

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost
“When payday becomes gift day!” Matthew 20:13-16
September 20, 2026
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our text for this 17th Sunday after Pentecost is from our Gospel reading, Matthew 20:13-16.

“13 But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’ 16 So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”

So far our text:

Payday...it’s pretty safe to say that the worker looks forward to this day, whether it be weekly, biweekly, monthly, or like this parable, at the end of one work day. The Bible tells us that a laborer is worthy of his or her wages (1 Timothy 5:18). And in fact, in the parable that Jesus told, the landowner went out early in the morning, hired some laborers to go out into his vineyard and agreed with them to pay a denarius at the end of the day, a full day’s wage. Workers began their work day at 6am and worked to 6pm.

So far, so good. Everyone seems to be happy to have some work and happy about the payment. Now there was plenty of work to do, so the landowner went out and found others who were idle and sent them into his vineyard as well. He did this at various times during the day...third hour -9am, 6th hour -noon, 9th hour- 3pm, and even the 11th hour – 5pm. Since it wasn’t a full work day, the landowner didn’t give a set price, but gave his assurance that whatever was right, the laborer would be paid.

And then, the landowner tells his steward to call the workers in and give them their wages, starting with the ones that were hired last. To everyone’s surprise, these get paid a full day’s wage even though they didn’t put in the full days work. So, those who had worked the full day, thought to themselves, we deserve more than these and expected more than a denarius. When they received the same, they grumbled and complained. Nobody ever grumbles about how much their paycheck is, right?

So, the landowner, wasn't pleased with the grumbling and told them to take what was theirs and go away. What business owner wants to have grumbling employees who aren't grateful for the opportunity to receive a fair wage? There was no deception involved here like Laban had done to Jacob, changing his wage 10 times...you remember, your wage will be the speckled flock, and then low and behold, speckled flock were born. No, I meant that your wage should be the streaked flock, and then God made the flocks bear streaked. No, none of that shady practice.

This landowner kept his word and gave them each a denarius, what was right for the first workers and more than right for the later workers. What a generous boss!

And the application of the parable is readily understandable now. God is generous. God is gracious. God gives us more than we deserve. Our wages are not commensurate with what we deserve. In fact, in God's vineyard, that is, in God's kingdom, His church, He makes the last, first and the first, last. God's kingdom is all about grace. And, thanks be to God it isn't about the payment we deserve, but the gift that we don't deserve!

In this week's confirmation class, we took the time to memorize a very important passage – Romans 6:23. **“23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

Every Christian should know this passage by heart. First of all, our wages, what we truly deserve, is not very good at all. For it is the result of a poor work day, a terrible work day of laziness, sloth, deceit, error, in short...sin. Instead of contributing to the God's company with good work, we arrived late, wasted time, broke stuff, cost the Boss, brought dissent, backbiting, gossip, hatred and every vice you can think of.

What is the payment, what do we deserve, what are our wages? Death. Plain and simple. Adam and Eve thought they could be like God even though God told them they could have any fruit except the one from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But they disobeyed God and received the wages of death. “Dust you are and to dust you shall return”. We, who have inherited their sin, their condemnation and added our own disobedience are promised the same wage – death. There is no escape. AI can't help us. We get what we have sowed.

The Bible puts it this way in Romans 3:20. **“20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”**

1 Peter 1 tells us: **“Be holy, for I am holy.” 17 And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear;”**

Try as hard as we can to be holy, we cannot justify ourselves worthy of any wage other than death.

But, there is a second part to the passage that all Christians should not forget in Romans 6:23. **“but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

Instead of paying us what we deserve, God does something absolutely surprising. He gives us a gift, a free gift of eternal life. Payday becomes gift day! Through faith in Christ Jesus, we receive the gift of a denarius of eternal life. We receive complete forgiveness, everything that is right!

How can God do this? Because He is merciful and gracious and full of love...so much love that He placed the payment for our sin, the wages of our sin upon His Son Jesus. And Jesus willingly carried this payment, this ransom on the cross and bore our sin completely!

Romans 5 tells us this good news of the Gospel.

“18 Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. 19 For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.”

And again...2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us, and this is another passage to remember, **“21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”**

Jesus bore the heat of the day, the heat of hell itself on the cross. He gave His life that we would receive His righteousness through faith in Him.

Yes, therefore, be holy for I am holy, says God. Work in His vineyard with diligence and utmost effort and gratitude. Why? 1 Peter goes on to explain why...

“18 knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. 20 He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you 21 who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.”

At the end of our work day, at the end of our life, we are promised the hope of our resurrection! The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Will our work in the vineyard be easy? Paul tells us in our epistle reading that there will be suffering for the furtherance of the Gospel.

“29 For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,”

God promises to help us in all that we go through in life and give to us joy in the midst of our suffering, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God!

And finally, at the end, at the coming of Jesus, when the time of working comes to an end, when the time of grace ends, then the workers in Christ are called to receive their wages, payday becomes our gift day, our eternal life day. For we receive more than we ever deserved.

“Hearken to the Lord whose coming marks the time when grace shall end, When with His angelic reapers He in glory shall descend. Soon the night, the final harvest; soon the time for work shall cease. Then the souls His grace has garnered shall enjoy His Sabbath peace.”

“10 But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. 11 To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 5:10-11

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)