

Work While It Is Day

Septuagesima

January 28, 2024

Matthew 20:1–16

In John 9 we are told of a man who was blind from birth. Jesus' disciples asked Him if the man was blind because of his own sin or his parents' sin. It was neither, Jesus said, but rather that the works of God might be displayed in him. Then Jesus said this: "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work." Jesus was using figurative language to talk about life on this earth. Our life on this earth is like the hours of daylight and the night is like when death comes and puts an end to our life here on earth. A short time later when His disciples were surprised that Jesus would go to Jerusalem when the religious authorities there were seeking to kill Him, Jesus spoke in a similar way: "Are there not twelve hours in the day?"

Back then there was the time between sunrise and sunset to get your work done, about twelve hours each day. They didn't have the 24/7 society we do today. There are businesses that are open at all hours. But back then when the sun was about to set you'd go to the foreman and receive your day's wage and go home.

This is the picture Jesus is painting in today's Gospel reading. He compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a landowner who goes out into the marketplace to hire workers for his vineyard. He hires a bunch of people and they agree to the common wage for a day's work. But this man has a huge vineyard so he goes back to the marketplace and finds more people who are wanting to work. He hires them, telling them he'll pay them whatever is right. He goes back multiple times throughout the day, later in the afternoon asking them why they're standing around in the marketplace. Because no one has hired us. Well here you go, you now have a job, go and work in my vineyard. The last group was hired at the last hour of the day, they knew they wouldn't get paid much, but it was more than nothing.

Except the surprise ending of Jesus' parable is that the workers who worked for only a portion of the day got exactly the same amount as those who worked the full day, which was a day's wage. This was a shock. I wonder who was more shocked. Those who toiled the whole day in the heat or those who barely broke a sweat? Can you imagine working only one hour and yet get paid for a full day's work? Yeah, neither could they.

Those who toiled the whole day took great offense at the man who hired them. "Why have you made those who worked only one hour equal to us? It's not fair." And it's not. They all should have gotten paid according to how much time they spent working. But Jesus is not telling us this parable to increase our understanding of how this world works. From our perspective, what the landowner did was unfair. But our perspective is exactly the problem. Jesus is telling us this parable to help us understand things from God's perspective. This parable teaches us not what this world is like but what God's Kingdom is like. The landowner represents God and the workers represent us Christians.

Jesus is not talking here about a utopia in which everyone as a worker is the same. Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is eternal. He is showing that all of us who are in His eternal Kingdom come into it at some point in this life. The normal pattern is at the beginning of the day, that is, from birth, where your parents bring you to the font shortly after you are born and you bear the heat of the day throughout your whole life, living as a Christian from birth to death. For some it is early on in life, the third or fourth hour of the day, in childhood or as a young adult. Some come later to the party, sometime in the afternoon, maybe in middle age. And some are toward the end of their life and they come to see that their life on this planet had nothing of lasting value, but only life in Christ is eternal, and they are converted late in their life.

If you have been a Christian your whole life, be glad! You have been receiving the eternal blessings of God year-in and year-out, day by day. Yes, being a Christian is hard. You toil in what the old version of the Catechism calls this vale of tears. And if you became a Christian at some point later in your life, you see the joy you now have and are glad that God brought you out of the darkness into His marvelous light!

There are only twelve hours in a day, dear friends. Seize the day while you have it. Do not become complacent, thinking you can stand around all day in the marketplace. You need to be out in the vineyard working. And while you're toiling away in the vineyard do not think about how unfair it is that those who come on board later are getting the same as you.

The landowner has strong words for those who felt cheated. "Did you not agree with me on a day's wage? Do I not have the right to give what is mine to whoever I wish? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" Would we begrudge those who have come to be Christians later on in life? Should we not rejoice with them? Should we not be glad that God has rescued them from hell and Satan just as He has with us? Work while it is day before night comes and no one can work. While you are alive in this life is the time to be a Christian. Once you die it is over. Without Christ there is only the suffering of the fires of hell.

God is generous. He freely gives His forgiveness, life, and salvation. He does not impose on us demands we must meet. He gives His Son. Jesus did not pay partial payment, accomplishing some of what is necessary for salvation but leaving the rest to us. With His suffering and death He paid the full payment for sin. And He did not die for some. He died for all.

If we begrudge someone God's mercy to them because we think they don't deserve it or because they lived a long, dissolute life only to repent at the end, then we do not see ourselves as we should. Inside is a dark, twisted heart. Inside is full of evil and lust and envy and arrogance. We're quick to judge and slow to compassion. We think the worst of others instead of putting the best construction on their actions. Perhaps worst of all, we think we are more deserving than others. If that is you, take what is yours and go. You have received your reward, that is all you have. If you are looking for what you deserve then receive your wages, the wages of sin is death.

But if you see that the generosity of God extends to all, that God loves everyone, that He desires that everyone be saved, that Jesus paid for all sin, for all people, yes, for you, then rejoice and be glad in the twelve hours of this day we call life. You are blessed to be a Christian for a long full life and to be generous and compassionate with others and forgiving and humble. Work while it is day. God has given you this life for a time, seize it. Don't waste your life away with pettiness and envy. Those who have come to believe later on in life have missed out on so much, not having received the good gifts of God for a lifetime and being able to love people not just with their own abilities but with Christian compassion and service. But though coming late they have received the fullness of the generosity of God, full and free salvation. We too are undeserving and yet have received the same thing! Amen.

SDG

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