

Septuagesima (2012)

(1 Corinthians 9:24-27, St. Matthew 20:1-16)

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.”

This morning's Lessons teach that living the Christian life requires labor and striving.

While most assuredly it is by grace we are saved through faith and not of works, the faith we are given is to be put to work.

As St. James reminds us, faith without such works is dead.

We must be careful though not to get the order mixed up.

Scripture teaches that God saves us by giving us His unmerited grace wholly because of His love and mercy in Christ. That grace then initiates faith within us, a type of faith that assuredly produces good works.

We must be careful not to rearrange this order to doing good works in order to try and earn grace that will initiate faith.

Such an order of salvation is a definite perversion of the Gospel, for *“...we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ (preceding) us.”*

Also, *“...Good Works, which are the fruits of faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, (though) “...they are pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith.”*

The following analogy may be helpful:

Grace is the roots of the “tree of salvation”, faith is the trunk and branches of that tree, and works are the fruit produced by that tree; at least a healthy tree.

As Jesus taught in St. Matthew 21:19, 20 when a tree (in that instance a fig tree) does not produce the fruit it has been planted to produce, our Lord's curse will come upon it, and it will wither and die.

This morning's Gospel lesson is Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

He states the kingdom of heaven is likened unto a vineyard owner that needed laborers for his vineyard and went to the market-place to hire them.

At 9:00 a.m. (“*the third hour*”) he hired a group of laborers who agreed to work *“for a penny.”*

At noon (the sixth hour) and 3 p.m. (the ninth hour) he hired more laborers to be paid *“whatsoever is right.”*

And then at the eleventh hour (5:00 p.m., the work day ending at the 12th hour or 6:00 p.m.) the vineyard owner found laborers standing around idle.

He asked them why they were not working, to which they answered *“Because no man hath hired us.”*

The vineyard owner hired those laborers also for *“whatsoever is right”* and sent them into his vineyard for that final hour of the day.

At the end of the day the laborers lined up to be paid by the steward of the vineyard owner. According to the vineyard owner's instructions the laborers were to be paid starting with the last ones hired to the first ones hired.

The men hired last, though they had only worked for one hour, received a penny for their labor.

Those hired at 3 p.m., noon and 9 a.m. received the same wage.

When those hired at 9 a.m. were also paid a penny they felt cheated.

They felt they should have been paid more than the other workers because they had worked longer hours and labored through the heat of the day.

The vineyard owner dismissed their complaint.

Each of the workers hired at 9 a.m. had agreed to work all day for a penny. If he, as the one who owned the vineyard and had chosen the laborers, decided to pay those who worked less hours and under less trying conditions the same wage, that was his right.

Their complaint had no substance to it.

The obvious point to the parable is this.

No matter when we were chosen to follow Christ; whether early, in the middle or very late in our lives, the “wage” we will receive is the same for all: eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

As Romans 7:23 states it *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

If we've had to endure many years of trial in order to labor for the faith, defend the faith and spread the faith; while others have spent fewer years, or did not have to endure trying conditions, we have no right to complain.

Oswald Chambers wrote “*You have no right to say- ‘O Lord I am so exhausted.’ He saved and sanctified you in order to exhaust you. Be exhausted for God, but remember that your supply comes from Him.*”

We must understand that it is only by grace that the owner of the vineyard, our Father in heaven, called us to be workers in His vineyard to begin with.

As Jesus teaches in John 15:16 “*Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain.*”

There is nothing we can do to work *for* our own salvation, or to make our salvation *better* than anyone else’s. No one merits salvation, nor can they make their salvation “better” than anyone else’s.

In Eph. 2:8-10 St. Paul teaches “*For by grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in.*”

God has chosen us, gifted us with His grace, His unmerited favor and mercy; has led us by His Holy Spirit to take hold of that grace through faith, and then blesses us with the opportunity to do good works to glorify Him.

At what point in any of that can we say that we, of ourselves, did anything, or earned anything and therefore can make any demands from God?

If He blessed us with grace many years ago and we have labored long and hard for the sake of the Gospel and the Church, it is a privilege to have been so called.

We do not have the right to demand more than those who were chosen to labor for Christ after we were. Our only right is to say thank you.

Once we have received God’s commission to “go”, St. Paul tells us what our aim is to be.

In Phil. 2:12-14 he states: “*...work out (not work for) your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Do all things without murmurings and disputings:*”

No matter what hour of the day (what point in our lives) we were chosen by God to labor in and for His kingdom, we are to meekly work out our own salvation for the promised wage of eternal life in Christ Jesus without complaining, realizing the great privilege we have been given by God to have been chosen to labor in His vineyard.

Remember what Jesus says at the end of the Lesson “*...for many be called, but few chosen.*”

We have been chosen in Christ to labor in His vineyard. Let us receive our being chosen for the privilege that it is, and then work it out.

While labor and striving are necessary parts of the Christian life, they are never means by which we can earn salvation.

Our labor and striving, our good works, are the fruits of that salvation.

They are the fruits of a true and lively faith.

They are the way we prove we have been, are being, and will be saved.

But works are never the means by which the grace that produces faith, faith itself, or the salvation that faith is rewarded with is initiated.

Let us never forget that our salvation is wholly God’s gift.

Let us never forget that it is by grace we have been chosen and that by faith we are being saved.

And then let us labor and strive by that grace and faith for as long as necessary and under whatever conditions necessary, to complete the good works prepared in advance for us to walk in.

When we do, we will be grateful workers, faithful Christians, not those who murmur or cause disputes within the Church or society for that matter.

We will be faithful laborers for Christ that do not want or need anything more or anything other than the blessed salvation all who have been chosen in Christ Jesus are given at the end of the Day. **Amen.**