW SHORT THEY'VE LABORED.

I.

It goes like this: One day, a master hires laborers to work in his vineyard. Even though they start at different times—some at 6:00 am, others at 9:00 am or noon or 3:00 pm, and a few at 5:00 pm, just an hour before quitting time—despite their hours being so different, the master pays them all the same. When the workday ends, they all receive a denarius—a day's wage. Even the fellows who spent the first eleven-twelfths of the day idle in the marketplace.

The injustice of this isn't lost on the workers. They knew the principal of equal work, equal pay, and now they're feeling overworked and underpaid. So the guys who started at 6:00 am complain: "Hey! Those other guys only worked one hour and you're paying them the same as us! Why, we had to deal with the full weight of the day's burdens. We worked right through the scorching heat—without a siesta! That's not fair." I really do sympathize with them. It isn't "fair" in the way we think of fairness. Somewhere in Scripture it even says, "**The laborer deserves his wages**" (1 Tim 5:18). And that's true as far as labor in this world is concerned. A worker is worthy of his or her hire (hear that, employers!), and workers are to serve their employers mindful that their service is being rendered to God (hear that, employees!). But Jesus' parable isn't about *this* world. 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**" (v 1). When it comes to the kingdom of heaven, there's more than wages. There's pity, mercy, and love for the least and the last. There's grace.

To those who would earn their way, it does feel like the guys who came late have gamed the system. They get everything for doing next-to-nothing. That's how it seems when we view a relationship with the Lord through the lens of the law. That's how it seems when we try to bring collective bargaining into the kingdom of heaven. "If we do *this* for You, Lord, we expect you to pay us *that*." Really? You really want to bargain with God for pennies? You do know, don't you, that our currency isn't any good up there? That heaven itself is way, *way* beyond any reward you could imagine, ask for, or deserve? Yet that's the attitude of the first wave of workers. **After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, the master sent them into his vineyard** (v 2). It almost sounds like those workers were bargaining with him for their wages, doesn't it?

## II.

It's different with the workers called later. You get the feeling that they're just happy to have some work. You'll see what I mean in just a second. I'm intrigued by the way Jesus tells this parable. It's told from the perspective of the owner of the vineyard. While he agrees to hire the first workers, did you notice how it goes with the later workers? **Going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace.** He *saw* them. He took note of their situation and he was moved by what he saw—moved by compassion to bring them into the vineyard, too. And even at the eleventh hour, we're told that **he went out and found others standing** (vv 3, 6). He, the master, takes the initiative and *finds* them, almost as if they were lost.

Now I know that we want to be hard on these other workers. We hear that they're idle, just standing around the marketplace, and we want to nail them for being lazy. If you don't work, you don't eat. That's in the Bible, too. But that's not necessarily what the

word “idle” means here. It *might* mean that they’re lazy, but it could also mean that they’re unemployed, unused, inactive, unwanted. When the master asks them why they’re standing there idle all day, did you catch what they said? **“Because no one has hired us”** (v 7). Right here I start to have a little sympathy for them. It’s not like they’re having the time of their life and then getting a full day’s pay for one hour of work.

In fact, what seems most unfair to me is that these other guys spend eleven hours *not* having any work. I wonder how that felt. I bet they were bored. I bet they were concerned about how to put food on the table for their families. I bet they were tired of being unemployed, tired of standing there all day with nothing to do, tired of being passed over. I wonder if they felt like dirt, unworthy, losers, the least and the last, until the master sees them and finds them and wants them. I wonder if that’s why the master of the vineyard starts with them when he gives out the wages. To show them they’re worth something to him. Wages that come not by their work but by his grace.

Speaking of their wages, those later workers didn’t have any formal agreement with the master. No contract. He simply says, **“You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is just and right I’ll give you”** (v 4). He says even less to the last group—only, **“You go into the vineyard too”** (v 7). They don’t even know what they’ll be paid, almost as if they’re not doing it for the pay. They’re working on trust. They have faith that the master will indeed give them a just salary. They believe that the master is a man of his word; they have faith in him. That seems about right for the kingdom of heaven. When the master calls you to work, go, and trust Him to make it right in the end, trust Him to crown the work He gives you with His own reward.

### III.

So do you still want to grumble and complain? Do you still think that you’re overworked and underpaid by God? Would you envy the guys who spent all day doing nothing? Would you look with evil on the master who is good and on the grace he shows to the last and the least? It only makes sense to grumble if we think of work as a drudgery; if we think of being idle in the marketplace as better than being with the Lord in His vineyard; if we prefer being self-employed, doing our own thinking and taking care of our own business, to being employed by the Lord for His work and His purposes. But God means work truly to be a joy and a delight; if He fills it with meaning and purpose for those engaged in it; if the Christian life is actually good and beneficial, then it’s those entering the vineyard at the last hour who’ve lost out and missed something! They only get one-twelfth the joy of the vineyard! But thank God, He still gives them that denarius in the end. It’s eternal life for all who heed the master’s call, even if *this* life wasn’t all it should’ve been or could’ve been for them. In other words, the person who heeds the call only on his deathbed hasn’t gotten away with

anything good or worthwhile—except grace! But he missed out on a lifetime of living and working in the master’s vineyard. And if God wills to give to the last worker as He gives to you who came earlier, isn’t that His to do? As the master says, “**Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?**” (v 15).

So who are we to complain about grace? You and I both know that none of us are getting in based on the work we’ve done, even if we’ve done a lot of work and done it well. Whatever He gives, He gives to us by grace. The master has earned the right to give that grace to whomever He wills, to be generous even with the least and the last, to do what He chooses with what belongs to Him. He’s earned that right by laying down His life for all who labor and toil and work *and* for all who are idle and unemployed and last and least. It’s grace at the price of His blood. And what has He chosen to do with what belongs to Him? He’s chosen to give it to you. He wills that you have it. His forgiveness—from the mouth of His called and ordained servant into your ears. His life and salvation—given by His word with the body and blood He puts into your mouth. Which of us will complain when our ears and our mouths are stuffed with grace?

So take up His call to enter into the vineyard and work in whatever little corner He gives you. Use the tools He puts into your hands. Do the labor that He sets before you, whether in the vineyard of your home or your community or your church, and see it as work that comes from Him and is for Him and is done with Him. Rejoice that you’ve been given this opportunity to labor and do good, and rejoice with the others who get to join in the work, even if it’s just at the very end.

It’s more than wages in the kingdom of heaven, dear friends, it’s grace, first to last and top to bottom. And great, indeed, will be Christ’s reward, the reward He shares with you, the reward that comes from His bleeding and dying and rising and living and loving. “**So the last will be first, and the first last**” (v 16), and whether first or last, He wants us and sees us and finds us and calls us, and we’ll be thankful to have even a denarius from Him.

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

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