

Septuagesima

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[0:00] Be acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer! Amen. Please be seated. You may have noticed that the churches again changed their clothing, as it were.

The green of Epiphany has given way to purple. And this marks our passage from the Christmas cycle into the Easter cycle.

The season where we contemplate not just who Christ is, but what he has done for our salvation. His ministry, suffering, resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

So from here all the way to Pentecost Sunday is this Easter cycle, as it were. But before Lent begins, the church gives us something older and wiser than our modern impatience allows.

The purpose for which we desperately need. And these things are the strange Latin-named Sundays of Descimatide.

[1:29] These three pre-Lenten weeks remind us that the heart must be prepared before the body is disciplined.

It reminds us that repentance must be taught before it is practiced. And it gives us a proper perspective and motive as we enter the penitential season of Lent.

In this parable of our Lord, which we have before us this morning, we are confronted with a scandal that grace is not earned.

Before the church calls us to Lenten discipline, this Septuagessimus Sunday teaches us why our work cannot save. And just as an aside to my Latin students, you have to tell me downstairs during coffee hour, after the annual meeting, what Septuagessimus means.

Or just Septuagessimus means. So, think about it. That's just for them. So, but for the rest of you, I invite you to open your Bibles to Matthew 20.

[2:39] And we're going to be in verse 1 to 16. It's on page 980 of your pew Bible. Page 980.

Now, the gospel is deliberately offensive. Deliberately offensive. Do you know that? Jesus tells this parable right after the encounter with the rich young ruler in Matthew 19.

This rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked Jesus, What must I do to inherit eternal life? He couldn't surrender his possessions when God told him what he needs to do.

He couldn't surrender his possessions because they were great. And so he went away sorrowful. And the disciples and the world around seeing this, recognizing that this man looked righteous by every human standard.

He's a righteous man. But Jesus disclosed what no human religion wants to hear. Jesus said in that interaction, With man, that is righteousness before God, with man it is impossible.

[3:54] But with God, all things are possible. And so upon hearing this, Peter, the spokesman for the other 12, Asked the question which we providentially read in last week's gospel reading.

Peter asked, Look, we have left everything and followed you. What will we have then? And Jesus said to him, Truly I say to you, In the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits upon his glorious throne, You who have followed me will also be seated on 12 thrones, Judging the 12 tribes of Israel. And all will leave house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or fields, For the sake of my name, will receive one hundredfold, And will inherit eternal life.

For many who are first will be last, And the last first. That's Matthew 19, verse 27 to 30. And that's the context for this parable that we have before us.

Peter's question is one we all secretly want answered. We have left everything and followed you.

[5:13] What then will we have? And Jesus answering promises a reward in his kingdom. But he had this warning that governs the gospel reading this morning.

Many who are first will be last, and the last first. That phrase serves as a bookend to the parable and to this passage that we read.

And the parable of the vineyard explains why that is so. The kingdom of God is not about where you stand, or what you've done. It is about God's sovereignty.

It's about God's sovereign generosity. It is a gift, not a wage earned by effort. And this truth applies especially to the disciples.

And it applies to us, who are disciples of Christ as well. It's not for outsiders, this parable. It is not for the un-evangelized. This parable that Jesus tells is for those who are in the family of God.

[6:18] Those who belong to Jesus already. Who are disciples of his. Followers of his. And this parable tells us plainly that salvation is not about merit. It reminds us of that.

And notice where the parable begins. The workers do not seek the vineyard. Who's seeking them? It was the master who seeks the workers.

We're told that he goes out early. And again at the 3rd, and the 6th, and the 9th, and even the 11th hour.

Now this, for our own sort of mindset to understand, this is like 6 a.m. 6 a.m. in the morning is the first hour. All the way to the 11th hour at 5 p.m.

And so the master goes out every 3 hour intervals. 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. being the first century Jewish work day. From sun up to sunset.

[7:17] And so the master goes out seeking workers for his vineyard. This is the sovereignty of grace. Some are called early in life.

Some when they're youths. Some as adults. Some even at the 11th hour. Like the thief on the cross. But all are called.

All are called not because they're useful. Not because they have something inherently in them that makes them worthy. They're called because the master is generous.

Even those who wasted their lives in the marketplace are sought by mercy and invited into the vineyard. The workers depend entirely on the master's call.

