

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It's a good thing that God does not deal with you out of a sense of fairness. If that were the case, it's a safe bet to assume that no one would be here, that He would have smote everyone long ago. The world would be a desolate place, and hell would be overcrowded.

No, you still live, not because God is fair, but because He is just, merciful, and gracious. You know that. You can sit there and recite it left and right. You believe it with all of your heart. But there is still a constant nagging voice in the back of your head that says it is unfair that God would treat and gift the newest Christian the same as He would you—that the newest Lutheran has the same standing before God as you who have been a Lutheran since the day you were baptized as an infant. The Father is completely indifferent to whether or not you were born into the faith or baptized when you were in your eighties; thief on the cross or apostle; Saul or Luke; early morning, third hour, sixth hour, ninth hour, or eleventh hour. It just isn't fair.

Yet, this unfairness is exactly what the kingdom of heaven is like. This says more about the King of heaven than the kingdom, as the master in the parable even says, "I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?" The master can do whatever He pleases with His own things, even if that seems unfair to you.

It says that the King of heaven is not bound by fallen humanity's silly idea of fairness. He doesn't care how long or how short one has been Christian—for Him, what matters is that this one has faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, this faith which apprehends the grace that Jesus Christ has won for him and made it his own. For such a one as this, the Father looks down and calls out, "Call the laborers and give them their wages: to the last, the forgiveness of sins and entrance into my everlasting kingdom; to the first, the forgiveness of sins and entrance into my everlasting kingdom."

I could end the sermon right there. It would make for my shortest sermon ever, at about half a page. But there was something about this text that was brought to my attention which is often overlooked. No matter when the laborers were hired, they worked.

The Lutheran bells ought to be sounding the alarm right about now. That's a good thing, and the reason for them is exactly why we went through all of that stuff about fairness. The work, the amount of it, has no bearing on the goodness of the master; therefore, what you do, having been made a Christian by the Father, through the Spirit, for the sake of the Son, Jesus Christ, has absolutely no bearing on the grace of God to you. Once again, remaining steadfast in this faith that you have been given, at the Last Day, you will hear Jesus proclaim to you, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matthew 25:34) "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:10)

Nevertheless, as a Christian, you have work to do. The laborers were hired into the vineyard to do work that was planted in advance for them to do. That should sound familiar to you. Let's put this simply: the field was and the crop planned knowing that it would need to be worked—tilled, planted, pruned, harvested...what have you—there was work prepared in advance to be done. Similarly, there are things prepared in advance, known before the foundation of the world, for God's people to do. From your perspective, He first calls you as His own, creates in you a clean heart in Jesus Christ, then sends you into His vineyard, the world, to work. It is as St. Paul writes, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10)

It must be asked, then, what worth is a laborer who won't work? Well, Jesus has an answer for

that, too:

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. (John 15:1-6)

Every branch that does not bear fruit—that does not do the work appointed—is taken away. He is cast out as a withered branch, which is gathered and thrown into the fire. A laborer who does not work is worthless to the one who hires him. It is as if he is dead—a worker without works is dead.

Once again, there should be something familiar about that last line. It is St. James who wrote, “[F]aith without works is dead,” and “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” (James 2:20, 24) Contrary to what that single verse may sound like, James is not denying that faith saves, but that faith is evident by the presence of good works. In fact, it is so evident because *that’s what faith does*. Jesus said it Himself: “He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit.” A true and living faith does good works. That’s what James is getting at, and so he exhorted his readers to do those good works. A faith devoid of works is not a true faith at all, but a dead faith.

