

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fifth Sunday After Epiphany, February 9, 2025

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 389, 373:1-2, 373:3-7, 385:1-5, 644

Lessons: 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 18:9-14, Matthew 19:16-27.

Sermon Text: Matthew 19:27 – 20:16.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In all three gospels where it is recorded, this narrative follows the history of a rich young man who thought his good works could earn his way into eternal life. Obedience to the law of God and good works do not earn eternal life. Today from Jesus' parable, we follow up on that idea, emphasizing God's grace.

Just before Jesus told this parable, Peter had asked Jesus ***"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"*** (Matthew 19:27) Peter's question seems to suggest that the first disciples of Jesus didn't quite understand that with God all things are possible. There may have been a trace of arrogance and self-satisfaction in Peter's tone as he addressed this question to Jesus. He had heard the demands which Jesus addressed to the rich young man, and also the promise of a treasure in heaven, if he would sell all his goods. It is so easy to see greed and covetousness in others! Peter's conclusion is 'We have done that, we have left behind all things, all of the goods and wealth that we possessed. What then will our reward be? Surely we are entitled to a treasure in heaven, if that is what is demanded.' Then comes the parable which emphasizes

GRACE!

- 1. Jesus teaches that God gives eternal life, and his rewards are rewards of grace.**
- 2. *"Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."***
- 3. A parable clarifies what Jesus is talking about.**

Jesus emphasizes to Peter that it is not because you have done these things that God rewards you. It is easy to think that is the case, but it is not really so. Jesus then talks about the kingdom of heaven they shall receive – and it is an inheritance. It is nothing they have worked for or earned.

When Jesus talked about the tax collector and the Pharisee in the temple, we learned that in childlike faith one must pray with the tax collector in the temple: "God have mercy on me, a sinner." Salvation is all gift. You just cannot earn it. Matthew tells us: ***"The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, 'Who then can be saved?'"*** If someone such as this outwardly good, religious man could not expect to get into heaven, who could?

We must rely only on God's grace – his undeserved love and mercy. There is no way that the gift of eternal life – an inheritance from the love of God – can be a reward for our deeds. Good works, good deeds flow out of faith, when the Christian uses God's law as a guide or guideline for doing good. Good works are a fruit of faith, a fruit of having the assurance of the gift of eternal life.

Peter now asks: what about us? What reward will we have – he and the other disciples of Jesus? They had not yet fully grasped and understood the concept of grace.

So Jesus pointed to the evidences of grace they were currently receiving, and would receive in heaven. There was no way this could be looked upon as wages, as recompense, as a reward for anything they had done. It was pure grace.

Jesus' words are also a comfort to all who believe. Because we belong to Christ, flesh and blood relatives may mock, ridicule, and even spurn us, and we may suffer even more serious persecutions. But Jesus assures us that we will have all we need in the family of our Lord Jesus Christ. God's love dwelling in the hearts of fellow believers is more precious than all earthly bonds of blood. Belonging to Jesus is what is necessary to receive the gift of eternal life.

"But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." There were men like Judas, who was one of the first twelve Jesus called as his disciples. And people like Annas and Caiaphas, high priests, of all things! who no doubt thought of themselves as "first" in the kingdom of God. But they did not end up that way. Judas Iscariot, the man

who betrayed Jesus had as his idol, his god the 30 pieces of silver. These 30 pieces might have equaled about six months' wages. The idols of Annas and Caiaphas were their positions of honor and power as high priests. All those ended up outside the kingdom of God. But many a simple believer, ignored and despised by the mighty of this world but accepted by God ends up "first".

What the rich young ruler could not do, Peter and the other followers of Jesus had done. Jesus gives the assurance that such sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom will be rewarded many times over especially in the life to come. Rich people who are moved by the Spirit of God to use their wealth for the sake of those in need will find this statement of Jesus fulfilled in their lives.

Jesus then tells a parable to emphasize ***"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."***

The parable begins by comparing ***"the kingdom of heaven"*** to ***"a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard."*** It is not hard to understand how some workers were indignant that people who didn't work as hard as they did got the same wages as they did. Jesus points out that God deals with us on the basis of his love and his grace, rather than on the basis of what we sinners might think is fair and just. If we complain about his generosity to others, we are despising his grace. If we insist that God reward us on the basis of merit, we deprive ourselves of the abundant blessings of his grace, for then we will receive nothing!

In the parable, we find the idea of grace – God's grace, like the generosity of the employer. But we also find the idea of covetousness. And we find the idea of willingly accepting what lot God gives us in life.