They do not decide to work on their own free will. They are hired by the Lord. Even hiring at the 11th hour shows his kindness.

[8:18] It shows that no one is left standing without hope. And yet this grace is not to be marked or presumed upon wherever you are in your life. We do not hone our time.

We must remember that. We do not measure our years. We're not in charge of those things. We must seek the Lord while he may yet be found. You don't know whether this is your first hour.

Or your ninth hour. Or your 11th hour. Eat the call. Seek him while he may yet be found. And in this parable as it continues, we're told that when evening comes, the payment order reveals the heart of these people who have been called into the vineyard.

Those who work the least were called to receive their wages first. And what did the master do?

They received a full day's wage. Those who have only worked an hour.

And the first workers, what does this reveal about them? They started to grumble. And they were grumbling not because they were cheated. Mind you.

[9:29] It's important for us to know that. They were grumbling not because they were cheated. But because grace made others equal to them. That's where the grumbling stems from.

All day long, they've been watching and working. They'd seen what was given to the late comers who came. The one hour workers. They expected that this meant, even though they had agreed at the beginning of the day to a denarius for a day's wage, they expected that if the one hour worker got a denarius, that they would be given more.

But they were given the same amount. Day two received the denarius. Because this is what they agreed on. But that's not what they were expecting.

They were not happy. Although just a few moments before, I assumed that they would have been quite happy after the end of the day to receive a denarius. Imagine if the master called them up first. And they received their denarius and then went on home. There would have been like a day's wage for a day's work. This master is fair and generous. And he keeps to his agreement.

[10:40] But now, they saw these Johnny-come-latelys. They saw what they were getting. And they compared how each of them had worked in the vineyard.

And they did not think that it was fair after all. It's not that they wanted the vineyard owner to be impartial. It's quite the opposite, actually.

They wanted a ranking. They wanted a scale of merit. They wanted partiality. But the master, instead, offers generously.

And what outraged them was the equal treatment. That the master gave. Those who were last worked for one hour. Those who were last worked for one hour.

And you have made them equal with us, they said. Who have borne the burden of the day and the heat of the day. And it is that equality.

[11:39] The master making those Johnny-come ladies equal with them. It is that equality, that lack of distinction, that is so offensive to them.

And this, friends, is the poison of self-justification. This is the poison of envy. This is the pride that forgets that everything, including even our obedience, is a gift from God.

This is the elder brother's complaint in that parable about the prodigal son. This is the Jewish resentment of Gentiles.

This is the lifelong churchgoers despising the newly repentant notorious sinner. The early workers received an equal wage with laborers who worked for just an hour.

And so their joyful anticipation of receiving a just wage, that joyful anticipation turned to grumbling because they expected more.

[12:43] Your Christian pedigree, the year of Christian faith, the labors you've performed in God's vineyard, His church, your gifts and talents, the burden of the day that you've borne, the many times you've endured the heat of the day, as it were.

None of this qualify you for different treatment. For better treatment. It doesn't qualify you for better treatment either. You cannot demand your rights because of what you've done.

Because you have no right before God. In the end, brothers and sisters, we are all laborers in the vineyard. And we are only there in that vineyard because He called us by grace.

Here, Josemite does its deep work. Here, we're meant to come together and reflect before we enter into Lent.

Before Lent asks us to do the work of repentance. This third day before Lent Sunday teaches us why repentance itself cannot justify us.

[14:03] Even our repentance must rest at the end of the day on Christ's finished work. St. Paul, whose life and ministry we remembered last Sunday, he who labored more than all, said this.

He said that he worked out his salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that it is God who works in us both to will and to do of His perfect will.

St. Christosthen said this about Apostle Paul. He said that even the best of men, compared to Paul, even the best of men are like those that were called at the ninth and eleventh hour.

And yet Paul trusted, never trusted his labor. He never put company in his labor. He trusted the cross of Christ.

Whether first hour laborers or eleventh hour converts, brothers and sisters, wherever we've come in, whenever we've come in, our hope is the same.

[15:14] As the Master declared, I choose to give to this last worker, as I give to you who came in the first hour. I choose.

This is mercy, not indulgence. This is the grumbling. And so the grumbling of the early comers often sounds familiar in our ears too, I'm sure. What are some of the grumbings?

I deserve more because I have burned the burden. I've been here longest. I just want things to be fair and be appreciative for all I do.

