

Matthew 20:1-16

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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Labors in the Vineyard

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 20:15: [The master of the vineyard said,] "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we have before us the "Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard," as it's usually known. However, we might also call it the "Parable of the Terrible Businessman." Let's face it: if the master of the vineyard keeps running things this way, he's going to turn a small fortune into no fortune in little time whatsoever.

The story is straightforward: the master of the vineyard is looking for laborers, so he goes to the marketplace and finds idle men as the day begins. He offers a fair deal: a denarius, a day's work for a day's pay. Around nine in the morning, he goes back and finds more, promising to pay "whatever is right," and sends them into the vineyard. He's back again at noon and three, hiring the idle and sending them into the vineyard. At the eleventh hour, as his laborers are probably starting to clean up their areas at the end of a long day, he's back at the marketplace hiring more. All of this appears to be poor planning, does it not? Wouldn't the master have a fair idea of how many laborers he needs at the start of the day?

It's as if this vineyard can never be filled with enough laborers under his supervision.

As it is, the story feels as if these last, eleventh-hour laborers arrive just in time to line up and collect wages. The master does a curious thing: he pays them first, lining up his workers so that the first to arrive will be paid last. This is where he gets even quirkier: the laborers who have just arrived, who have barely done anything at all, receive a full day's wage. You can imagine the buzz that starts to ripple through the line: if these guys are getting a day's wage for less than an hour's work, how much will the workers get who have put in the full twelve-hour day?

They find out soon enough: when they get to the front of the line, they get ... a denarius, a day's pay. They get exactly what everybody else has gotten, even the men who stood idle in the marketplace for the first eleven hours. The grumbling starts, and you can see why: these men have endured the heat of the day: they have the sore backs, the aching muscles, and the cracked skin from the relentless sun. You can understand why they believe they deserve more, can't you? Haven't they earned a lot more than these others?

This is why I would call the master of the vineyard a terrible businessman. He's giving away a lot of money and destroying his profit margin, but that's not his biggest mistake. You know human nature. If he keeps this up, he'll show up at the marketplace at sunrise, and all the men will say, "Meh. We're going to stay here until the eleventh hour and then show up, because we know we're going to get just as much pay for a lot less work." Because he deals with sinners, the master's generosity is going to destroy his business.

What sort of master pays the new hire the same amount as the guy who has worked all day long?

This is the answer Jesus gives: this master doesn't reward the laborers for their work.

He rewards them for being in the vineyard at the end of the day.

This parable is about the kingdom of heaven, not effective techniques to making your business survive in the 21st century. In the kingdom of heaven, eternal life isn't yours because you've been working in it all day. Salvation is not yours because you've earned it by your hard work and dedication. You're in the kingdom because the Master is generous to you, so generous that you're in at the cost of His Son's blood. You're in the kingdom of heaven because, as the Small Catechism says, "the Holy Spirit has called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified you."

Before we can look at the laborers, look at how they get into the vineyard. They don't answer a want ad or submit a resumé. They're not knocking on the door, looking for work. They're standing idle in the marketplace. *Idle*. They're not looking for labor or occupied with other things. They're doing nothing. They have no direction. The parable doesn't even say, "When they saw the master coming, they lined up because they wanted work, clamoring to be chosen." They're just ... there. They don't have a good reason for what they're doing. They're just doing it. They're just doing ... nothing. That won't last, though: there's a good reason for the old proverb, "an idle mind is the devil's playground."

The only reason these laborers are in the vineyard is because the master seeks them out. He calls them to be his and promises a reward. He rescues them from restlessness and nothingness, which is only going to lead to sin and vice. He doesn't just give them work to do. He gives them an identity and a purpose. And whether they work a long time or a short time, he gives them a reward because they are in his vineyard.

That's the kingdom of heaven, yes? If you take seriously what Scripture says about you apart from Christ, and if you meant what you said in the confession at the start of the service, you're not in the kingdom of heaven because you applied, asked to be let in or prayed a prayer of decision. You're numbered among God's people because the Lord sought you out and gathered you in; and to gather you in, He had to free you by shedding His blood and dying your death on the cross for sin.

Because the Lord has gathered you in, He promises the reward of eternal life. Why? Is it because now that you've been hired, you're turning in some great work? No. Eternal life is yours because you're in the vineyard. Eternal life is yours because the Lord did the work of gathering you in by His own suffering and death. How's that for generosity?

By way of comparison, imagine a child walking up to his parents and saying, "Mom, Dad, what do I have to do to be your child?" The question, no matter how sincere, is actually silly. The child is already their child, because he was born to them. They might give him chores because he's their child, because they want to teach him the value of labor and guard him from idleness; but those chores don't make him any more their child than he was before.

You're a child of God because you've been born into the family – that's what baptism is all about. The gate to God's vineyard is called a font. To put it into the language of the parable, you're a laborer in the vineyard because God has brought you in. The reward is yours because the Son has earned it for you.

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But this is the rub, this is where your sinful nature gets cranky about being in the vineyard: you bristle at the idea of labor. In other words, your old Adam is going to have you

asking, "If I don't get a reward for my labor, then why should I labor at all? And if I already have the reward, why should I keep working?"

