

## Septuagesima (2024)

A single word can make a tremendous difference. Take for example a printer's error in what would become known as the 'Wicked Bible'.

Published in 1631, 'not' was left out of Exodus 20:14, making the 7th Commandment read "**Thou shalt commit adultery.**"

Just three letters, but what a tremendous difference the absence of those three letters make.

Another example is the three-letter word with which today's Gospel begins in the Greek: γάρ . . . gamma, alpha and rho. In English, 'gar' means 'for'.

For stylistic reasons, the word was omitted in the Gospel as it appears in the Book of Common Prayer.

I don't fault the compilers. Beginning a sentence with a conjunction is problematic. English teachers generally discourage it.

Nevertheless, it's good to know that is there. Why?

Certainly not because leaving it out creates a scandal, as did omitting 'not' from the 7th Commandment in the Wicked Bible. Rather, it is because this three-letter word helps us interpret the parable that follows, the parable of the workers in the vineyard. How so?

It is because 'gar' or 'for' links today's passage to what immediately precedes it . . . the story of the rich young ruler and a question the disciples ask after he is gone away.

He comes to Jesus to inquire about obtaining eternal life but leaves disappointed after Jesus tells him to go and sell all that he has

and to give the money to the poor. That was a step too far.

No sooner than he is gone away the disciples ask Jesus: **“So, what’s in it for us?”**

No doubt they assumed because they had left all to follow Jesus and because they had come on board early, they would be first in the queue when the rewards were handed out.

It is in response to this question – What’s in it for us? -- that Jesus tells the parable recorded in today’s Gospel, ending with the words: **“Many that are first shall be last, and the last first.”**

His words seem to be directed at the disciples.

Jockeying for position, rank and reward was the way of the present age. The way of the Kingdom was different, radically different, as

Canon Frank Colquhoun makes clear when he writes:

**“We are not to think of . . . reward [the reward for discipleship] as a carefully calculated wage – that is, as something *due* to us -- but as the free gift of God, far surpassing all we deserve.”**

Having set this parable in its rightful context, let’s move to its application.

How might this story intersect with where we are in our lives? What might it teach us about the God revealed in Jesus? ///

First, I want to suggest, it teaches us that He is a **God of justice**.

In this parable, God is represented by the owner of the vineyard. At quitting time, he pays those hired first the wage he said he would pay them.

In no way does he chisel or try to change the terms of the agreement he had made with them. He is absolutely just.

I was talking this past week to someone who had a friend who suffered great financial loss from the breach of a contract made with the Chinese. If I remember correctly, it cost him his business.

When the conditions of the contract were fulfilled, this man's accounting department submitted the final invoice . . . only to be met with a smile and "We don't pay you. We want to renegotiate."

Well, there was none of that. The owner of the vineyard was honorable and true to his word.

God is like that. He keeps His commitments. He is a God of justice.

In Genesis 18, we find these words coming from the mouth of the patriarch Abraham:  
**“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”**

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard (as in many other places in the Bible), we get our answer, which is: Yes, of course.

Here is the take-away:

Neither in this life or in the life to come will God be anything less than just.

From time to time, I meet people who are concerned about loved ones who have died and whose spiritual state it is hard to access.

They ask: What will God do with them? Perhaps you have asked this question.

Another one is: What about the heathen who has never had the opportunity to hear a clear presentation of the Gospel? Will he be damned forever?

In both cases, based on all that has been revealed to us about God in the Bible and supremely in Jesus, we can be sure that the Judge of all the earth will do what is right. We can take great comfort in that knowledge.

But there is a second attribute of God revealed in this parable. The God of justice is also the **God of grace**. He goes far beyond bare fairness.

In the parable, those last hired get more than they deserve based on their time sheet. They get a living wage. Their families will not go hungry that night. The owner of the vineyard sees to that.

God is like that. He does not deal with us according to strict justice, but according to grace, grace being unmerited favor.

In case you have not noticed, grace is a recurring theme of our Prayer Book liturgy. ‘Miserable offenders’ that we may be, God’s property is to always have mercy, as least to those who repent, believe and follow Jesus.

Good news! This is the Gospel.

“Miserable”, by the way, does not mean how we feel. There may be times when we are merry offenders! Feeling is not the criterion.

What then does this old-fashioned term mean?

Well, it refers to our helplessness in the face of the challenges and temptations we face in life.



Put another way, we have dugged ourselves into a pit too deep to get out of and stand in need of rescue from outside of ourselves.

This thought, by the way, is central to the seven-step approach used by such groups as AA. The way back begins by acknowledging one's helplessness and need for a Higher Power.

God's help—grace--is needed. An old hymn puts it like this:

*Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;  
Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that is greater than all our sin!*

We Christians have been entrusted with Good News. Grace is real and available.

As a friend of mine likes to say: **“Every saint has a past; every sinner a future.”**

Our God is more than just. He is generous and gracious. Tell it out!

Finally, He is a **God of sovereignty**. By sovereignty I mean He is free to do as He wills.

We find this attribute of God in the owner's response to the grumblers: **“Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own?”**

Or, as the Revised Standard Version translates it: **“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”**

In so saying, the owner of the vineyard was asserting his independence, his sovereignty.

What might this mean to us as it relates to God?

Well, first, we cannot dictate to God. Nor, is He not a magic amulet to be carried around. He is to be held in awe and humbly obeyed.

But also, and this is part of the Good News of which I have just been speaking, He exercises His sovereign freedom in reaching out to us human beings in sovereign love, coming down to where we are. Think of John 3:16:

**“For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son . . .”**

Again, we find that little word ‘gar’.

This time, ‘gar’ links John 3:16 to another man who came seeking answers from Jesus, Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

To Nicodemus, Jesus says: **You must be born again, or born from above.**

John 3:16 is the follow up. It tells us how this can happen to us, how we can be born from above.

The way to respond to God's sovereign love with benefit is to believe, to put ourselves in God's hands, to accept His forgiveness and help.

Perhaps you were marked as Christ's own as a baby in baptism. Now your faith needs to catch up to your baptism.

If that is where you are, complete the transaction. Say: For God so loved *me*. *I* believe. *I* receive your gift of everlasting life. ///

In closing, today's parable, as I hope you have seen, is full of encouragement. It points us to a God of justice and fairness; a God of grace and mercy; and finally to a God of sovereignty, freedom and life.

This is our awesome God. Again, as I said earlier, tell it out.

Never forget, you are part of God's Good News team