

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The little parable that Jesus tells today is not very satisfying to our flesh, to our reason. Our reason likes justice; we want to be treated fairly, at least, in our interaction one with another. At an early age, kids can sniff out the slightest odor of inequality and whine, “That’s not fair.”

Equality has been enshrined in our national dialogue from the beginning. The words of the Declaration ensure it, enumerating it as a “self-evident” truth: “that all men are created equal.” In fact, so strong is this self-evident truth in the national psyche, that another self-evident truth, that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” is losing ground. Life and liberty are certainly under assault by the social juggernaut that is equality. Equality can have its downside.

That’s not to say that equality is always bad. There have been many good things that the push for equality has done. Like that our African American fellow citizens are no longer saddled with slavery, with the idea that their vote couldn’t be equal to that of a white person, with an oppression that kept them as second-class citizens. Or like the rights of women. There, too, there has been much progress—opportunities have opened that once were not available to women.

But equality is a law word, like its synonyms “fairness,” and “justice.” In our interaction one with another, we want to be treated equally under the law; that’s justice—to be treated fairly. A fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work, for example. That makes sense, and in some ways, that’s Biblical, too. St. Paul does teach, “*For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat*” (2 Thess. 3:10).

In the religious realm, when you think about the non-Christian religions, that’s how they imagine that the interaction with God ought to be. A kind of Divine extension of justice, so that the longer and harder you work, the better off you’ll be with God. That’s natural. That’s the fleshly way of thinking. That’s what is called the *opinio legis*, the opinion of the law: that we, by our works, can please God, that we can placate Him, that we can gain entrance into His eternal presence.

But that’s legalism, as we just sang—for this is “a false misleading dream, That God His Law had given That sinners could themselves redeem And by their works gain heaven.” It’s a false misleading dream, and it’s what all non-Christian religions teach—and sadly, some false-teaching Christian denominations, too.

But you don’t really want to be treated fairly when it comes to God, do you? What is fair? What is just, you sinners? What is the just payment for what you have done? What do you deserve because of your sin? What is fair?—death! “*For the*

wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). What is just?—punishment! As Luther reminds us, “for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment.”

And that’s the point of this parable that Jesus tells today. God doesn’t treat us fairly, as we deserve. He treats us with the grace we do not deserve. But to do that, He has to treat His own Son Jesus unfairly, making Him who knew no sin to be sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). He treats His own Son unfairly, condemning Him to endure shame, and suffering, and death, instead of us. And all that, so that He could be true to Himself, as He describes Himself throughout Scripture, both as a God who “*loves righteousness and justice*” (Ps. 33:5) and as the God who is “*gracious and merciful ... abounding in steadfast love*” (Ps. 145:8), as the One who has compassion and abundantly pardons.

This is the proclamation of the true religion that saves, not something made up in the imaginations of men’s hearts, but something that proceeds from God Himself. For this is not how we think. Thus the Lord says through the prophet Isaiah, “*my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” Our thoughts ever bend toward fairness; God’s thoughts are of love and mercy and grace toward us in His Son, Jesus Christ.

It’s with our minds thus re-tuned to “Salvation unto us has come By God’s free grace and favor,” that we can listen to this parable Jesus tells today without our own offense and grumbling.

“*[T]he kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.*” Note that these are laborers in the master’s vineyard. They enter not on their own choosing, but they enter upon the master’s call. So it is for us, whether by baptism and then teaching for infants, or teaching and then baptism for adults, it’s God the Holy Spirit’s calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying, that makes one a laborer in the Lord’s vineyard.

The master goes out again at the 3rd, 6th, 9th and 11th hours and does the same thing—almost. For these workers, He simply says, “*whatever is right, I’ll give you.*” And it’s important to note again that whether it’s in the first hour or the eleventh hour, the laborers enter into the vineyard at the Lord’s calling. That is, it’s important to note, as we apply this parable, that Jesus is talking about believers here

Nevertheless, believers are not immune to the desires of the flesh. When the day is over and the master settles up, He begins with those hired last, who worked only one hour of a long day. They receive a denarius, the very amount that had been agreed to by those hired first, who worked a full 12 hours. That amount, by

the way, was a fair amount — the usual pay for a day’s work. But a denarius for only an hour’s work? That was generous!

Of course, operating with the lens of equality, those hired first naturally thought they would receive more. And admit it, so would you! Twelve times more, you might expect! But they did not. They too received a denarius, the agreed upon amount. They grumbled — it’s not fair. We should have gotten more; we did the brunt of the work; we bore the heat of the day. How many times have you who were baptized as an infant, and have labored in the church throughout your life, thought similarly? Repent! Drown that old Adam in you, drown that fleshly way of thinking, in contrition and repentance, and rejoice in the righteousness and purity that Christ won for you, and the privilege of working in the Lord’s vineyard.

Rejoice that God’s ways are different than our ways, that He doesn’t treat us as we deserve, that He doesn’t give to us according what we have done, but according to His grace. And what He gives you is forgiveness, life, and salvation—that’s your denarius.

You want more? That’s your flesh talking; that’s the law standard. But salvation doesn’t come by the law; *“the law brings wrath”* (Rom. 4:15). Our works “help and save us never.” No, our salvation comes unto us “by God’s free grace and favor”; *“by grace you have been saved through faith. ... it is ... not a result of [your] works”* (Eph. 2:8-9).

And grace is better than fair, although because of Jesus perfect sacrifice for us, *“what is right”* now flows from His grace. For *“we are unworthy servants,”* and *“when we have done all that we were commanded ... we have only done our duty”* (Luke 17:10). But we who have worked 12, 9, 6, 3 hours, even 1 hour in the vineyard, receive not the wages that are our due, but the grace of God as gift — our denarius: eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Dear saints of God, by water and the Word you have been called to labor in the master’s vineyard, and you are strengthened for your *“fruitful labor”* by Word and Supper. Do your duty in whatever calling the Lord has given you: “father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker”—professor, pastor, teacher, healer, helper, or administrator (1 Cor. 12:28). Live in Christ. Labor in His vineyard. Live in a manner worthy of His gospel. But at the end of the day, trust not in your works; seek not fairness; trust in Christ and His grace. Trust in Him who gives you all things, for through Him, not even death will stand in your way. Trust that in Christ, whether you are first or last, even death is gain, for death is the gate of life immortal. Receive your denarius with thanksgiving.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.