

WAGES AND GRACE

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Laborers in the Vineyard

Dear congregation!

Be honest. When you heard the reading of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard just now, did your heart leap for joy? Were you thrilled when you heard that the workers who'd toiled and slaved all day long in the hot sun were going to get the same day's wages as those who'd worked only one hour? I guess that would depend on where you find yourself in this story. Among the first, or the last, the fit or not so fit, or maybe more in the middle?

Let's be honest, this parable runs against the grain of one of our most deeply cherished values, the value of hard work and just reward: The more you work and the more productive you are, the more you ought to get paid. I don't know many who would disagree with that. And this is the complaint of those who worked all day: "You have made them equal to us."

The parable provokes one of the most primitive cries of childhood, when one sibling gets a better or larger milkshake than another, the one who feels cheated screams: "But that's not fair!" And so, it goes: Some seem to get more than they deserve while others get less. It's just not right.

But before we dismiss this parable and put it back on the shelf, let's consider the possibility that what's going on in this parable is nothing less than a battle between human justice and God's justice – a battle between our will and God's will – and that, even though we say we just want to get what we deserve, what we want the most and what we need the most are two completely different things. And what we need the most is something far greater. The love and grace of God leads us to experience the fullness of life, not as compensation, but as a gift.

And it starts with the Landowner, GOD, going out to hire laborers for His vineyard. An Invitation to Relationship. The deeper meaning of this example used by Jesus is that God is inviting people who are standing on the outside, which are all of humanity, really, to be in a relationship with God. This relationship is made secure in the idea that God comes seeking for us, and not the other way around. The owner not only seeks workers, but does so repeatedly until the end of the day.

God, in Christ, has also come looking for us, repeatedly, in fact He does this daily. Through the Holy Spirit we are constantly sought out and brought around to be "workers in the vineyard." Even the symbol of the vineyard itself, a sign of Israel's mission among the nations, is likely not accidentally used by Jesus in this story. It is for that very mission and purpose that God seeks us to be his workers, his agents of grace. In doing so, God is making his grace the hallmark of his identity and inviting us to identify ourselves with just such a thing. He wants to give us a sense of purpose, a sense of dignity and honour, and yes, also a sense of pleasure and joy in our work in His vineyard. And in the story, the landowner does not ask the ones He wants to hire what their capabilities are, whether they can do this or that. He simply says: Come into my vineyard. There'll be something that you can do. So, this is the God who invites us to discover our value. And notice from where the workers are hired out. Out of the market-place, where, till they are hired into God's service, they stand idle (v. 3). The market-place is a place of concourse; it is a place of business and seriousness, of noise and hurry; and from that we are called to retire. "Come, come from this market-place." Come into my vineyard. In contrast to the marketplace, a vineyard is a place of serenity, a place of joy and laughter, of camaraderie and community. God, by his grace, is hiring laborers into his vineyard, His church, to dress it, and keep it. It's paradise-work.

So, what was it about those workers who'd worked all day that made them so angry when the others got paid the same? The fact of the matter is that they did have a legitimate complaint from the rational and logical perspective of human beings. However, this parable is not a paradigm of fair labour management, but rather is a statement about the radical nature of God's Grace and His Kingdom. The perspective of the parable gives us a glimpse into the nature of the Kingdom. It accentuates the fact that participation in the Kingdom does not come about by works or by rank of superiority, but rather comes to expression in the unmerited and unmitigated grace of God. It is this element of complete surprise which astounds us as readers and hearers repeatedly. The response of the workers is not unlike that of the elder brother in Luke 15:25-32. It is not a matter of either the elder brother or the day long workers being cheated or rejected. Their sense of fair play and equity has been violated according to human standards, but the radicality of God's ways goes beyond all expectation and human convention as we are constantly surprised by grace at every juncture. Grace is not conditioned by time, space, logic, equity, or any other contingency; rather it is a free-flowing fountain which gushes forth without restriction or reserve. The unfettered mercy and grace of God is extolled, and the radical nature of God's way stands in sharp contrast with that of human beings.

The theme of grace which is so strongly sounded in this parable is like the ring of a bell on a clear day. It is a clear call to place our trust in the wisdom and lovingkindness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. No one enters this Kingdom by merit laying claim to the grace of God as a right, but is rather to acknowledge that it is God who lays claim upon us who in turn are privileged to labour in the vineyard. Human logic is limited, human compassion circumscribed, but the mercy and grace of God knows no limits or boundaries. Even though "grace" constitutes the cen-

tral focus of Christian life and theology, communicating its reality so that it is not only cognitively acknowledged but experientially appropriated in the hearts of people is the most difficult task. Our deeply ingrained patterns of human behaviour and experience simply resist the seemingly preposterous nature of grace as an expression of the sovereign love of God. The "Good News" which proclaims freedom from the requirement of the law is indeed too good to be true. Luther rightly reminds us that one cannot believe this based on one's own reason or understanding, for it defies every human convention. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit's working that one can in faith embrace the message of grace.

Another notable aspect of grace in this parable to consider, is that perhaps, those who were hired to work at five o'clock had been left standing idle all day, not because they didn't want to work or didn't try to get a job, but because they were the least fit to work. Invariably, the younger, stronger, more aggressive men would hire out first. The others couldn't compete. By mid-morning, all that was left milling around were the undesirables – those who were too old, too frail, too crippled, or too mentally incompetent to hire out.

In the parable, God's grace is that everyone gets to work, everyone is given a sense of dignity, and everyone is given the essential earnings to feed his family. The inequity of their varying hours of work was offset by the inequity of their varying strengths and abilities. And this is God's Grace, not that we get what we deserve, but that we get what we need. This shows that the reward of our obedience to God is not of works, or of debt (Rom. iv. 4). It also shows us that there is not any proportion between our services and heaven's glories; no, it is indeed all of grace.

The workers are hired for a day. It is but a day's work that is done here. The time of life is the day, in which we work the works of Him that called and sent us into the world.

It is a short time; the reward is for eternity; the work is but for a day. This should quicken us to expedition and diligence in our work, that we have but a little time to work in. But also, it should encourage us in reference to the hardships and difficulties of our work, that it is also but for a day; the approaching shadow, which the servant earnestly desires, will bring with it both rest, and the reward of our work. It encourages us to hold out, to faith, and patience, for it is but for a little while.

Finally, the problem with the workers who complained the loudest could be that they failed to recognize their relationship to each other. Or, to put it another way, the offense of God's Grace is softened when the "all day" workers and the "eleventh hour" workers stop seeing each other as "us and them" and start seeing each other as "we".

God's Grace arises out of a sense of community in which we see the "eleventh hour" workers as our brothers and sisters whose needs are every bit as important as our own. Next time you get bent out of shape when someone else gets more than he/she deserves, ask yourself, "What does this say about my relationship to this person? Would I feel the same if this were my brother or sister or father or mother?"

Well, I suppose when it's all said and done, we'll always feel a little squeamish about the inequities of life – the unfairness of it all – and perhaps we'll continue to harbour a little resentment toward those who seem to get a free ride. Let's just say it's because we're human, not God. Even so, let's trust God to be just, despite our humanness. Then we will see and know that when the day comes when we're caught short, as one day it surely will, there'll be grace for us as well.

And may this grace and peace of God, which is indeed higher and deeper than our understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.