

SEPTUAGESIMA

Text: St. Matthew 20:1-16

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The Gospel text appointed for Septuagesima Sunday serves as a warning for all who would believe they deserve more from God than their brothers and sisters in CHRIST simply because they have done their duty. No one has ever earned the Kingdom of Heaven. Salvation and the Kingdom of Heaven come by grace alone, through faith alone.

You see, the Kingdom of Heaven is ruled by a different standard than that of the secular world. In CHRIST's Kingdom all are judged from the perspective of JESUS' innocent suffering and death for our salvation, not by any merit or worthiness on our part; not by who we are, not by where we are born or who our parents are, not by the color of our skin, but solely by God's grace and mercy. *"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."* For *"We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do."* God never promised equality in this life; He did, however, promise salvation that we may enter into the life to come.

For this reason, I ask, *"Who are we to judge God and His will? Who are we to begrudge the benefits our neighbor receives from our gracious God lest we become like Satan who hates mankind for the love shown to us by our FATHER in Heaven?"* Satan has received His reward; so, also, shall those who judge likewise.

You see, the Kingdom of Heaven is not a democracy. It is now, and always has been, a theocracy, that is, it is governed solely by the will of God. Therefore, what God says goes. There, in the Kingdom of Heaven, God's will is done. God sets the rules and no amount of arbitration will change Him who is unchangeable, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He will not negotiate nor will He compromise and He does not play favorites. You may not think that fair. I would agree. It is eminently unfair, but not for the reasons you may think.

You see, God is not like you and me. His ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways and thoughts are far above all human understanding. Does the clay undertake to understand the potter? Does a worm consider his Creator? Does a lifeless stone meditate on He who made the seas and dry land? No, and far less can we comprehend the mind or heart of God.

For our God, who alone *is* God, does the unexpected. He is merciful to those who deserve no mercy. He loves the unlovable and those who hate Him. He declares the unclean, clean, and the sinner righteous. He gives His Kingdom to any who desire it.

This God does, not because we earn it, nor for the reason that we deserve it—not because there is any merit or worthiness on our part at all. He gives to us citizenship in His Kingdom because He is moved by His mercy and compassion for our desperate need. So, no indeed, it is not fair; it is divine grace and divine grace alone!

For what does our God owe you? What have you done that merits His grace and compassion? Do you somehow mistakenly believe that you have acquired God’s favor based on your piety and service to God and His Church?

Repent! Take heed! Your labors in the vineyard are no more than your duty to God and your neighbor, and those who believe otherwise are here warned, *“The last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”*

Therefore, know this, you will enter the Kingdom of Heaven by the grace of God alone—or you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven at all. That, my friends, is the bottom line. You cannot earn God’s grace. Your wages, that is your salvation, is a gift of God—freely offered and freely received. This, I *cannot* emphasize enough, it is *completely a matter of grace*; it is that simple!

Yet, the old Adam within you attempts to take credit for your salvation. Thus, you mistakenly believe that it is your faith that saves you, and because you *believe* more than your neighbor, you *deserve* more than your neighbor. But in this, you are wrong. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

For example, Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems, and Jews, etc., have great faith, but not in JESUS CHRIST, and are, therefore, lost. Our LORD’s sacrifice for their salvation avails them nothing. If one who calls him or herself Christian believes it is the quality of his or her faith that has saved them, or that they somehow merit salvation by the quality of their works, they too, are equally lost.

You see, faith is not your work; it is the working of the Holy Spirit within you. God does not declare the sinner righteous because one’s faith or works are so fine or morally excellent, but only because one’s faith believes in the promise of JESUS’ all-sufficient atonement on the Cross of Calvary. For this reason, St. Paul does not write, *“By faith you have been saved”* but *“By grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.”*

Did you hear that? Your faith is the gift of God. It can be no other unless it becomes your own work. If it is your *own* work it becomes your *own* righteousness, but your own righteousness avails you nothing, for your own righteousness is nothing but sinful, filthy rags before God and you are left naked—an unclean thing. To make faith your work is nothing less than bringing CHRIST JESUS down from His Cross and despising His sacrifice. Without the Cross of JESUS CHRIST, you have nothing.

That is not to say that faith avails one nothing; of course, it avails one much. One is saved *through* faith, but one must never forget from whom faith comes and to whom true faith holds. For even the demons have faith of a sort.

Demons confess who JESUS is, and surely, they know exactly what He has done. Yet theirs is nothing more than intellectual knowledge, an acknowledgment of an undeniable fact. They no more worship the God of heaven and earth or look to Him for every blessing, than does a fence post. They do not believe, nor would they or could they ever confess and accept unconditionally, or otherwise, that JESUS CHRIST is our Righteousness. Never would they look to the Cross of CHRIST for their salvation.

But the Cross of JESUS is the symbol of God's grace and love. It is God's guarantee that He has given to men far more than they deserve or could even desire. For there, on the Cross of Calvary, JESUS received what you deserve. There, JESUS received the wages that were rightfully yours to receive. It was there, upon His Cross, that the unblemished Lamb of God was roasted by the fiery, blistering, wrath of God for your sin; and death passed over you.

Death has passed over you because the very same Blood of that Lamb has been painted on the doorposts and lintels of your heart by the HOLY SPIRIT through preaching, through Baptism, and the Holy Eucharist, creating faith where there was none, and nurturing and strengthening that faith until CHRIST returns to pay out His wages to all believers.

So, it is, that in the Kingdom of Heaven, God gives to you not as your labors deserve, but as His love desires. And His love desires to give you salvation and eternal life with Him in His Kingdom. To accomplish this, there is nothing He will not sacrifice; not even His only-begotten SON.

Therefore, instead of giving you the death your sin and the Law demand, He gives you life in His SON, JESUS. This is a gift you have no right to demand or expect. It is a gift of God's boundless mercy, grace, and love. With this gift you receive, as the Prophet, Isaiah tells us, *“from the LORD's hand Double for all [your] sins.”* Therefore, *“Instead of your shame you shall have double honor, And instead of confusion [you]*

shall rejoice in [your] portion. Therefore in [your] land [you] shall possess double; Everlasting joy shall be [yours].”

This is the chief meaning that our LORD teaches in today’s Gospel—that our God rewards sinners by grace alone, and gives to us poor miserable sinners far more than we deserve. We deserve eternal death, and instead, He gives us forgiveness of sin, salvation, and eternal life. All this He gives to us out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on our part at all.

Dearly beloved, the Kingdom of Heaven is not about what you deserve or merit; it is the Kingdom of Grace. It is a Kingdom of God’s immeasurable love for you and even now you have a part in this grace and mercy. For here, at this very altar, is the sign of His love, His true Body and Blood, given and shed for you, in and under the elements of bread and wine. With this wonderful gift, He calls you to the head of the line.

You were last, but God’s grace has made you first. It is not a reward for your work; it is pure grace alone. It is the way of God and the way of His righteousness. So, come and receive what you did not earn, but what JESUS died to give you—Himself. Yes, come, eat and drink, and hear your LORD JESUS say, *“I forgive you all your sins.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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