

Septuagesima
St. Matthew 20:1-16

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

Here's the set up for today's text. A man asked Jesus, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" After a bit about who or what is good, Jesus told the man to keep the commandments. Then, as if there are some more worthy of being kept than others, the man asked Jesus which commandments should be kept. (cf. Matthew 19:16-18)

Could you imagine asking such a question? I suppose not, given the tone of my question, but it shouldn't be so surprising. Man has been looking to grade and divide the commandments into those which would be most important and those which are of least importance since God first gave the commandments. For this reason, James wrote, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it." (James 2:10)

Anyway, Jesus, ever gentle with one such as this, replied with the second table of the Law, those commandments which govern your interaction with each other. That's not too difficult an ask, at least outwardly—some commandments might likely be easier to keep outwardly than others, and differently so from person to person. Still, this young man answered Jesus that he had kept all of those, but he knew he still lacked something. So, Jesus replied, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." At this, the young man went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (cf. Matthew 19:18-22)

Then, Jesus turned to His disciples and told them, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." This distressed the disciples a little. They wondered if anyone could be saved, then. Again, Jesus replied, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." So, Peter spoke up and boasted for the others, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (cf. Matthew 19:23-27)

This prompted the parable you heard as today's text, but not before Jesus first answered, Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. (Matthew 19:28-30)

So that might help to give a little context for the parable—the parable where a master goes to the marketplace several times to find workers for his vineyard. It might also give you pause to how you have most often heard the parable explained—that God is equally but unfairly gracious to all whom He has placed in His vineyard, regardless of how early or late in the day that was, and in this case, the day being the lifetime of a person, so how early or late in life one came to faith.

Now, I don't mean to dissuade you from such an understanding. It is an obvious understanding of the parable since the master goes to the marketplace throughout the day to hire workers. Then, at the end of the work day, he pays them all the same, no matter when they were hired. It is, therefore, a good sense to have of your heavenly Father, who is a most gracious Master, equally and unfairly so.

So, if you've been a Christian since infancy or have only very recently come into the Church Militant, you are a Christian, one claimed by Christ the crucified in those Holy Waters and made a son of His Father and Yours, and co-heir with Him of heavenly riches. Those heavenly riches—forgiveness, life,

and salvation—He gives equally to all of His beloved children, though unfairly, because all have need of them, no matter when in life they have come to faith. You are all equally forgiven of your sins, given eternal life, and saved from this valley of tears, for the sake of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Paul described oneness in Christ regardless of heritage, station in life, and gender, but you could add age and longevity in the faith to that as well. You are all one in Christ; that should be cause for great rejoicing!

But think also of the master paying the hired hands each the same thing regardless of how much they have worked and how hard they have toiled under the heat of the day or didn't. The parable now sounds like a warning against expecting more of what is promised for more labor, as if the work that you have been hired to do somehow earns you more than what is promised.

What is promised is forgiveness, life, and salvation. How much you've left behind to follow Jesus, how much good that you've done in the name of Jesus, how much you've given for the sake of Jesus...all of this has no bearing on the promise that God has made to you—forgiveness, life, and salvation. To expect something else or something more is to turn an evil eye toward God; or, to put it more precisely, to turn one's eye evil by taking one's eyes off of God. Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs explains it thus:

The master's actions are stunningly unexpected. However, they are only insulting or hard to swallow...if one takes one's eyes off of the owner. One can imagine the scene as the parable sets it up. Wages are paid out, beginning with the last group and ending with the first. As the first group stands in line and waits their turn, their gaze falters, leaving the master who has hired them, given them meaningful work, and promised them a fair wage. They stop looking at the master, and they start looking at their fellow workers. That's when they get into trouble. Their eye actually becomes evil because the master is good to others.

It would seem that the most at risk for obtaining this evil eye would be pastors and those in offices with similar work as the apostles. Most simply put, it is to the disciples that Jesus told this parable, because Peter boasted on behalf of all of them that they had given up more than anyone else to be a follower of Jesus. And, being apostles, they could easily have thought that they have done more work for the Church than an ordinary Christian—church history would agree with them in this regard. Pastors, missionaries, and teachers in the church might say that they do more work in and for the church than anyone else. Who else spends as much time in study and preparation and delivery and administration in order that you might hear and receive the salvation wrought by Christ? While there are certainly laymen who spend as much time, if not more, doing "church work," by-and-large, the bulk of this "church work" is done by church workers.