For starters, you were created to work. Labor is not a consequence of sin: God gave Adam work to do before there was sin in the world. Furthermore, Ephesians 2:10 declares that we are created in Christ to do good works. I think we can generally agree that things are best put to use for what they were made for: you can use a skillet as a bookend, but it's far better for scrambling eggs. If God has created you to work, and then re-created you in Christ to do good works, then you are at your best when you're doing what God has created you to do.

Second, it's also true that work itself is rewarding. In fact, work and love go together. As I've said before, look at musicians and artisans: the more they work at their craft, the more they love what they do – and the more they love what they do, the more they want to work at their craft. The more husband and wife work at marriage, the more they love each other; and the more they love each other, the more they work at marriage. This is also why parents love their kids so much, even when everybody thinks the kids are brats, because they've worked so hard to care for them.

Work is rewarding. Quiz question: imagine that you have a day off at home with two choices. You can either tackle that backyard project you've been wanting to do, knowing it's going to take the day and that you'll be stiff and sore and tired at the end; or you can binge-watch the latest Netflix series for twelve hours while you eat Cheetos.

Which is easier? And which is more rewarding? I think you know.

Third, the Lord rewards your labors – just not with eternal life. He rewards a musician's hours of practice with greater skill and beauty. He rewards husband and wife who work at marriage with a strong marriage. He rewards dedicated parents with good kids. He rewards hard work at your day job with a promotion and a pay bump. He does *not* reward these works with forgiveness and eternal life – why? Because they're *already* yours. They're already won by Christ for you: that's why you're already in the vineyard, remember? Rejoice that this gift is already given – don't begrudge the Lord's generosity.

Now, we should also add that rewards based upon your works are rewards that come by way of the law, not the gospel; and thus things don't always work out as planned because of your sins or the sins of others. But the Lord does reward labor.

Fourth, have you noticed what sort of labors we're talking about? We're talking about the everyday stuff you've been given to do: love your spouse, love your kids, love your neighbor. If you're single, continue the hard work of chastity and fortitude (which is one of the most difficult labors of all), and serve those around you. Take care of the home and possessions God has given, turn in a good 8 hours at work, serve around the church as you're able, and the like. When your sinful nature is asking, "Why should I labor at all?", it's talking about these sorts of works. As a Christian, are you really wondering why you should be working at your marriage, taking care of your kids, practicing chastity and fortitude, or doing a good job at work? Do you really want to avoid the labors God gives and rewards?

Which brings us to the fifth point: work guards you against idleness. Sloth is a deadly sin, and it manifests itself in the world in one of two ways. One way is simple laziness: the more time people spend not working, the less they feel like working. The less they feel like working, the greater the void they have inside because they're not doing what God created them to do. The other way surprises people: they sense the void that comes with laziness and they don't like it, and so they work themselves into a frazzle until they wear themselves thin and burn themselves

out. At that point, they're incapable of working hard and they can do nothing *but* be idle. Though they've tried to avoid it, they then also face the void of not doing what God has created them to do.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and voids must be filled. When people choose idleness or suffer idleness, they end up with a numbness about them and they want to *feel* something. Too often, they seek to fill the void with pornography, with a greedy pursuit of material possessions, with gossip, with alcohol or drugs ... in other words, they seek to fill the void with some sort of sin that makes them feel something, but destroys faith.

On the much larger scale, this is the world: it's a world full of restless, empty hearts, trying to fill the vacuum; and because of the blindness of sin, they fill it with all sorts of destructive stuff. Because of the bondage of sin, they will never think the void can be filled with Christ until they are filled with Him by His Word.

Thus if we're to rephrase this fifth reason for labor, it's this: if you're not laboring in the vineyard doing good works, your either doing bad works or else you're doing nothing which will lead to bad works soon enough. I think I would even suggest that, if you look at the cultural warfare in our nation today, the sin that lies behind it is not pride or greed or lust: it's idleness. It's trying to fill the void with anything but God and His gifts, be it self-determination or material possessions or immorality. If you choose to fill the void with bad works – which is your only option if you're not going to do what God has given you to do, then you're going to find yourself outside of the vineyard.

Let me repeat that more succinctly: if you resist doing the work that God has given you to do, you will – by your own sin and fault – remove yourself from the vineyard. This doesn't mean that you're saved by works. It means that you if you turn back to sin, you throw away the salvation that God has freely, generously given.

And if you're outside of the vineyard at the end of the day, there is no reward. There is only condemnation.

Labor is a gift from God! And you are given to labor in His vineyard because He has gathered you in. He has gathered you in because Christ has died for your sins, paid for them all and set you free. The void that you feel because of sin is ultimately a restless distance of your heart from God. That's why you confess your sins, rejoice in His grace, and then live your lives going about what God has given you to do.

If God does the work of bringing you into the vineyard, why should you work at all? Because that's what God, in a generosity beyond comprehension, has created and re-created you in Christ to do. What could be more rewarding than what God has given you to do?

And if God has re-created you in Christ to labor in His vineyard, do you know what is the top reason to go about your work?

You labor because you are forgiven for all of your sins!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen