

“The Landowner's Generosity”

Septuagesima

Matthew 20:1-16
January 30-31, 2010

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lutherans are sometimes accused of being against good works, or at least not promoting them very well. After all, we're constantly harping on the fact that we're saved by God's grace alone and that good works do not make us right with God. To some that sounds like saying we can live however we please. But, of course, we're not saying that good works aren't necessary; they are. It's not the Ten Suggestions, it's the Ten Commandments we're talking about. They're not optional. God has told us to do them, and so we should. We must.

But let me ask you this: *If you do good things in order to gain some earthly or eternal reward out of it, is that truly a good work? Or if you do something good out of fear that if you don't you'll be punished, is that truly a good work? In both cases the good deed is tainted, isn't it?* It may be good humanly speaking, but it's not in God's sight. For with Him it's not just the outward act but what's going on in the heart that counts. Love and trust in Him is what He seeks. If heaven is the reward we get for living a good life, we're hopelessly lost; because then living a good life would end up being a self-serving thing, which in fact is the opposite of doing good before God.

Think of it this way: If you work at a job just in order to get a paycheck out of it, chances are your heart's not going to be in it. You'll do what's necessary, but you won't care about it like you should. On the other hand, if you'd work at a particular job regardless of the pay, then chances are you'll do much better work; your heart will be in it simply for the love of doing that job. It's true, we can do good work when a self-serving reward is the motivation. But we do our best work when what we're going to get out of it is not part of the equation.

So in truth, God has enabled you to do truly good works by taking the reward out of the mix. The reward is already yours before you even start working, no catch, no fine print. It's been purchased by Christ for you; it's a done deal, whether you entered the vineyard at dawn or at the 11th hour. Your reward, your eternal life in Christ is not in doubt. The denarius is yours through faith, simply by trusting Him. *So now what?* Now you are truly free to do the work God has given you to do from the heart, out of love for Him and love for your neighbor, without any thought of what's in it for

you. All the tainted motives you might have are taken away in Christ. Fear of what might happen to you, self-serving ends no longer have a role to play since Jesus has already given Himself to you with every blessing. You are set at liberty to do good, not because you have to in order to win God's favor, but precisely because you already have God's favor in Christ, and because your neighbor needs you. In a sense you are free to do as you please. For what pleases the heart of faith is not to go back to living in the same old shallow, empty, self-serving ways, but to live in Christ, loving and trusting in God and serving others. That's why it is written that without faith in Christ, it is impossible to please God. Only in Jesus are you truly free to do good.

When we forget that, that's when we'll start to grumble and complain, like the children of Israel in the wilderness, like the laborers in the vineyard who worked all day. You only grumble and complain like that when you think God owes you, that you deserve better based on what you've done. **“I've worked harder than that other guy; I've done more for the church. So I deserve better than him.” “I've lived a good life and been a good person. It's not fair that God is letting me go through this hardship.”** You can only talk and think that way when you believe it's your works that run the show with God. And when your works run the show, then it's all about you, not Jesus or your neighbor in need.

The laborers in the vineyard wanted the landowner to be fair. But in fact He was more than fair. A denarius is a good and proper wage for a full day's work. That's exactly what they received. The landowner didn't stiff them. It's just that the landowner was extremely generous to the others. He treated even the ones hired at the 11th hour as if they had worked all day. You might say that it was by grace that they received their denarius. The landowner wasn't unfair but good and gracious. Besides, he had the right to do whatever he wished with His own things.

Beware of applying standards of fairness to God, as if the clay can tell the potter how to do his job. Beware, because generally the fairness argument is just a mask for promoting our own interests. That's why we love to complain about overpaid athletes or Wall Street CEO bonuses. **“They don't deserve it and we deserve more for all our hard work; it's not fair.”** But God doesn't want to deal with us that way, on the basis of what's fair or deserved, as if we had a contractual arrangement with Him, a business deal. Rather, He wants our relationship to be one of love, freely

given, no strings attached. As soon as it's about what we think God owes us, then we're not seeking to love Him but to use Him.

We should beware of wanting God to be fair with us, anyway, because if He were to do that, we'd be in grave danger. Those who think God should work on the merit system with them are spiritually ignorant. If you want fair wages, then here's what the Scriptures say, **“The wages of sin is death.”** Those who go to hell are really only getting what they asked for, namely, the just and fair payment for their faithless works. **“Go your way,”** the landowner said. Hell is filled with grumbling and complaining against God. I think that's part of their torment. Like someone who can't stop arguing red-faced that they're right and the other guy is wrong, the damned bitterly disagree with God's judgment and spend all of eternity suffering the anguish of growing more and more angry with such an **“unfair”** God.

Repent, then, of your bargaining and negotiating with God as if He were against you, as if He needed to be badgered into loving you. Turn away from your anger with Him. Trust that He is good, that He is merciful and abounding in steadfast love. He is blessedly unfair with you, pouring out on you the fullness of His grace and generosity in Christ. He loves you. He will provide you with all that you need. *After all, if the Father has given us His own Son, will He not also graciously give us all that is good and necessary and right for us?* Remember that the laborers who were hired later in the day went to work without being told what they would be paid, just trusting in the goodness of the landowner. So you also, even though you can't see what the future holds, even if life doesn't seem to be fair, trust in the goodness of your heavenly Father; stake your life on His grace in Jesus. Know that He will give far more than you could ever dream of.

Just like the landowner dealt with those hired at the 11th hour, so the Lord treats you as if you did all the required work, from the beginning to the ending of the day. He does that for the sake of Christ, who did all the labor for you in His perfect life and death and resurrection. What you failed to do, the Lord Jesus has accomplished perfectly on your behalf. He Himself is the true Laborer in the vineyard who brings you the generous reward at the end of the day. All the times in the parable are fulfilled in Jesus on Good Friday. Christ was handed over to Pontius Pilate at dawn. He was crucified at the third hour of the day. Darkness covered the land at the sixth hour, noon. Our Lord died at the ninth hour as the perfect and complete sacrifice for your sin; He who is the Rock was struck, and water and blood flowed

forth from His side for your cleansing and your forgiveness. Finally, He was buried at the eleventh hour of the day just before sundown to sanctify your grave and make it a place of rest from which you will awaken and rise in glory on the Last Day.

It is as we prayed in the Introit, **“The Lord will save the humble people, but will bring down proud and haughty looks.”** Or as Jesus said, **“The last will be first, and the first last.”** It's not first come first served; it's first come last served and last come first served. The repentant new believer is at the front of the line while the self-righteous lifetime member is at the end.

Unbelievers seek a God who is fair. Believers seek a God who is merciful and gracious. Believers know that it is only by grace that they are even in the vineyard, no matter how long they've been there. They consider it a privilege and an honor to be able to contribute to the health and the growth of the vineyard. They are not jealous of the newcomer or of the one converted in his dying days, but they rejoice that the same mercy that saved themselves has also saved another. Even a faithful lifelong Christian recognizes that of himself he deserves nothing and that it is only because of Jesus that he has forgiveness and life. As it is written, **“The free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (Romans 6:23) And again, **“By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”** (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Let us then be truly full of good works by trusting in the grace of Christ alone to save us. Or as St. Paul puts it, let us run in such a way as to obtain the prize of life with Christ, which He Himself has won for us. Let us run with the certainty of faith, setting our hearts on Him, disciplining our bodies and minds, filling them with His words and His life-giving body and blood. Come and lay hold of the denarius Christ earned for you—not because it's owed; but simply because it is His good pleasure to be generous and loving toward you. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.