

“Justice and Grace”

Matthew 20:1-16

Sermon for Septuagesima Sunday 2022; February 13, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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In the Gospel reading, Jesus teaches us about the kingdom of God in the parable of the workers hired to go work in the vineyard. Jesus uses this parable to teach us about the way of the kingdom. This has to do with getting into the kingdom of God and what difference it makes in our lives. Jesus also uses the parable to teach us something about the corruption of our human nature. He uses this parable as an illustration of His saying that “many who are first shall be last, and [many who are] last shall be first” (Matthew 19:34). He first said that right at the end of Matthew 19, just before the reading for today from Matthew 20. So He spoke this parable to explain what He meant.

In the parable, Jesus introduces us to a “master of the house.” The master of the house is the owner and the ruler of the house. He owns the vineyard and hires workers to go and work in it. Let’s call him the landowner.

It is at the start of the day. They worked a 12-hour day. Let’s say it’s about seven in the morning. The landowner agreed with the first workers to pay them a denarius to work in the vineyard for the day. A denarius was the customary pay for a full day’s work at the time. They went to work.

The landowner then went out at the third hour, that is, nine o’clock in the morning. He saw workers standing there doing nothing in the marketplace. He hired them to go work in the vineyard. Then he went out again at the sixth and ninth hours of the day and hired more workers. That would be at about noon and three o’clock. Then he went out at the eleventh hour. That would be about six o’clock.

He asked them why they had been standing there idle all day. They replied that it was because no one had asked them to go to work. It makes me wonder how many people are not in the fellowship of the church because no one has told them about Jesus, and they have not been asked to come.

The landowner hired them to go work in the vineyard.

The workday ended. The landowner told the foreman or manager to pay the workers. The foreman started with those who had been hired at the eleventh hour. Let’s call them the last ones. They got paid a denarius. Then the foreman paid those workers who had been hired at the beginning of the day, those who had been hired first. Let’s call them the first ones. They thought that they would get more. But they too got paid a denarius.

The first ones thought they would get paid more than the last ones for two reasons. First, it would only be fair and just for them to get paid more because they worked longer. Second, they not only worked longer but they had to endure the burden and the heat of the day. They did more and endured more difficulty. They had to work in the 90 degree heat for at least four or five hours. It was probably only about 75 to 80 degrees when the last ones were hired, and the sun was at a low angle as it was sinking toward the horizon.

Of course, the complaint of the first ones makes sense in economics. But not so in the kingdom of God.

It is relatively easy to identify what Jesus was getting at with the first ones. They were thinking about things along the lines of justice and fairness. And in that connection, they were

thinking about works and measuring themselves against others. I have done more, they were thinking. I should get paid more. I have worked more hours, I should get paid more.

But the last ones got paid the same amount as the first ones. The first ones complained to the landowner: “You have treated us equally with the last ones, but we have had to endure the burden and scorching heat of the day” (Mat. 20:12).

If we take this parable about Jesus teaching us about how we get into the kingdom, Jesus’s point is that it does not happen on the basis of justice and fairness regarding works done and how people measure themselves in relation to others. It happens by grace, which is to say that it does not happen with respect to what one thinks one deserves. It happens by grace, which is to say it happens by way of gift. And since it happens by grace, it also happens by faith, not by works. But since it happens by faith, it then addresses one’s attitudes, that is, one’s heart and judgment. Since getting in happens by trusting the landowner’s grace and mercy, getting in by faith exhibits a certain attitude toward oneself, and then toward others.

The attitude toward oneself that faith exhibits is not considering whether one deserves it or not. The attitude toward others is not engaging in measuring oneself against others to see who deserves it more.

When people play the measuring game, alternative things can happen. They can end up thinking that they deserve it more than others. That is the way of pride and conceit and the arrogance of regarding oneself as superior. What do they then think they are justified in doing for themselves and those they honor and have a stake in?

On the other hand, they could conclude that they are not as good as another. But then this goes the way of jealousy and is on the road of bitterness and hatred. Bitterness toward the injustice of not being as good as the other. Hatred of the other because one thinks that one is not as good as them.

