

Septuagesima (2025)

Since I took up ‘preaching’ now over a third of a century ago, I can look back and remember people who were super-workers in the church.

One particular couple comes to mind. Together, they took care of the church library.

He served on the Vestry, was a Lay Reader, took pictures at church events, represented St. Luke’s in ecumenical endeavors, taught Bible and church history classes. and at one time aspired for the permanent diaconate.

His wife set up for social events, was on the altar guild and sang in the choir.

Eventually, however, he got jealous – indeed became paranoid – of another man seeking ordination. There was not room for both at St. Luke’s, he felt. Then, one Sunday morning the couple stalked out just prior to the sermon.

I should add that we later learned that his paranoia was the result of the drugs he was taking following a heart transplant. And he himself would go on to say their leaving was the biggest mistake they ever made.

I am reminded of this couple because “work for God” can become distorted. Worldly attitudes and ambitions like jealousy and false assumptions can and often do slip in.

Jesus’ 12 disciples were not immune to this danger and at times fell into this trap.

In the chapter just preceding the one from which today’s Gospel comes, the offending party was none other than Peter, the undisputed leader of the Twelve.

The Rich Young Ruler had come to Jesus and had left after finding Jesus’ demands too costly.

At this point Peter steps up and asks Jesus, **“What’s in it for us?”**

His reasoning went like this: He and his 11 compatriots had done what the Rich Young Ruler had been unwilling to do, leave all and follow Jesus.

Should they not then be first . . . get a greater reward than others . . . be the big chiefs when Jesus’ ship came in . . . when God’s long-awaited reign began?

In response, Jesus assures Peter that his and the others’ faithful service would not be left behind or forgotten, but He also issues a correction and warning to Peter’s earth-bound tit-for-tat way of thinking.

He says that there may well be some surprises when the ‘rewards’ are handed out: **“But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.”**

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard follows immediately and was apparently meant to be an expansion on this saying.

The purpose of this parable – as I hope you realize – is not to teach a lesson on fair labor practices. There are other places in the Bible where this issue is addressed. Rather it is to teach a lesson about God, His nature and mode of operation.

First, we learn from it that **He is a God of extraordinary generosity.**

The dominant thought of this parable is that while it pays to serve God, this ‘pay’ – if you want to call it that -- is not to be thought of as a carefully calculated wage.

It is not something *due* us, but is gift from beginning to end. **“By grace are ye saved,”** says Paul in Ephesians 2:8.

Further, those who, through no fault of their own, are called late into God's service will suffer no disadvantage.

This point would become even more important as more people including Gentiles became followers of Jesus. The temptation may well have been for some in the Church to look down on these latecomers, but that would be a mistake. Why?

Because at the end of the day, the song of both those who came early and those who came late, in the words of Julia Johnston's 1910 hymn, would be:

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!

Thus far, I have given you an overview of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

Almost certainly Jesus gave it in response to Peter's question, **“What are *we* going to get out of following you?”**

But there are some practical applications in this parable that we should not miss. I would like to look at two.

First, in this parable we are given a glimpse of the *justice* of God.

Each of the workers, at the very least, got what he was promised. Justice was done.

To the grumbler who complained about those workers who were hired later getting paid the same wage as those who were hired first, the man in charge (who represents God) said, **“Friend, I do thee no wrong; didst not thou agree with me for a penny?”**

The terms of the contract were strictly met.

God will never be anything less than just. And here is where the application comes in:

Some people are understandably troubled about loved ones whom they have lost whose spiritual state was not clear. What will happen to them?

Others express concern over the eternal fate of those who have never heard about Jesus. What about them?

The only answer we can give at the present is that they are in the hands of a God who is infinitely just. **“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”** says Genesis 18:25.

This answer is incomplete, but it does provide at least some insight and comfort.

We must follow our Lord’s Great Commission. We must “go make disciples of all nations.”

We can't say, as some have said and continue to say, **“Those people *over there* have their religion. Leave them alone.”**

No, with Peter in Acts 4:12 we must say: **“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”**

Yet, I think we should be very cautious about making pronouncements about who's in and who's out. Rather, we must leave such matters to the God who is just and more than just.

Be very sure, He will do what is right in every case, with every person.

Aren't you glad you are not the one who is called upon to make such judgments? I know I am.

A second insight and application concerns what our response should be to God amazing generosity.

To those who were hired first the man in charge showed justice. To those hired later in the day, he showed more than justice. He gave them the wage required to take care of a family for one day.

And here is the take-a-way: **As God has been so wonderfully generous to us, so we should be to others.**

First, in terms of the material blessings with which God has entrusted us.

“Give, and it shall be given unto you,” says Jesus in Luke 6:38.

By mimicking God’s generosity, we put ourselves in the position where God is able to

entrust us with even more of His bounty . . .
bounty that is not to be hoarded but shared.

There is a sign over the door of one of those
roundtable, all you can eat, restaurants that
reads: **“Eat until it ouches you.”**

The same could be said of giving: **“Give
until it ouches you.”** You can’t outgive God.

But this generosity should not end with
material possessions. It should also extend to
our judgments regarding other people.

It is so easy to write people off.

But the thing to be considered is that the
crabbed-up person behind the till at the
convenience store may well be carrying a
burden we cannot see.

By withholding judgment and exercising generosity, we may well be an agent of God's grace in that person's life.

There is one business I frequent in Blue Ridge where the woman behind the counter never smiles, always looks as if she has lost her last friend. At times, she can be very curt.

You might be put off by her grime exterior and write her off.

But who but God knows what trials she is undergoing, what burdens she is bearing?

So, what do I do? And I know at least one other person who does the same. Every time we enter that business, we make a conscious attempt to make her smile, and she often does.

By withholding judgment and exercising generosity in our dealings with other people, we

become conduits of God's grace in a world where there isn't must grace.

Why not look for opportunities for doing this very thing this coming week. Mimic God's generosity and leave the outcome to Him.

The parable found in today's Gospel is more than a tale for Jesus' disciples in the first century: it's for us in the 21st as well.

It tells of the justice of God but also of His outrageous generosity. At the same time, it offers us some insights as to how we should live in this present age.

May we hear it for all its worth and respond to it as the Spirit leads.