

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus told another parable in the Gospel. We heard the parable of the unforgiving servant last week; this week it's the parable of the workers in the vineyard. This parable concludes with Jesus saying, "*So the last will be first, and the first last.*" "*In this manner ...*," Jesus says to sum up the parable, but we need a bit of context to understand what He is teaching us. Indeed, Jesus begins the parable saying, "*For the kingdom of heaven is like ...*," pointing us backward, for this parable is meant to explain what He had been talking about. In fact, in the verse preceding the parable, Jesus says, "*But many who are first will be last, and the last first*" (Matt. 19:30). Clearly, this parable is intended to illustrate this enigmatic statement.

Let's look back a bit farther. What was Jesus talking about? What was the occasion?

Well, Jesus had just had an encounter with a rich young man who wanted to "*have eternal life.*" You probably remember the account. "*Keep the commandments,*" Jesus told him. "I have; what else?" "Sell everything, give it to the poor, and follow me." The young man departed with sadness. "It's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus said. Indeed, it's "*easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*" The disciples were surprised: "*who then can be saved?*" By man's own striving, it's impossible; but not for God, for "*with God all things are possible*" (Matt. 19:16-26).

What was Jesus talking about? Salvation. How does one obtain eternal life?

The disciples wanted to know more. "What about us?" "*See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?*" They weren't disappointed with Jesus' answer. "*Truly, I say to you, in the [re-creation], 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.*" Again, He's talking about eternal life in heaven. And then Jesus said this of every believer: "*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.*" Then comes His statement: "*But many who are first will be last, and the last first*" (Matt. 19:28-30).

These familiar words that introduce the parable and conclude it are mirror images of each other. They are, so to speak, the bookends to this parable Jesus tells in our Gospel, of the laborers in the vineyard. And this context helps us understand both the parable and the riddle: "*the last will be first, and the first last.*" For the

topic is eternal life. The question is: who gets it? The point is: it's all by God's generosity and not by the merits of our labors; in the end, all those called into the vineyard receive what is good and right. "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*"

Yes, the context is eternal life; that's what Jesus is addressing. If it seems obvious to you, it isn't to all of the commentators I read in preparation. One in particular rejected that understanding as he talked about this parable. To him, Jesus is talking about the blessings that come from "an outward connection with the church." "[O]ften the church offers social, business, and other advantages of no mean value. They are all included in the denarius of the parable. But eternal life is not one of these" (Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 767).

Really? In the midst of this instruction about eternal life, Jesus breaks off into a discussion of "social, business, and other advantages" of belonging to the church? Needless to say, I disagree.

To be sure, there are details of the parable that trouble us, even challenge our thoughts of fairness, but we need to remember the words of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah: "*my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*"

A master of a house goes out at the beginning of the day to hire workers for his vineyard. A denarius for a day of work was customary. They agree to it, and he sends the workers out into his vineyard.

He goes back to the marketplace at the 3rd hour and hires others, this time agreeing to pay them what is just. He does the same thing at the 6th and 9th hours. Finally, he goes to the marketplace at the 11th hour, and again finds idle workers whom he sends to the vineyard.

At the end of the day, the master settles up with the workers starting with the last. What a surprise! He pays them more than they had hoped. He pays them a full day's wage — a denarius — for an hour of work! When those who were hired at the beginning saw what the master had done, they thought, "we will surely get more." But no, they, too, were paid a denarius, just as they had agreed. Jesus doesn't mention those hired at the other hours, but we can assume that they, too, received a denarius.

Those hired first grumbled about this wage, but the master was not unjust with it. They had agreed to it; he didn't gyp them of anything. On the other hand, he was certainly generous with his wage to the 11th hour workers. This is what is called

grace, as we heard chanted as the alleluia verse today: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”*

There are other interesting details in this parable. For example, first, no one labors in the master's vineyard without being hired. And the master himself was the one who called the workers into the vineyard. It's the same way in the Church. God Himself is the One who calls us to labor in the vineyard, the Church. He does it through baptism or through the Word read or preached; He does it for some when they are young and for others when they are old. It doesn't matter. Through His Spirit, God Himself has “called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith” (Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation to the Third Article of the Creed).

Second, the laborers work throughout the day. The end of the day is a time of reckoning. It's as Jesus said, *“We must work the works of him who sent [us] while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work”* (John 9:4). Indeed, at the end of the day, it's time to settle up. So too for us in the church. We are given an amount of time to labor in Christ's kingdom for the good of others, and then we die, which St. Paul says is gain. Or as the writer to the Hebrews says, *“just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him”* (Heb. 9:27-28).

Third, the payment is the same for everyone without distinction — so it is in the kingdom of heaven, too. No one is better than another or greater than another in the kingdom — the first are last and the last are first. Regardless how long you labor, regardless the heat you have had to endure in trials or persecutions, each receives the same heavenly reward, even those who grumble at the inequity — after all, the faithful have suffered torture, mockery, flogging, chains, and imprisonment. They have been stoned, sawn in two, and killed with the sword. They have been destitute, afflicted, mistreated (Heb. 11:35-37). Who wouldn't grumble a bit? Cower and weep? And yet, through these fiery trials they remained faithful and become for us *“a great cloud of witnesses”* encouraging us also to keep our eyes fixed on *“Jesus”* — stop comparing your situation to others. Keep *“looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame”* (Heb. 12:2).

For eternal life is the end of a life of faith for the Christian. It's what God in His love sent His only Son to do — to earn for us eternal life by cross and death and resurrection, and then to bestow it to those who look to Jesus and believe in Him. Status is irrelevant. Only God's own generosity in Christ Jesus — and the faith that receives it. The one who thinks himself first will receive no more than he

who is last, just as the one who thinks himself last will receive no less than the one who is first.

Dear friends, you have been called to labor in Christ's vineyard. It's still day for us; I don't know which hour. Labor diligently and faithfully, though it may be hot and burdensome. And when the day is ended, rejoice in the Lord's generosity. A denarius awaits you. Rejoice, for it doesn't get any better than that!

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.