

Our Lord Is Generous

Matthew 20:1-16

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

Hymn: *ELH #227* – “Salvation unto Us Is Come”

Let us pray: Keep us ever mindful, O Lord, that it is only by grace that we have been included in your kingdom and are privileged to serve in it.

Sermon Text: Matthew 20:1-16

¹“Indeed the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing to pay the workers a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³He also went out about the third hour and saw others standing unemployed in the marketplace. ⁴To these he said, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶When he went out about the eleventh hour, he found others standing unemployed. He said to them, ‘Why have you stood here all day unemployed?’

⁷“They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’

“He told them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When it was evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last group and ending with the first.’

⁹“When those who were hired around the eleventh hour came, they each received a denarius. ¹⁰When those who were hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But they each received a denarius too. ¹¹After they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner: ¹²‘Those who were last worked one hour, and you made them equal to us who have endured the burden of the day and the scorching heat!’

¹³“But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not make an agreement with me for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what is yours and go. I want to give to the last one hired the same as I also gave to you. ¹⁵Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am

generous?' ¹⁶In the same way, the last will be first, and the first, last."

Dear laborers in the Lord's vineyard,

Does the unfairness of the landowner in this parable bother you? Put it into modern terms: if you worked all day, and meanwhile your coworkers worked half the day, or a quarter of the day, but you all received *the exact same wages*, how would you feel about your boss? You probably wouldn't list generosity among his virtues.

And yet, this landowner claims, "I am generous." For this to be true, our thinking has to change. This means we must dispose of our preconceived notions about work and reward and earning and merit. We must understand what it means that **our Lord is generous**. It means, to put it simply, this:

I. He Gives out of His Grace, Not Our Works

But it can't be that easy, can it? The answer can't be St. Paul's simple thesis: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9, ESV), can it?

Humanity has, for its entire existence in sin, had a preoccupation with labor and merit. Just consider one part of the curse laid on Adam: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen. 3:19, ESV). Man must *work* to earn his wages and food. It's not just in the Old Testament, but St. Paul also writes, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10, ESV). Now this makes sense to us. It's a tit-for-tat system, logical and orderly, and we are baffled and confused when it is upset.

The disciples were in this very same mindset when Jesus told this parable. Jesus had just told the rich young man, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21, ESV). Of course, that rich young man went away sad, prompting Jesus to state, terrifyingly, that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24, ESV). This baffled and confused the disciples, who asked, “Who then can be saved?” to which Jesus answered, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:25, 26, ESV). You’d think that they’d get it now, that this would make sense, that their concerns would be answered. But Peter, the spokesman of the disciples, proves that they still don’t understand, for hear what happened next:

“Then Peter said in reply, ‘See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?’” (Matt. 19:27, ESV). Peter is *still* looking for what the disciples could have *earned*, even though Jesus had only just made the point that it was impossible for man to earn anything, but it was all done by God.

This is what prompts Jesus to tell this parable. Before telling it, Jesus does elucidate what the disciples will have:

Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. (Matt. 19:28-29, ESV).

Here is the reward for discipleship! Summarized succinctly: “eternal life.” This tells us also what the “denarius” in the parable means – it stands for eternal life. So Jesus does answer Peter’s question. *However*, Peter’s question “was not a right one.”¹ Peter was locked in that tendency to bring everything, even discipleship, into the realm of work and reward. This wrong thinking must be corrected, and that is why Jesus proceeds to tell this parable. Even after answering what the reward would be, Jesus tells the moral of the parable he would tell: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matt. 19:30, ESV), a moral he would repeat again at the end: “In the same way, the last will be first, and the first, last.”

Therefore we have this baffling and confusing parable. The elements are simple enough, and mundane enough. A landowner needs workers to tend his vineyard, and he hires them. He hires several throughout the day, and work goes smoothly. In fact, this isn’t much of a story, until we near the end: at that time, “the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last group and ending with the first.’” The moral starts to take shape now, because the last are literally first in line, while the first are last. And when the hearers see that the workers hired last receive a denarius, as was promised to those hired first, we are left to think like the workers: “When those who were hired first came, they thought they would receive more.” We think this way, and the workers think this way, because it *makes sense*. Wages are, by natural law, proportional to labor: work more, earn more.

¹ R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*, 62.

But there comes in the absurdity of the parable! The wages *do not change* based on work performed. This shows just how un-rooted in earthly concern this parable is. The absurdity of it is, in fact, the point, because it completely deconstructs the attitude of the disciples and, really, all mankind. We *expect* the outcome to be that those who sacrificed more will receive more, but the actual outcome is nearly the opposite: all receive the same reward, and in reverse order. Therefore, the message Jesus sends everyone home with, aside from that moral of last-first and first-last, is what the landowner says: "Can't I do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" There Jesus really hits it hard: the point is *generosity*. The disciples, and everyone else involved, were looking for a way to earn the best. From Peter's question it's obvious: "See, we have left *everything* and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matt. 19:27, ESV). Or, put another way, he asks, "What do we get for all we've done?" Peter's question is the voiced expectation of the first hired workers, expecting to get more. But Jesus proves, it's not a matter of earning and wages, but of *generosity*. The workers were not *robbed* of anything, but were in fact *given* much! The disciples are not to emphasize how much more reward they *aren't* getting, but how much reward God freely gives to all!

