

**Matthew 20:1-16**

Don't you suppose that, if this parable happened in real life, those laborers who worked all day would be out talking to lawyers about now? There is no way that they would let that master get away with being unfair to them. They were entitled to more money; any jury would agree with that. What do you think? If the boss paid you the same as everyone else at work, but you put in ten times more effort and ten times more hours, wouldn't you complain that he was being unfair? You know something...so would our Lord. "He who will not work, neither let him eat." He said these words through St. Paul. He also said, "The laborer is worthy of his wages," and "whatever a man sows, this he will also reap." That master, plain and simple, was being unfair. Forget the deal he made with the "all-day workers" for one coin. When he paid the "one-hour workers" one coin, that deal was off. The "all-day workers" were entitled to ten coins. No one, not even God, would disagree with that.

So why did Jesus tell us this parable—one which appears to be so far removed from real life that it could be called ridiculous? To show us, as Isaiah writes, that "God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and our ways are not His ways." The fact is that this parable teaches the absolute truth. It's not ridiculous. It is real life—not in the world, but in the church. "The kingdom of heaven," says Jesus, "is like a master of a house..." He is not speaking here of the way life is at your place of work, or at the business down the street. In God's kingdom; in His church this is how it is—life is not fair.

Those of you who have worked hard in God's kingdom for sixty, seventy, or eighty years will not receive any more joy in heaven than the thief on the cross who did nothing for God his entire life, but repented within hours of his death. Those of you who spend hours each week working for the church, making sacrifices, taking time out of your already busy schedules to keep the church going, will have no more benefits, bliss, or joy in heaven than those members who barely raise a finger to help out. And those of you who give ten-times more than the average member when the offering is collected will not get a better seat at heaven's banquet feast. Life may be fair out there...to an extent; but in God's kingdom everyone who works in His vineyard for a day, or an hour, or for years or decades all receive the same reward.

This parable of Jesus may remind us of the Prodigal Son story. When the older brother came in from the field he was angry at his father for showing mercy to his brother. Like the "all-day workers" in the parable, the older brother also complained. He said: I've been working hard for you, serving you for years, and what do I get? But this prodigal returns and you give him a feast! That brother was angry because his father was merciful. He wanted his brother to get what he deserved—not a loving welcome, but a harsh rebuke and a cold shoulder. Punishment, not mercy. A slap to the face, not a warm embrace. In Jesus' parable we see the same attitude. The "all-day workers" wanted the other workers to get what they deserved—not the same pay as them, but less...much less. They didn't deserve a denarius; they didn't even work up a sweat.

Wherever we look—at this parable, at the story of the Prodigal Son, at Jesus' disciples always quarreling about which of them was the greatest—it seems that we always see people in the church comparing themselves to others. The "all-day workers" compared themselves to the "one-hour workers." The older brother compared himself to the prodigal

son who came home. The disciples of Jesus were always comparing themselves to each other. And if I'm not mistaken, the same kind of comparing goes on in Jesus' church right here in Augusta, Missouri. And like with the parable, when comparisons are made, complaining soon follows.

Sometimes these complaints are voiced; often they remain only in our heads. "Well, he's not pulling his fair share around here." "He should give a lot more to the collection plate than what he gives." "I do twice as much work around here as she does." "If it wasn't for me, this place would fall apart." As with every congregation, we have "all-day workers" here. We have "9 a.m. workers," "12-noon workers," "3 o'clock workers," and "one-hour workers." We have members who work hard for the church. We have others who work a little. And we have those who hardly work. But when we start making comparisons, and put ourselves into the mix, that's when the grumbling begins within our thoughts and sometimes with our words.

Let's look again, however, at Jesus' parable. If there is one truth which stands out here, it's this: Everyone who worked in the vineyard that day—whether they worked all day or only for an hour or two—everyone of them received a denarius as a reward not because they deserved it, but because the master was merciful. The master of the house went out to hire workers; the workers did not come to him. He found each and every worker. Not one of them would have received anything that day except that the master came to them. And when he came to them, he already knew in his heart that each of them would receive a coin no matter how long they worked. They thought they received the coin because they worked in his vineyard. But it was the other way around. The master had the coin set aside for them even before they picked their first grape. In reality, they did not work in order to receive the money; rather, because the money was already theirs, they worked.

You see, "God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and our ways are not His ways." We think that God is pleased with us for working in His church. But it's the other way around. He is first pleased with you because Christ washed you in your baptism; and because He is pleased with you, He lets you work in His church. We think that our money, and time, and effort keep the church going. Not so. God keeps His church going with or without us. If we fall out, He replaces us with another. He uses our money, time, and effort not because He needs these things, but because He delights in doing so. Our thoughts center around what we do for God. His thoughts are all about what He does for you in Christ. Our ways are to grumble and complain when we don't think that we get the praise we deserve for all that we do. God's ways are to be merciful and give us not what our sins deserve, but forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ Jesus.

Are you an "all-day worker?" Have you been active in the church for a long time? Heaven is yours not because you work in God's kingdom, but because Jesus lived, died, and rose again for you. You don't work for the church to gain eternal life. It's the other way around. This life is already yours in Christ by the mercy of God. It's a privilege, therefore, that He allows you to work in His church, His vineyard, to show your gratitude for what He has given you in your baptism.

Are you a "one-hour worker?" Have you been one who has not spent much time and effort, and perhaps money, in serving God's kingdom? God doesn't love you any less. Christ died also for you. All of your sins are also washed clean in baptism. In the parable, the

master was merciful to all who worked. God will not take any blessing away from you if you spend less time working for Him. He blesses you with His precious gifts not because you work in His church, but because Jesus is your Savior. It's a privilege to serve in God's church, and the more you serve, the more you see this. But the most precious work in the church is the work of God within your heart and life, not your works for Him.

And so the greatest thing any church member can do is to faithfully hear the Word of God and receive His Supper. Through these means God is at work in you; and through you as He pleases, He will work to serve in His church. The worst thing any church member can do is to think that he deserves the blessings that God gives. For then our eyes are not on Christ, but on ourselves. Then we become like those workers who complained. Then we are as the older brother. And then we are in danger of losing our faith; of losing Christ.

What we deserve whether we serve God night and day, or only once a year in October, is a place in hell because of our sins. But God is merciful. He forgives you. Jesus is your Savior. He suffered hell's agony for you. What God delights in doing most of all is to show mercy to those who do not deserve it. He has brought you into His vineyard to work, not because you asked Him to, but because He is merciful. He gives you the reward of heaven not because you work for Him, but because in Christ He is merciful to you. He has brought you here today because He is merciful. Today in this, His House, He forgives your sins, and He places eternal life into your mouth with the body and blood of Christ.

Today in God's vineyard, here in His church, there is something greater going on than church members working to serve the Lord. Today the Master of this House is showing mercy. He is showing mercy to you. He is forgiving your sins through Word and Sacrament. He is rewarding you with the beautiful denarius coin. He is giving you eternal life in heaven—not because you work for Him, but because the Master of this House, for Jesus' sake, is full of mercy toward you. Amen.