That is not meant to sound as a boast on my part, though it certainly can become one. And in the event it does, then my eye has become evil toward God, especially if in that boast I expect more or something other than what has been promised to all who have been made a part of God's vineyard, the Church. God guard me and all pastors and workers in the Church from this arrogance.

Still, there are degrees of difficulty in the work that God gives to all of His children. To this one He says go there and do that work which will take you the better part of the day; to another He says go here and do this work which will take you only an hour. Some have a harder task in the Church than others, but in every case, God provides the means to see to the task that He has given you. So, perhaps you were hired at the third hour, or sixth hour, or eleventh hour—to you each God has given a task and the means to accomplish it. And while in the parable the promise isn't repeated, it is still the same for being brought into the vineyard—forgiveness, life, and salvation.

It is as St. Paul wrote, "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) Recall Jesus' parable of

the talents, wherein the master, going on a trip, gives to three of his servants a different amount of talents, “each according to his ability,” Jesus said. (cf. Matthew 25:14-15) So it is with each of you. The work you have been given to do is according to the ability that God has given you. Some do more than others, who in turn are doing less than the some, but each are doing what it is that God has given them to do.

To then look at what your brother and sister have done in comparison to your work and see that they receive the same forgiveness, life, and salvation which God has promised to you is to take your eye off of Him who promised this to you and turn your eye evil toward Him. The promise that God has made to you to forgive your sins, give you eternal life, and save you is not dependent on the work He has given you to do—you cannot get more of any of this promise for having done more than your brother or sister in Christ. Likewise, you do not receive any less of this promise because you have been given less to do than a brother or sister in Christ.

So, what does doing the work with eyes fixed on the master look like? Well, simply put, if you’re not looking at anyone else around you, then you are not comparing what it is you do, how hard it is that you’re working, or how long you have been working to that of anyone else. With your eyes fixed on Jesus, your work becomes a joyful task in which there is no boasting, pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, as St. Paul put it. (cf. Philippians 3:14)

Then, the end of the day will come—the end of days will come—and the Master will call all to account for what they have done. Like sheep and goats, recall, is how the King will separate mankind. The sheep—you, dear baptized believers—will be ushered into the everlasting life that was promised to them, their good deeds recounted for them, unawares of having done so much. That’s because joyfully doing the work that God has given you to do with your eyes fixed on Jesus involves no score keeping; there is no evil eye involved here.

But St. Peter wanted to keep score. James and John wanted to keep score, according to the request of their mother. (cf. Matthew 20:20-21) Paul spoke of his temptation to keep score as he listed his pedigree. (cf. Philippians 3:4-10) It’s inevitable that score keeping will happen; it’s part and parcel of life in this Vale of Tears. Fixing your eyes on Jesus is an impossible task for you. Only Jesus can fix your eyes on Him, and when He does, He draws them to His cross and empty grave—to His death and resurrection, the means by which He makes the promise to you—forgiveness, life, and salvation. There, see the greatest work done to earn the promise; after all, who among you could give your life and take it up again?

There, at the cross, Jesus took all your sin upon Himself and died with it. His death destroyed the score. His death destroyed the boasting of working longer and harder in the vineyard. His death took all of that and more away from you—all your sin and death and guilt and evil desire—and destroyed it once and for all. His resurrection brought to light immortality and life. These all Jesus gives to you freely, without any worth or merit in you, all for His sake. Therefore, “On the Last Day, the reign of God in Jesus will come in all its fullness. All who have been called as workers in the vineyard—all disciples of Jesus, without distinction—will receive from the Master what he deems just, in accordance with his pledge when they were first called,” Dr. Gibbs wrote.

Do you believe this? Then let it be done to you as you believe. You are saved. You have eternal life. You may not feel it now, even as you struggle with your Old Man, but these are all yours because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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