**A Parable of Laborers In The Vineyard**

**Matthew 20:1-16**

Septuagesima

1.31.2021

You have heard this parable before, it comes up every year on Septuagesima Sunday. It is unusual enough that you remember it. It is one that has been misused and misquoted by those who try to claim that Jesus is teaching equality of wages or socialism. This it not true. Nor is this a parable teaching how to do mission work or evangelism.

What this parable is, is a parable which teaches salvation by GRACE. In fact, it declares the strange and outrageous GRACE of God. It teaches the grace of God so that we might know that His mercy toward us, and ultimately our salvation is not by works, in any way, shape, or form.

I would like to share with you a retelling of this parable in modern American terms. I did share this with you eleven years ago, but as I read it again in preparation for this sermon, it again struck me profoundly. What follows was written by Robert Capon as if he were teaching in a classroom setting.

*Since you have all read the assignment… (much eye-rolling, some guilty looks) … I shall tell you the story anyway.*

*There was a man who owned a vineyard. His operation was not quite on scale with that of Ernest and Julio Gallo, but it was quite respectable; let’s put him in the Robert Mondavi class. We find this gentleman on the evening of the second Sunday in October. September has been a perfect month – hot and dry, bringing the grapes to the 20° Brix – but his weather service calls him, explaining that the weather is about to turn into cold and wet.*

*So, what does our friend Robert do? He gets up early first thing Monday morning, goes down to what passes for the local hiring hall and contracts for as much day labor as he can pick up. Unfortunately, every other grower in the neighborhood uses the same weather service, so he has to promise higher pay to attract the workers he needs; $120 for the day is the figure that finally guarantees him a crew.*

*I see a hand up. Yes, Virginia?*

*No, Virginia, $120 is not a ridiculous figure. A denarius was a day’s pay; I have simply taking the liberty of making it an acceptable day’s pay. A penny a day may have been alright for the translators of the King James Version, but this is 2021.*

*Anyway, Robert loads his crew into a couple of old school buses and puts them to work right quick. Just before 9:00am though, he gets another weather bulletin. They have moved the start of the three weeks of rains from Wednesday back to Tuesday: he has one day, not two, to get the harvest in. So, in a bind, he goes out at 9:00 therefore – and with increasing panic at noon and at 3:00pm – to higher on still more hands. Each time he succeeds in rounding up all the available help, giving them the by now practiced line, that he is Robert Mondavi, the famous payer of top dollar who is also Mr. Fairness himself; whatever is right, they will get.*

*It’s a huge harvest, though, and with only one hour left before dark, Robert realizes he won’t get it all in on time without still more help. So, out he goes again, but the hiring hall is closed by now and the village square has only its usual crowd of the up-to-the-minute losers hanging out in a haze of smoke. You know the types: ratty clothes, maybe some leather, some girls (and their boyfriends) with more mousse than brains, six-packs everywhere, and music that ruptures eardrums.*

*Why not, Robert thinks in desperation: it’s worth at least a try. So he walks up to the group, ostentatiously switches off the offending ghetto-blaster, and goes into his spiel. He’s Robert Mondavi; he’s famous and he’s fair; they could probably use a buck; so what do they think? What they think, of course, is also, why not, whatever he wants them to do, it won’t take long; and whatever he pays, at least it’s a couple more six-packs for the night. So off they go.*

*Now then: run your mind over the story so far. I’m sure you know exactly what happens each time one of those new batches of workers get dropped off at the vineyard. Before they pick even a single grape, they make sure they find out from the workers already on the job the exact per diem amount on which Robert Mondavi is basing his chances at the Guinness Book of World Records grape harvests. And since they are – like the rest of the human race – inveterate bookkeepers, they take the $120 figure, divide it by twelve and then multiply it by the number of hours they’ll be working. Then and only then do they lay hand to grape, secure in the knowledge that they will be getting, respectively, $100, $70, $40, and $10.*

*Robert however, has a surprise for them. At the end of the day, he is a happy man. With his best and biggest harvest on its way to the stemmer-crusher, he feels graciously overgenerous – and a bit frisky. So he says to his foreman, “I have a wild idea. I’m going to fill the pay envelopes myself; but when you give them out, I want you to do it backwards, beginning with the last ones hired.”*

*Once again, I am sure you know what happens. When the first girl with purple hair gets her envelope and walks away opening it, she finds six crisp twenties inside. What does she do?*

*No, Virginia, put your hand down. She does not go back and report the overage; she just keeps on walking – very quickly.*

*But when her shirt-open-to-the-waist boyfriends catch up with her and tell her that they also got $120. . . well, dear old human nature triumphs yet again: they cannot resist going back and telling everybody else what jerks they were for sweating a whole day in the hot sun when they could have made the same money for just an hour’s work.*