The forefathers of Lutheran doctrine confessed this. In our confessions, they write, “This should not be understood as though justification and renewal were sundered from one another in such a manner that a genuine faith sometimes could exist and continue for a time together with a wicked intention.” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III.41, Triglotta) “[James] says that that is dead which does not bring forth good works; he says that that is living which brings forth good works.” (Apology III.128, Triglotta) “St. James teaches correctly when he denies that we are justified by such a faith as is without works, which is dead faith.” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III.42, Triglotta) “James, therefore, did not believe that by good works we merit the remission of sins and grace. For he speaks of the works of those who have been justified, who have already been reconciled and accepted, and have obtained remission of sins.” (Apology III.125, Triglotta)

The Scriptures say it most plainly when it is declared that, “[A] man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ...for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.” (Galatians 2:16) As has been said as this sermon began, if God dealt with you out of a sense of fairness, then no one would be here, because that fairness would be based on works of the law, and by works of the law no flesh is justified. Faith alone saves, without your works—*Sola fide*—but faith is NEVER alone.

Because those works are necessary, as they were prepared in advance for you to walk in them. You were hired as a laborer in the vineyard, to do the work, but the wage has already been settled: the forgiveness of your sins and life eternal for the sake of Christ Jesus. You have faith, and it is yours by grace, and this faith alone saves. So now you must attend to the work of the vineyard. Faith and good works go together, but the works do not save you nor merit the grace that the Father gives by which you are forgiven and saved. These blessings are yours solely for the sake of Christ Jesus who merited them on your behalf, which are apprehended and made yours by your God-given faith. As Dr. Martin Luther once said, “Faith and good works well agree and fit together but it is faith alone, without works, that lays hold of the blessing. Yet it is never, ever, alone.”

It follows that if you have faith, then you have works. So, what’s stopping you?

Well, you are! The self gets in the way of the faith—your Old Adam does not delight in doing the work of the vineyard. The only works he’s interested in are those that serve you, not the good

works of serving others. Your Old Adam is what issues the complaint when you receive the same wage as the laborer hired at the eleventh hour.

It could even be said that whenever you do something that serves yourself over and against your neighbor, whenever you do something that hurts or harms your neighbor, whenever you do something which you have been taught not to do as you have studied the Ten Commandments in the Small Catechism, your faith dies a little. In those moments of doubt and weakness, the *peccator* wins out over the *iustus*.

But, I would be in error if I said that the *iustus* is destroyed. You are at the same time sinner and saint, and that sainthood of yours is important. Jesus took on human flesh, was born, baptized, and crucified to gain for you the blessings of the remission of your sins and entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' merits—His perfect obedience in His death, resurrection, and ascension—are the ones by which your wages are secure, whether you were hired at the beginning of the day, the end of the day, or at any time in between. You are a saint for His sake, and no one can take that away from you. (cf. John 10:29)

Jesus died as the propitiation for your sins, among those being the dying faith that your idleness or wickedness produces. By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified, because no flesh can keep the law and do the works that the law requires. So God, in His infinite wisdom, grace, and mercy, sent His Son into the flesh, in order that the works of the law could be done on behalf of His people, and the wages of their sins be paid in the shedding of the blood of Christ Jesus.

In that same infinite wisdom, grace, and mercy, God has seen fit to grant you faith to trust in Jesus Christ solely for your forgiveness and salvation, and for the merits of the same. That faith grasps the blessings which Jesus won for you on the cross and makes them yours. That faith is now strengthened time and again as you are in His presence to hear His Word and receive His Sacraments, so that when you receive and grasp onto the words of Holy Absolution by faith, your faith is restored and revived again, and you are forgiven for your laziness and wickedness. And when you take into your mouth the very body and blood of Jesus under the bread and wine, you take to yourself the very medicine of the soul and elixir of Life, so that your faith is restored and revived again, and you are forgiven for your laziness and wickedness.

All of this is your because you have been brought into the vineyard and made a laborer, regardless of when that happened. It is yours purely and solely by God's grace and mercy. It isn't fair, but it is just, and it is exactly what the Father desires for you, not wishing that any would perish on account of their sins and wickedness, but that all would come to a knowledge of salvation. (cf. Ezekiel 33:11; 1 Timothy 2:4) This you know and confess, dear saints of God, because you have been given faith and remain faithful only by the work of your Father in heaven, for the sake of the Son, Jesus Christ, in whom you have remission, the forgiveness of all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.