

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 20, 2020

Psalm 27:1-9 (NIV) ¹The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? ²When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. ³Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident. ⁴One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. ⁵For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock. ⁶Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD. ⁷Hear my voice when I call, O LORD; be merciful to me and answer me. ⁸My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek. ⁹Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior.

Isaiah 55:6-9 (NIV) ⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ⁸"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. ⁹"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30 (NIV) ¹²Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴Because

of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly

¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. ²⁷Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel ²⁸without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20:1-16 (NIV) ¹"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³"About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵So they went. "He went out

again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶About 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?' ⁷"Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' ⁸"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' ⁹"The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²"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.' ¹³"But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The Generosity of the Kingdom

Matthew 20:1-16

It's not fair? (Matthew 19:16-30; Isaiah 55:8-9)

- **The reversal of the Kingdom**
(Matthew 19:28, 30; 20:16; Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 3:21)

- **The equality of the kingdom**
(Matthew 20:8-12; James 2:1-9)

- **The grace of the kingdom**
(Matthew 20:13-15; Romans 3:23; 6:23)

Benediction: 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

The Generosity of the Kingdom

Matthew 20:1-16

It's not fair!

If you're a parent, you've probably heard that from your kids, especially if you have more than one child.

Children are quick to play the "fairness" card. They do it when they don't get as much as someone else does; or if they miss out on an activity that their sibling got to go on; or if they don't get what they think they deserve, or even just what they want! It's not fair!

We live in a time where cries of "it's not fair!" are all around us, from children and adults alike. We are quick to complain when anyone has more than us or we think we have been treated unjustly.

We hear that in our Gospel lesson today, where a group of workers grumbled and complained that they didn't get what they thought they deserved. It may cause us to wonder, is God Fair?

The context of this parable is vital to understanding it. That context begins with the account of the rich young man in Matthew 19:16 who asked Jesus, "*Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?*"

He was asking, what do I have to do to earn it, to deserve it?

"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." (Matthew 19:17)

Jesus' reply should have tipped off the young man that God alone is truly good and that no good deed will earn him eternal life. Jesus was not giving him a prescription for earning eternal life, but bringing him to the point of seeing his need for repentance and his need to seek God's mercy and grace.

But the young man persisted, and asked Jesus, which commandments? Jesus then listed them. ²⁰ *"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"* ²¹ *Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."* ²² *When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.* (Matthew 19:20-22 NIV)

This whole section, from the rich young man through the parable of the workers in the vineyard, is about trusting in God's goodness and not in our goodness . . . or our wealth, or our talents or strength.

But Peter didn't get the connection, and so in verse 27 *Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"* (Matthew 19:27)

Peter was quick to point out his good deed—of leaving his possessions, his family, and his business—his means of earning a living. He wanted to know, "what will we get? What's in it for us!"

This is precisely the attitude Jesus addressed in the parable of the workers in the vineyard—the what's in it for us attitude. The attitude that our good deeds have earned us favor with God—that we deserve God's blessing.

Now Jesus responded that there are indeed benefits for *everyone* who leaves all to follow him, but they aren't earned or apportioned in the way Peter is thinking.

Jesus set the stage in Matthew 19:30 when he said, *But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.* (NIV)

Jesus used a provocative parable to teach them that the values of God's kingdom are different from those we expect in this world.

Jesus said *the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner*, an employer, who paid all his workers the same wage

whether they worked one hour in the cool of the evening or from dawn to dusk.

My initial response to the parable is, “that’s not fair!”

What incentive is there to work all day in the hot sun, when you can show up an hour before quitting time and get the same pay?

All of us, I’m sure, would agree, that just isn’t a good business practice. The people who labor the most ought to get paid best! That’s just the way things work; it’s just a basic principle of economics.

Now this is precisely Jesus’ point! What happens in the parable is not what we would expect.

Things are different in God’s kingdom. God’s standards are different. The values of God’s kingdom are different.

In today’s Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 55:8-9 we read: *8“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. 9“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

God’s thoughts and ways are different. They are higher—nobler—wiser. They are holy.

Let’s look at some ways God’s kingdom is different from what we expect in this world and why that’s good news.

First, Jesus taught about the

The reversal of the kingdom

The parable is bracketed by two very similar verses. Matthew 19:30 forms a bridge between what Jesus said before (about the rich young man and receiving eternal life) and this parable: *“But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”* Jesus ends the parable in Matthew 20:16 with: *“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”* (NIV)

There is a reversal of fortune between this world and the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus spent most of his ministry with the last, the least, the littlest and the lost. (Think of the little children, of Zacchaeus, of Mary Magdalene and all the disciples.)

Often times what makes a person first in this life—their possessions, positions and power—get in the way of a relationship with the Lord because they are self-sufficient; they see no need of trusting in Jesus to save them.

In this life, we place a high priority on wealth—and the power, privileges and luxuries it provides.

But what will earthly wealth mean when in heaven the streets are paved with gold, and the buildings are made of precious gems?

