

Septuagesima
Matthew 20:1-16

Today, Jesus teaches us about the kingdom of heaven.

There are three kingdoms. The kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of the world. And the kingdom of glory. We won't know what the kingdom of glory is like until our Lord comes again in glory, so we usually talk about the other two kingdoms. You may have heard the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the world described as the right hand kingdom and left hand kingdom, respectively.

We understand the left hand kingdom or the kingdom of the world. It is also known as the kingdom of power.

The left hand kingdom is the kingdom of *lex talionis*, or the law of the claw. God sets up governments to reward good behavior and to punish wicked behavior so that all may be relatively safe and cared for. Luther had this great idea that rulers should have a bread basket as their coat of arms on their shirts to remind them that their main job is to take care of the people under their care. You learn this lesson first at home where God has set up parents as the natural authority. Then you learn it even more as you venture out into the world. You find out quickly that many parents and leaders are corrupt. When leaders become corrupt, God may allow them to last for a while, but eventually He will end their leadership. Finally, when He comes again in glory, He will end all tyrannical leadership.

This is why Paul tells us, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." (Rm 13:1-2) Paul wrote these words from God while Nero was caesar. Nero would make both Trump and Biden look like altar boys. Nero was truly evil, but Paul says to respect him! God uses these evil men to accomplish His purposes. And He doesn't let us know what He's doing. God put President Trump into power. And He put President Biden into power. It is the height of folly to peer into God's unrevealed will.

God's revealed will is found only in the kingdom of heaven, or the church. We do not understand this kingdom by nature. Notice that the master of the house went out and invited idle men to work.

We like to think that if we work hard and take initiative, we'll be rewarded. This is generally true in the kingdom of the world, but Jesus describes something different for the kingdom of heaven.

Just as Lazarus had to be commanded to rise from the dead, we have to be commanded to work in the vineyard from a state of idleness. This is how Paul describes us in Ephesians:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph 2:1-3)

Thanks be to God, He doesn't leave us in this state. Paul continues in the same passage:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Eph 2:4-5)

If you remember nothing else, remember these two verses. God is rich in mercy and He loves you!

This is the revealed will of God.

And this reveals to us the work of the vineyard. The work of the vineyard is the work of the church.

Repentant sinners are baptized. (Mt 28:19-20, Mk 16:16, Jn 3:5-6, Acts 2:38-39)

Repentant sinners are taught the Word of God. (Mt 28:19-20, Deut 6:4-9)

Repentant sinners are absolved of their sin. (Jn 20:19-23)

Repentant sinners are fed the body and blood of their Lord for the forgiveness of sins. (Mt 26:26-29, Mk 14:22-25, Lk 22:14-23, 1 Cor 11:23-32)

Older men and women are to teach sound doctrine to the younger men and women. (Titus 2:1-8)

Church buildings are taken care of by the trustees. No matter how modest the church building is, it needs care.

The altar of God where He distributes His very own body and blood is cared for by the Altar guild.

Elders assist the pastor with his duties.

Cleaners clean. Servers serve. Builders build.

As Peter says, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” (1 Peter 4:10)

Everything is done “decently and in [good] order” to serve the purpose of the church which is to preach and teach the Word of God purely and to administer the Sacraments correctly by Christ’s command. (1 Cor 14:40; AC VII)

Whenever the church forgets that it exists to preach the Word and administer the sacraments, it hides the Gospel. People are not saved by programs but by the means of Word and Sacrament. Everything we do needs to keep Word and Sacrament central. It’s not our church, but the Lord’s church!

God uses you and I to invite others to the vineyard. It would be nice if God spoke from heaven in his great booming voice like at Jesus' baptism and invited others to come to His vineyard. He doesn't do that. He uses "poor sinful beings" to invite other "poor sinful beings" to the one place where God's mercy is found for sinners! (LSB 184)

You face three temptations in God's vineyard, the church.

The first temptation is to become weary.

Our church is not "growing."

I'm tired! I've worked in the heat of the day for so many years and I've grown weak and weary!

I've prayed for my friend or relative and invited him or her to church for years and nothing has happened!

My prayer life has become so stagnant. I don't have any of the zeal I remember from long ago!

Repent and remember the Word from Peter:

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

To use Paul's analogy from our Epistle reading, we remember that we are in a marathon and not a sprint.

The second temptation is to begrudge God's grace shown to another sinner.

We all come into God's vineyard at different times.

When it works well, godly parents raise godly children who grow up to raise their own godly children. But we know that even if you raise your children in God's vineyard, there's no guarantee they will stay.

Some come to the vineyard later in life. These are like the workers that the master of the house finds later in the day at the marketplace.

Some grow up in the vineyard, depart for a time, and come back to the vineyard later in life.

Some in the vineyard are blessed with incredible skills that serve the church well. Others think they are blessed with incredible skills. Some have skills in one area and not in others. We certainly don't want just anyone on the board of trustees!

You are tempted to despise others in the church. You wish some would get off their butts and contribute. You wish others wouldn't do so much. You wish the pastors weren't such sticklers for what seems silly to you. When you do this, you are despising others for whom your Lord died.

Repent and remember the Word from Paul:

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body...

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Cor 12:14-20, 26)

We remember that we are just like one big family and will spend eternity together!

In the same way, we are tempted to create a pecking order in the church like the pecking order we see in the world.

Of course, God did not dictate how we are to order the governance of the church. We have Christian freedom to choose any kind of ordering that seems best. Even though the Roman Catholics have abused the hierarchical order, that doesn't mean that order is bad in and of itself. Even though some churches in the LCMS have abused the congregational order, that doesn't mean that that order is bad in and of itself.

We sin against others when we assume our voice should be heeded because we're founding members of the church or because we have been here forever. We sin when we think that only certain members of our church know what's best for Grace Lutheran Church. We sin when we do things against good order because we've always done it that way!

Repent and remember the Word from Paul:

“one Lord, one faith, one baptism!” (Eph 4:5)

We remember that the church is the Lord's church and that we are all equal! We may have other stations of life in the world, but in the church we are all equal.

The third temptation is to begrudge God's goodness and return to a works based salvation.

The main point of the parable is that God lavishes His grace in the church to those who don't deserve it!

There's a problem with the ESV translation at the end of the parable. God gives all the workers a denarius and starts with the last workers. The first workers expect more and are mad when they only get a denarius. The ESV says, “Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (v. 15) They interpreted instead of translating it. The Greek actually says, “Are your eye's wicked because I AM good?”

God's goodness is the source of our salvation and nothing else! When we see how God treats others, we are tempted to think we are blessed because we're such "good people!" instead of remembering that all of God's blessings come out of His goodness and grace which He lavishly bestows upon His people! God forbid we hear these words from our Lord: "Take what belongs to you and go." (v. 14) If we take what belongs to us, we are doomed forever!

We repent and remember the Word through Isaiah:

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. Is 64:6

This is especially important to remember on your deathbed!

There's a rite I do for those on their deathbed called "The Commendation of the Dying."

It is full of God's Word that tells you the work of Christ on the cross for all your sins is fully yours in your baptism through the grace of God! There's not one iota in the commendation about your works! It's all about the work of Jesus applied to you lavishly through faith and not works! The work of Christ brings true comfort! The comfort you need not only on your deathbed, but every day you sojourn here in both kingdoms.

Remember the main point of the parable: God lavishes His grace in the church to those who don't deserve it! Thanks be to God, that means He lavishes His grace upon you!

In Jesus' name. Amen.