First, realize that a 12-hour day was the normal work day, or more accurately, sunup to sundown, especially during the grape harvest. The Greek coin called the denarius was the common daily wage for a laborer, and it was not uncommon to hire extra help during the harvest. In the parable a covenant or agreement or contract was made with those first hired – called, if you will. No such agreement was made with the subsequent ones put to work in the vineyard. The owner of the vineyard simply said ***"I will pay you whatever is right."*** The denarius, a Greek coin called the "penny" in the King James Version of the Bible, was the normal day's wages for a laborer, a working man. Incidentally, there were two coins smaller than this coin that were in common usage in Jesus' time. The landowner contracted, agreed with the first men he hired at the beginning of the day, for a normal day's wages.

But he went out three hours into the 12-hour work day and ***"and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went."*** He went into the labor market half-way through the day, and again three-fourths of the way through the day, ***"and did the same thing."*** He even went out into the marketplace with just one hour left in the work day! ***"About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'"***

So at the end of the day, he called the men in to settle up with them. He paid the last hired first. ***"So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."***

Oh the unfairness of it! Or is it unfair? If you are a typical worker, you'd be upset and maybe even outraged if your employer were to pay you – and others that way. But in most cases, there would be nothing at all that you could do about it. After all, it is the employer's right, or at least it would have been until all the rules and laws about equal pay for equal work in our country were enacted by governments. Today the employer's ways of dealing with the employees like this would probably would be challenged. He would be dragged into court. But God has the right to give his grace to anyone he chooses and we know that he wants, really wants to give his grace to all humans.

The King James Version reads ***"Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen."*** The evil eye is a synonym in Scripture for jealousy. The master had done no wrong to those who had labored longest, for he had paid them what they had bargained for and earned. If he chose to be generous with others, no one had any just cause to complain.

Covetousness is one of the sins that are addressed here. God devoted two commandments – the ninth and the tenth – to covetousness, the sinful attitude of the heart which sinfully wants something God does not want us to have. The workers who had willingly agreed for a denarius a day and were happy at the beginning of the day see that others have something which the landowner – a picture of God – gave freely to others and they were jealous. They coveted what he had given to others.

In addition, if we understand this to be a reward which is ours as a gift, the free gift of God, it teaches us *to be content with such things as we have*. Instead of complaining that others have more, let us take what we have, and be thankful. If God is more generous in any way – materially or spiritually – to others than to us, we have no reason to complain for he is so much better to us than we deserve.

Jesus' parable is directed against a wrong spirit or a sinful attitude of mind. The apostles were the first called, but many more would be called and invited, including you who are sitting here listening to this word of God, which today is calling you to repent again. Jesus is also rebuking the attitude of covetousness, the idea of wanting more.

The master was just, fair, righteous to those hired first – like Peter and the first disciples – and he was just as good, kind, and generous to the others who came to work in God's kingdom later – like you listening today.

We receive a reward because God has promised it, not because we earn it. The Word of God is plain about that: ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV) And we read in Romans ***“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God. What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.”*** Romans 4:1-4 (NIV)

God seeks his laborers, they do not seek him. Jesus tells us ***“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit -- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”*** (John 15:16 NIV) The agreement made by the workers is what Peter is asking about: What will we have? But those hired after the beginning of the day went in with a simpler, humbler spirit, expecting that the landowner would be fair with them. This is a picture of a true humble spirit of waiting on the Lord, trusting that he will give far more than we deserve – out of the abundance of his riches.

We are talking about God's grace here. Remember exactly what grace means. God's grace to mankind is his undeserved goodness, love, and mercy. We don't deserve anything, even if we were to devote our entire life – every minute of it – to the work of the Lord! God distributes his rewards by *grace*, and not because he owes anyone anything. God's grace is his to give as he sees fit.

And who is more unfit to receive it than the sinners in this room, and particularly the sinner you see in the mirror each day. In fact, if each of us looks into the mirror of God's law instead of just our bathroom mirror, we will see someone who is totally undeserving of God's grace and goodness. With the tax collector in the temple, you will have to admit: God, be merciful to me, the sinner, literally, for there was one sinner on his mind, and that was himself.

So what do we deserve from God? Nothing. What does he give us? Everything! Luther's explanation of the first article of the creed gives a long list of temporal gifts: clothing and shoes, food and drink, property and home, spouse and children, land, cattle, and all I own, and all I need to keep my body and life. And the second article details his gift of Jesus Christ to redeem us from our sins. And the third article describes how the Holy Spirit gives all this to us – by creating and sustaining faith, by sanctifying us. All this is mine and yours – not by our own thinking or choosing, but purely by grace.

And so far as the giving of equal rewards of grace to all believers, to all members of the kingdom, is concerned, no one dare point to a greater amount of good works before God, as though they were able to merit anything in His sight

Jesus tells us that ***“many are invited, but few are chosen.”*** (Matthew 22:14 NIV) God chooses. God gives gifts, including his grace and mercy. Your sins are forgiven because of what Jesus did. So if you ask ***“We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”*** The answer is: eternal life. Every believer will receive the full reward, but remember it is a reward of grace, not a reward you have earned. May God keep us in his grace. Amen.

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