Both cases are the result of playing the game of who deserves it and measuring oneself against the other. One of the things that gets lost in the measuring game, getting in by deserving it, is the truth, and humility and goodness.

In the game of entering by works and measuring oneself against others, justice and fairness get used selfishly, and therefore, get distorted and perverted. We know how justice can be used selfishly when children throw a fit, protesting, “It’s not fair.” Adults can use justice selfishly in much more serious ways. It’s interesting how we humans know how to use justice the selfish way from a very early age. It’s almost as if it were engrained in us; hard wired. That’s because it is. Using justice to justify oneself is the way of the corruption of our nature.

Justice and fairness can also be used for the good, however, and God calls us to use it this way. Getting into the kingdom of God, being accepted by God on the basis of His grace through faith, makes a difference between justice being used selfishly in the interest of self-justification, or being used by faith in God’s grace in pursuit of the good. Just like sin is a power to use justice selfishly, so getting in by God’s grace as a gift is a power to fight against that selfish use of justice to use it for the good.

Jesus makes this point at the end of the parable when the landowner is talking to one of the ones who were hired first. The ESV says it like this: “[D]o you begrudge my generosity?” Literally, it says this: “Is your eye evil or envious, because I am good?” The word good here in the context of the parable could also have the sense of gracious. So it could be like this: Are you filled with envy because I have been gracious toward your fellow worker?

The phrase “is your eye evil” is a figure of speech. We might say something like: “Is your nose out of joint,” or “do you have a chip on your shoulder.” We say these things to get at a

rotten attitude.

The word “eye” in the figure of speech Jesus used is interesting because we could think of it in the sense of judgment. Is your judgment beset by jealousy and bitterness and malice toward your fellow human being because I have treated him or her with grace and received them by grace through faith into the kingdom at the eleventh hour? Do you say its not fair that they should be given entrance along with you because you are measuring yourself against them to judge which one is better and more deserving? This way of thinking and being leads to a corruption of judgment.

Jesus is here identifying how our sinful nature uses justice selfishly and perverts it when it is used as the standard in the game of getting into the kingdom by works and measuring oneself against others. But that is a perversion and distortion of justice. There is no way to uphold what God considers to be true, and just, and fair, and right objectively, when justice is used to justify oneself, or someone else one has a stake in.

On the other hand, when justice is not used for self-justification, then the way is opened for using justice aright, which is according to truth and in pursuit of the good. When getting into the kingdom is by faith in the goodness and grace of God, then we are enabled to see things as they are and to follow God’s word where it leads. Our hearts are turned away from the measuring game which breeds all kinds of vile things in our hearts, which then manifests itself in bad behavior.

The fact is that everyone is on the same playing field when it comes to getting into the kingdom of God. No one deserves it, so it is by grace. Since it is by grace, it is by gift. Since it is by gift, it is by faith, for someone can only receive a gift and then be grateful to and trust the giver.

Regarding the kingdom of God, the gift is Christ, given for the forgiveness of sins. Getting in, which is also to say staying in, is by recognizing that one needs forgiveness, always. It is not by claiming what one has done, but looking only to Jesus, to the cross He bore, to the victory He won in leaving the tomb behind alive once again. But this time He lived again to establish the Gospel and authorize and empower its proclamation and the deliverance of forgiveness of sins and the grace of God. And so He empowers it to gives us the assurance of forgiveness and God’s grace toward us. And so He uses it to change our hearts and attitudes away from selfishness and toward the good.

But this means that the way of the Gospel and the way of the kingdom is not like the ways of natural human justice and the ways of the world, for the first shall be last and the last first, when it comes to the gospel and the kingdom. Let us regard ourselves as getting into the kingdom by grace through faith in the gift, which is forgiveness and the promise of God’s favor on account of Christ, our Savior. And then let us walk in humility, goodness, and truth, not for the sake of justifying oneself, but for the sake of what is good and right for the good of others. May our Lord Jesus Christ, so work this in our hearts and minds by His Spirit through His word, always. Amen.