In this life, we place a high value on hard work and industry, which is a good thing, but will our works earn us entry into the kingdom of heaven?

The kingdom of heaven is a great equalizer. But that doesn’t mean that we are all demoted to the least common denominator. Just the opposite: we are all given the highest place—we are *heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ*. (Romans 8:17a)

19:28 Jesus said to [His disciples], “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

But this privilege is not just for a special few. 2 Timothy 2:12 says *if we endure, we will also reign with him. . . .* (NIV) In Revelation 3:21 Jesus promised: *To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.* We are given the highest position possible! Each of us will wear a crown and reign with Jesus.

This parable also addresses,

The equality of God's kingdom

*8"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' 9"The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. 10"So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11"When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12"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.'*

At the end of the day, everyone received the same pay, regardless of how long they worked. And this is what made the laborers who worked all day so furious! They said, *you have made them equal to us!* They resented that. These workers were confusing their worth with their wages.

We often do the same thing when we value a person based on their economic status. The book of James tells us not to show favoritism to the rich over the poor (James 2:1-9).

What the parable actually teaches is that each one is equally precious in God's kingdom, and equally valuable to the king regardless of their contribution. Jesus was seeking workers for his vineyard, His kingdom, and would not leave anyone standing idle.

In God's kingdom, everyone is equally important! That means we all need each other to get the job done.

Now it is obvious that we do not all have equal ability. We all have different talents—some greater than others—and God made us that way.

But God made us that way for an important reason: He wanted us to be dependent upon one another. If we all had the same gifts and abilities then we wouldn't need

each other. In giving each of us a different set of skills and talents, God made us interdependent (instead of independent).

The apostle Paul used the analogy of the human body. We are all members of a common body, the body of Christ. Some are more vital to the body's functioning, like the heart, lungs or liver.

Other parts of the body are less vital but still important, like fingers, toes and hair. All of us, every Christian, is necessary to accomplish the task God has given his Church: To proclaim and live out the gospel of God's kingdom—God's love shown to us through Jesus Christ.

Some may feel that they don't have much to contribute, but everyone is vitally important.

When the grapes are ripe, every worker is needed—even if they can contribute only an hour's work. God does not leave anyone standing idle.

Matthew 20:6-7 (ESV) says, *6And about the eleventh hour [5:00 pm] he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' 7They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'*

The Lord is seeking workers for His kingdom . . . *you go into the vineyard* . . . there is much work to be done.

Are we standing idle while there is work to be done in the Lord's vineyard . . . in God's kingdom?

Right now, He is seeking out laborers to send. Right now, He is asking, *why do you stand idle?*

Third, Jesus taught,

The grace of the kingdom

13"But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?

14Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15Don't I have the right

to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

Jesus taught that the issue was generosity, not wages. The first group earned their wage, the rest received a measure of generosity—of goodness—of grace.

RC Sproul wrote: “This parable is not about grapes. It is about grace. It is about the mercy of the living God. It is about the grace of the One who owns the vineyard and who, in His mercy, gives benefits to people who have not earned them. In the parable, those who came later in the day had no possible way of meeting the normal requirements to make a denarius. However, the owner of the vineyard gave them the denarius anyway.”

If we did get what we deserved from God, we would get God’s eternal punishment.

The worker should get a fair wage, but in the kingdom of heaven, *the wages of sin is death.* (Romans 6:23)

There is no merit system in God’s kingdom. *But, the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Our heavenly Father is truly generous, knowing how to give good gifts to his children.

The greatest was and is, the gift of His Son, who purchased our forgiveness and eternal life in the kingdom of heaven, by his terrible suffering and death.

Jesus took what we deserved, the penalty of sin and eternal death, and gave us the gift of redemption and eternal life. There is nothing we can do to merit God’s gift of love and life.

As far as God’s kingdom is concerned, under the merit system, we have all failed. The Bible clearly spells this out in Romans 3:23, *we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*

But fortunately for us, God has instituted, in Jesus Christ, a system based on grace.

In this system, God gives us the most we can get: His great love through Jesus.

That is top pay and everyone who believes and trusts in Jesus receives it. There is nothing greater God can give.

We are not to begrudge God’s generosity because He gives the same reward to everyone in spite of their contribution to the kingdom.

We do not labor in God’s vineyard just for the rewards we will get. We go . . . grateful for the opportunity to serve . . . elated that God has chosen us to work in his vineyard.

We go . . . out of gratefulness for what God has done for us, and in anticipation of the grace yet to come.

In God’s kingdom, we don’t have to worry about getting our fair share . . .

In God’s kingdom we do not get what we deserve.

We deserve God’s punishment,
we are given God’s grace.

We deserve eternal separation from God
we are given eternal life.

We are given what we deserve least,
and need most.

We are given God’s great love in Christ Jesus—and that’s good news!

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your love and grace that gives us everlasting life—in spite of what we deserve. Open the hearts of the lost to receive your forgiveness and salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose Name we pray. Amen.

Benediction: *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17