So it is just as simple as works vs. grace. It is wrong to emphasize works, because, if we would look at our works, we would see what we truly have earned: "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23, ESV), or, as Jesus said, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God"

(Matt. 19:24, ESV), which really emphasizes the impossibility for *any* man to enter the kingdom of God. As we sang in our hymn:

From sin our flesh could not abstain,
Sin held its sway unceasing;
The task was useless and in vain,
Our guilt was e'er increasing.
None can remove sin's poisoned dart
Or purify our guilty heart,
So deep is our corruption.²

The reality of our work is that all we'll ever earn is death. That's our depressing and hopeless state, and why the hymn goes on to sing in the very next verse:

Still all the law fulfilled must be,
Else we were lost forever,
Then God His Son sent down that He
Might us from doom deliver;
He all the law for us fulfilled
And thus His Father's anger stilled
Which over us impended.³

New wages are given! And these are wages are not such that *we* earned, but, again, as we sing at the end of the next verse, addressing our Lord: "For *Thou* hast paid my ransom."⁴ *Jesus* fulfilled the law, working everything that we could not, earning that eternal life. Then, rather than take his own wages, he took ours: he took the *death* that we earned by suffering hell on the cross, bleeding out his lifeblood, and declaring that the wages that *he* had earned were now *ours*.

² P. Speratus, "Es ist das Heil uns kommen her," tr. composite, *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (Mankato, MN: Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary, 1996), #227:4.

³ *Ibid.*, v. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, v. 6.

So we must see, it's not about what *we* earn by our works, because that's all given to Jesus. Meanwhile, what we *receive* is the gift of Jesus' wages: eternal life. But this does not mean that we don't do works. No, works have their place, for

II. We Are Called to His Service

We see the end of our lives – as the day in the parable ends with the workers getting their wages, so the “day” of this life ends with us receiving our wages, eternal life. Therefore, with that end in view, we see the purpose of our life: to serve the one who gives us so great a gift and reward.

The landowner was gracious, but that did not mean that the laborers simply sat in the vineyard eating his grapes. They worked! As Lutherans we tend to behave as a paradox: on the one hand, we are naturally inclined to emphasize the rewards we think we should receive, thinking that more work means more reward, as the disciples thought, which I addressed in the first part; on the other hand, we fear discussion of good works and shy away from it, lest we sound too “Catholic.” This is why our Confessions admonish us, in the Epitome to the Formula of Concord:

Accordingly, we reject and condemn the following modes of speaking: when it is taught and written that good works are necessary to salvation; also, that no one ever has been saved without good works; also, that it is impossible to be saved without good works. [On the other hand,]

We reject and condemn as offensive and detrimental to Christian discipline the bare expression, when it is said: Good works are injurious to salvation.

For especially in these last times it is no less needful to admonish men to Christian discipline...and good works, and remind them how necessary it is that they exercise themselves in good works as a declaration of their faith and gratitude to

God, than that the works be not mingled in the article of justification.⁵

Put simply: we must not speak as though works are necessary for salvation, nor that Christians should *not* seek to do good works. In what was known as the Majoristic Controversy, leading in part to the formulation of that article, there were those among the Lutherans who were teaching that good works were necessary to salvation. Amid this, the proper reaction was phrased “that good works are necessary, but not that they are necessary to salvation.”⁶ This is another thing our hymn expresses well:

The just is he – and he alone –
 Who by this faith is living,
 The faith that by good works is shown,
 To God the glory giving;
 Faith gives thee peace with God above,
 But thou thy neighbor, too, must love,
 If thou art new created.⁷

Faith to the cross of Christ doth cling
 And rests in Him securely;
 And forth from it good works must spring
 As fruits and tokens surely;
 Still faith doth justify alone,
 Works serve thy neighbor and make known
 The faith that lives within thee.⁸

In the same way, the laborers in the vineyard were *promised* their wages, and received it only because the landowner was “generous,” but still they worked.

⁵ Formula of Concord, Epitome V.16-18 in *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 801.

⁶ F. Bente, “Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,” *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 1-256, 119.

⁷ *ELH* #227:8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, v. 10.

We work, too, not to *earn* eternal life, because that is a gift that is given to us freely already. Instead, we work *because it is already given*. We work in anticipation of the reception of that great gift. We work because we wish to show our gratitude to the great and generous God who pays us Christ's wages. We work because in the vineyard of this world, there is a harvest of the Word and grace to be made, and we may go forth as laborers to bring this great gift to others. We work, not begrudging our master's generosity, but joyfully sharing it with others!

We must change our thinking from imagining that, on the one hand we can get by with laziness, riding on the coattails of grace – as Paul said, “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6:1, KJV), to which he gives the answer himself: “μὴ γένοιτο” – “By no means!” or “God forbid!” or “Let it not ever be!” Rather, see that we are privileged to work *after* being promised the wages, which we are privileged to share with others, because it doesn't run out!

And that's the second thing on which we must change our thinking: that we have earned a certain reward. If we would seek salvation based on how *good* we are, or what *works* we've done, we would receive our reward: the wages of death. Instead, praise the Lord, we have been given the gift of salvation from Christ's merits, by his death on the cross and resurrection for us, by grace alone.

Amen.

*Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, Evangelical Heritage Version™ (EHV™) copyright © 2016 The Wartburg Project. All rights reserved.
www.wartburgproject.org*

Some quotations from the Old Testament are samples and may not reflect the final wording.

Comments and suggestions may be submitted at: wartburgproject.org/contact/

Scripture quotations marked "ESV" are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked "KJV" are from the Holy Bible, King James Version.