Or as Peter puts it, we have left everything to follow you. What do we get? And as we do that, as we grumble, what happens?

We start to compare. We start to calculate. And we start to demand what we think we're owe. We compare, we calculate, and we demand.

[16:23] As if God really does owe us anything. As if, if we were to calculate, God is ever going to be indebted to us.

Friends, if we're honest with ourselves, we might admit that at times we've gone down that road of self-justification with God ourselves. We've put our efforts up against others in the church.

You've put up what you've done against what, what you've given up. You've done the work of comparison. You've maybe compared the ease of their life compared to the struggles in your life that you've endured while remaining faithful.

And you expect God to give you more. Or that you demand more. Of course you know it's all about grace. But at the end of the day, you want your work to count for a little special treatment from God.

You don't want equal treatment. You want what you think you've earned. You want God to discriminate just a little bit in your favor.

[17 : 41] But here is the gospel truth. Here's the gospel truth. Before God, our achievements count for nothing. No worker can plead their achievements for special treatment as the basis for special treatment.

No matter the years of service, the sacrifices, the faithful labor, the vineyard owner owes no one more than he chooses to give.

God is not indebted to anyone. We are all together laborers only because in his mercy he made us we were unworthy.

He made us worthy vessels to bear his name and his message. Some are called early. Some late. Some have smooth paths.

Some have gone through rough terrain. Yet all are under the master's sovereign hand. the kingdom of heaven is scandalous grace.

[18 : 52] Grace that does not reward merit but offers generosity beyond all deserving. That's the basis on which we all sit here this morning.

That is the basis by which we are all gathered under Christ's banner. It is because of his scandalous grace that brings us in. And so I think this parable annoys.

It is annoying a little bit isn't it if we are honest. And this parable annoys because it cuts against worldly thinking. Even our own Christian thinking at times. Because we expect more because of what we have done or given up.

And this parable cuts right against that. But here is the warning that Jesus wants us to hear. do not let your vision be clouded.

That was the heart of the master's message to the workers in verse 15. As he says to them am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me or do you begrudge!

[19 : 58] my generosity? Or do you begrudge my generosity? Now that phrase translated more literally from the Greek is this. Is your I evil or bad because I am good?

Is your I evil because I am good? Is your I bad because God is gracious and generous with his grace?

This is the danger of a clouded vision of an evil or bad eye. It keeps us from seeing the blessing of God's generosity. beauty of grace that is lavished upon all of us that we were all of us recipients of not because we deserved it but because of God's free gracious love towards us.

Grace is by God's grace is by its very definition because it's given to us who are sinners. It is scandalous. Scandalous and wonderful because it is not earned it is given.

And even if you come at the 11th hour even if you come with empty hands with failure in your past and regrets like the thief on the cross God is good and gracious to forgive and to cleanse you.

[21 : 29] Just come as you are. And if by grace you've been welcomed at the first hour it is that grace of God that keeps you.

This is the amazing grace of life in God's vineyard brothers and sisters. We need God's grace colored eyes to see it in all its beauty.

But upon seeing it when we truly see this grace we like Saint Paul will not cease to delight and to glorify God for it.

And once we fully grasp this in all its glory I think our labors will be sweeter and more joyful for it. Our fellowship together in Christ's church will be richer for it.

As we labor as we work for Christ in gratitude for what he's done for us. Not as a way to earn anything but as a response to his free grace and love that has been lavished on us.

[22 : 43] And so as we approach Lent I want to invite you to fix your eyes on Christ. Do the work of repentance not to earn grace but because grace has already been given to you.

Lay aside pride lay aside every spirit of comparison or presumption and rest in the generous goodness of the Master.

let us pray. Oh Lord we ask that you will hear our prayers this morning that we who are justly deserving of your wrath and condemnation because of our sins where we've been by grace welcome into your family forgiven restored given a new name adopted as sons of yours we ask Lord that you will give us grace colored eyes to see that love that you've lavished on us and that we would delight in the generosity of our Father as he welcomes others into his vineyard as he gives them the same love that he's bestowed upon us help us Lord and as we continue to work in your

vineyard help us Lord to work with the right perspective in mind and in heart that we would delight in the work you've given us to do and we'll do it all for your glory to the advancement of your kingdom knowing that all our labors is not in vain we ask Lord that you would give us this grace colored eyes we pray this in Jesus name
Amen