

Septuagesima
16 February, Anno Domini 2025
St. Matthew 20:1-16

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Beloved saints of God,

Is the kingdom of God a kingdom of grace or a kingdom of works? Yes. It's both. And in this parable, our Lord carefully places both of these - grace and works - in the proper relationship. That is the key - the relationship between the two. If we don't properly understand both and the role of each, then we will end up sabotaging salvation and robbing our neighbor of our love and service. But if we will take the time to meditate properly on the words of our Lord today, we can avoid the pitfalls and live joyously in God's kingdom that is filled with God's mercy AND good works.

As Lutherans, we understandably love grace - undeserved, freely given, universally available grace. We pride ourselves on *sola gratia* (isn't that a bit ironic!). How marvelous that the master of the vineyard gives to those latecomers as richly as He gave to those who had worked the whole day! Here, grace is on full display. First, the master wanted workers in His vineyard. God wants people in His kingdom. Why? We are wretches! We despise His Word. We break His commandments day in and day out. We are rude and merciless to others. We are crass. We are lazy. We are arrogant. We are fools. Why on earth would He want us in His kingdom? It isn't even like we are clamoring to get into the vineyard. We are probably just as content to stand idly in the marketplace and do nothing. We may not get anything for it, it may bite us in the end, but, hey, at least in the moment we were comfortable and we didn't have to sweat and toil.

Yet, for all that, God still wants us, all of us, every last man, woman, and child in His kingdom. The work that He sets before us isn't the point. The point is that we are in the Lord's kingdom and God lavishes His rich blessings upon all who are in that kingdom - life, peace, health, salvation, forgiveness. The list is really endless. The only reason we would worry about whether we have worked more or made greater sacrifices than someone else is if we hate the notion of God's grace and think that we deserve to be in the vineyard. There isn't a single person who can claim they have done more than anyone else to earn the gracious forgiveness and daily provision of God Almighty. Grace and grace alone is the only way anyone

enters the vineyard of the Lord. Only if the Lord casts all of our filthy selfish works behind His back can we hope to have a place in the kingdom of God. And that is exactly what He does.

The truth of the matter is that He, the Lord, has done all the work. He endured the taunts and the blasphemies. He sweat great drops of His precious Blood on the ground. He stood silently as the the blows were landed against His face. He endured the scorching heat of God's damning wrath against our wickedness. He gave every last ounce of His strength over to death, allowing Satan to land every blow against His holy Body. And all of this He endured and worked in order to open the gates of the vineyard of God to sinners. He did this because He doesn't want you idle in the marketplace of judgment. He wants you in His kingdom so that you can have what rightfully belongs to Him. That is grace. And that alone is what gives us joy and gladness in the midst of this dark and fallen world. Praise the blessed Holy Trinity for grace!

But, in our great love of grace and receiving such blessings at no cost, for no work, let's not forget that those who were brought into the vineyard still worked AFTER being brought in. They didn't stand around leaning on their shovels and rakes. The faith which trusts in Christ, is by its very nature not idle. It's busy. It can't stand still. That was even the invitation - "Come work in my vineyard." Freed from the slavery of earning salvation, rejoicing that the kingdom of God is already ours as a gift through our Baptism into Christ, we are free to put our hands to the plow with joy. We are free to love and serve our neighbor in whatever way he needs, even laying down our very lives if that's what it takes. The cost is irrelevant because God is our Father. He knows every need and has already provided for all of them. Your love of your neighbor truly costs you nothing.

Even in Eden, Adam worked, not because God needed Adam to work to care for himself, but because God is a busy God, taking care of things, tending and nurturing creation. Thus we who are created in His image will be about that same work. The difference is that in Eden there were no thorns or thistles. The ground gladly gave up its strength to Adam and produced an abundance of wonderful things. This world no longer does. Creation only begrudgingly yields up its fruits. It requires great work and sacrifice. But, even through those thorns and thistles and the sweat of our brow, God still provides for us and far more than we deserve at that! And, now, in the kingdom of God, work can again be a joy precisely BECAUSE it's not saddled with the impossible burden of saving us, by grace we have already been saved. It is simply the great privilege of working and serving in God's kingdom, sharing the riches of that kingdom with our neighbor as freely as

they have been shared with us.

Properly speaking, nothing in this vineyard belongs to us. Everything we have belongs to the master of the vineyard, the Lord God, the one who has graciously brought us into His kingdom. All that we have is a trust from Him. We are merely stewards. He gives us life and breath. He gives us family and friends. He gives daily bread. He gives money, house, and home. He gives the work. He gives the tools. He blesses the work. He gives the fruits. None of it belongs to us. We aren't simply free to use His things in whatever way pleases our whims. We are to share His things and give them away as He does. That's what the fruit of the vineyard is for - giving away.

That's the strange economy of God that is so uncomfortable to us. The more you freely give away the kingdom, the more the kingdom grows. It is a kingdom of grace. By definition, it is meant to be given away - freely and liberally. This is first and foremost true about the Word of God, the chief fruit of the divine vineyard. As the Word is preached and proclaimed, as more sinners hear the gracious call of the Gospel, as sins are washed away and forgiven, as the Holy Spirit causes faith to sprout forth among its hearers, the walls of the kingdom continue to expand ever outward. As every Christian gathers around the table of the Lord to be taught by God and fed the food of eternal life, as fathers tend to the portion of the vineyard entrusted to them by teaching their families God's Word, praying with them, bringing them where the Word of Lord is taught purely, as Christians faithfully go about their God-given vocations to meet the needs of their neighbors, the harvest grows. As each and every Christian applies the gifts entrusted to them by God in their vocations, the work of the vineyard is carried out and the kingdom of the devil is put to flight.