*The fullness of Adam’s transgression being what it is, however, the workers who were on the job longer come up with yet another example of totally unoriginal sin. On hearing that Robert Mondavi is now famous for paying $120* ***AN HOUR****, they put their mental bookkeeping machinery into reverse and step on the gas. And what do they then come up with? Oh fabulous joy! They conclude that they are now about the become the proud possessors of, in order, $480, or $840, or even – God bless you Robert Mondavi -- $1440.*

*But Robert, like God, is only crazy, not stupid. Like God, he has arranged for the recompense to be based only on the weird goodness he is most famous for, not on the just deserts they have infamously imagined for themselves; every last envelope, they find, has six twenties in it; nor more for those who worked all day, and no less for those who didn’t.*

*Which, of course, goes down like Gatorade for the last bunch hired, like dish-water for the next-to-the-last, like vinegar for the almost first; and like sulfuric acid for the first of all. Predictably, therefore – on the lame-brained principle that those who are the most outraged should argue the case for those who are less so (wisdom should have whispered to them, “Reply in anger and you’ll make the best speech you’ll ever regret”) – the sweatiest and the most exhausted decide to give Robert a hard time. “Hey, man,” they say; “you call this a claim to fame? Those punks over there only worked one hour and we knocked ourselves out all day. How come you made them equal to us.”*

*Robert, however, has his speech in his pocket. “Look, Pal,” he says (Incidentally, the Greek word here would come off more sounding like – Look, buster.) “Look, Pal,” he tells the spokesman for all the bookkeepers who have ganged on this parable for two thousand years, “Don’t give me your anger. You agreed to $120 a day, I gave you $120 for the day. Take it and get out of here before I call the cops. If I want to give some pot-head in Gucci loafers the same pay as you, so what? Are you telling me I can’t do what I want with my own money? I’m supposed to be a stinker because you got your nose out of joint? All I did was have a fun idea. I decided to put the last first and the first last to show you there are no insiders or outsiders here; when I’m happy, everybody’s happy, no matter what they did or didn’t do. I’m not asking you to like me, bub; I’m tell you to enjoy me. If you want to mope, that’s your business. But since the only thing it’ll get you is a lousy disposition, why don’t you just shut up and go into the tasting room and have yourself a free glass of Chardonnay? The choice is up to you, Friend; drink up, or get out; compliments of the house, or got to hell. Take your pick.”*

Do you maybe see this parable in a new light? I am not sure I would have retold it exactly that way, but this ***is*** a parable of God’s Grace.

Yes, it is also a parable of judgment. It is a parable of judgment upon those who think they are the “in” crowd. Who is the “in” crowd? Those who think they are members of God’s Church eternal because of:

 their time spent as members of a given congregation – their time served in various positions – they offerings they have given over the years – or that their family has always been a member of that particular congregation.

It is a parable of grace, for it raises all those who are dead in trespasses and sins. This it does not by rewarding the rewardable (for all are sinners, and none ***are*** rewardable), but by the goodness of our Heavenly Master.

It is about a judgment that falls hard only on those who object to the indiscriminate universal nature of the arrangement.

“Do you begrudge me because of my generosity?” Or, as the King James says, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” Judgment falls upon those who cannot accept acceptance. Bookkeeping is the only punishable offense in the kingdom of heaven. If the world could have been saved by bookkeeping, then we could have been saved by Moses. The Law is indeed holy and perfect, but nobody can pass that test. Nobody works hard enough to accomplish the perfection that the Law requires.

God throws out the bookkeeping statistics in heaven. In that happy state, all books but one are ignored forever – The Book of Life. The kingdom of heaven is for everybody, hell is reserved for the fools who insist on keeping records in their heads – and desire God to open “that book” again.

You want what you have earned? You want “That Book,” the book of your works, opened? That can be arranged. Think hard! What have you earned? Yes, you know this all too well, the wages of sin is death. So, what we have earned for our wages is God’s wrath and punishment.

We are working in the Lord’s vineyard, but are we doing what we have been called to do – do we live as the baptized children of God we are? How much time is spent on our cell phones while at work, gossiping about our neighbor who we know is doing even worse things – than using a cell phone at work? How much time is spent looking at porn, shopping at Amazon, or some other distraction – when we are supposed to be doing the tasks assigned us to earn our hourly wage?

Yes, instead of living holy and perfect lives, we are sinners. What we all deserve – all of us – from those whom we think are the best Christian in our midst, down to those whom we are certain are hypocrites, is the wrath of God!

God has paid the price in full! Christ has earned for all what no one could earn on their own. With His innocent suffering and death, the pay envelopes are filled and His foreman – the pastor – has been instructed to hand them out.

Word and Sacrament are the envelopes. You ears receive that outrageous grace of God in a Word of forgiveness. You come to the table and receive from the Master’s gracious hand the gift He would give to you. Receive what Christ has earned for you; eat, drink, and be glad of heart that your God so graciously blesses you unto life everlasting. No, the wages are not fair! They are the given by the outrageous grace of God in His mercy to you.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.