This coming Saturday everyone who can is encouraged to attend our Parish Planning Meeting to discuss goals and projects for our congregation and how best to be faithful stewards of the offerings of God's people for the furtherance of God's kingdom and the help of our neighbor. This is an essential part of working in the Lord's vineyard that is given to each and every one of us. Of course, this isn't so that we can earn our way into the vineyard. That wouldn't make any sense. We're already in the vineyard by virtue of our Baptism into Christ. Each of us are hearers of the Word of God, the Word which saves us and lifts us out of death, the Word which bestows upon us the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to eternal life. And as hearers of that Word, as those who by that Word are graciously invited into the vineyard with all its blessings, it is to be our joy and our response of faith that we return our firstfruits to the Lord and His

temple, not because it earns us anything but in thanksgiving and because we trust our heavenly Father. There is nothing that we could earn. Again, you are already in the vineyard. Rather, what you return to the Lord in faith, the Lord turns around and uses to tend His vineyard and grow it, even causing that life-giving Word to continue to be preached to you. Let us understand clearly that our entire existence is to be a fragrant offering to God. Our bodies, our minds, our resources, our mouths, our time - everything at all times is to be pressed into the service of the one who created all these things. Whether you are at home, at work, at church, or at play. All that you have and are belongs to God. What kind of a steward will you be?

It is true, God commands His people to give sacrificially. That's where the 10%, the tithe, came from. We are to deny ourselves and thus confess that all we have belongs to the Lord. First, we are commanded to give 100% of our trust and faith to Him and Him alone because He has created us, and even more, because He has redeemed us from eternal damnation. That is the first commandment. The psalmist prays in Psalm 51, "For you (God) will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give; you will not be pleased with a burn offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." What is most pleasing to God are repentant sinners who desire His mercy in Christ. He is pleased when our faith rests solely in Him for every thing - from daily bread to eternal salvation.

Then, in the joy of that faith, we are commanded to cheerfully give back to Him the firstfruits of all that we have. God could certainly rain down manna from heaven to meet the needs of this parish. But He hasn't commanded us to expect that. Shame on us if we do. Woe to us if we sit idly by enjoying our treasures on the sidelines and don't take seriously that not only is Satan constantly at work to silence the Word of God among us, but also that God has taken His Word away in the past from those who do not treasure it and will not support it. God hasn't promised to rain down money from heaven. Instead, He has lain upon each of us the holy vocation and obligation to sacrifice and make sure that this parish is cared for, that all the bills are paid - the lights, the mortgage, the insurance, the pastor - and that this place where we are blessed to hear His saving Word preached and receive His life-giving gifts is well-cared for and kept up so that His Word goes forth among us and those in our community who have not heard of Christ may yet hear and be brought into the vineyard with us to enjoy its fruits. This is indeed part of what it means to be a part of this body. We take the concerns and needs of this whole congregation to be our own. We give of our prayers, our time, our skills, and our money to take care of this body, this family. Certainly not all in the same way.

But all, nonetheless. Each and every part of the body is vital. None is to be despised and none idolized. None work for their own glory or simply to get things the way they want them. All sacrifice for the whole because we are one body together. The whole body rises and falls together. Your neighbor's needs are your needs and your needs are your neighbor's. This is how we love one another. It is only our sinful flesh that begrudges such sacrifices and that sinful flesh needs to be drowned and die.

Our heavenly Father puts each of us to the test and says "Trust Me. Love me. Let me be your highest good. Put Me to the test. Give as I have commanded you and see if I don't pour out blessings to you beyond measure." To be sure, our Lord doesn't promise earthly wealth in response to our tithes. Rather, if in faith you cheerfully entrust yourself to God's care, you will have peace that passes human understanding and you will see and know the Lord's rich care for you, you will see that He is no liar and that the riches of His kingdom are yours.

Times of work and sacrifice lie ahead for us. But this is not ordinary work or sacrifice. It is work and sacrifice in the vineyard of the Lord God who has graciously invited us into His kingdom and given to us, not simply the wages of laborers but the inheritance of sons, the adoption of grace. The work here is pleasant and the sacrifice truly no sacrifice at all because it is the work of Lord done in the freedom of our salvation. In this vineyard, the hard work has already been done. Christ has planted the vineyard by the gracious Words that pour forth from His lips and fertilized it with the Blood of His holy cross. And from His work, you have sprung forth out of death to life.

Dear Christian, it is indeed by grace that you have been saved, not by works. You have been brought into the kingdom of God by no working or merits of your own. The Lord brought you here and here He will keep you. And while neither our entrance nor our remaining in the vineyard is any way dependent upon our work, still, let us not stand idly in this vineyard. Let us put our hand to the plow. Let us be busy in this vineyard, joyously participating in God's own work. This work isn't done for His benefit or our own, but for the benefit of everyone around us - our families and our neighbors. Let us freely love and sacrifice and give, not in the weakness of fear but in the strength of faith. There is a great harvest all around us. Let us not squander the opportunity to share in the glorious work of inviting more sinners into God's kingdom of grace to share in His riches. Let us encourage and strengthen one another. Let us not shrink back in fear but boldly move forward, knowing that in the Lord our labor and our sacrifice are never in vain. God grant to each of us such joy and faith in the gracious and free salvation that we have been

given, that we may gladly and wholeheartedly give of ourselves and our treasures to the work of our Father's kingdom among us.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace which passes all human understanding keeps your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.