

SEPTUAGESIMA

Text: St. Matthew 20:1-16

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

The message of the Gospel text assigned to Septuagesima Sunday is quite clear; one can never hope to work his or her way into heaven. To put it another way, either one will enter the Kingdom of Heaven by the grace of God alone, or one will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven at all. That is the bottom line. The sermon could end here and all that needs to be said about the words of JESUS which we have here before us today will have been said.

Therefore, understand this, your merit, your good works, are worthless when it comes to your salvation and where you will spend the rest of eternity. When it comes to your justification and your righteousness before God, your good works profit you nothing at all. Indeed, as the Prophet Isaiah has written, *“But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away.”* Thus it follows that even your righteous acts must be repented of, if for nothing else than for the reasons for which you do them.

Therefore, your one and only hope of salvation can only be found in the free and unbounded grace of God the FATHER, and the love and sacrifice of His only-begotten SON, JESUS CHRIST, whom the FATHER sent as an unblemished Sacrifice for you. It is He who sets the terms of your employment, and it is He who pays out your wages. He says to you, *“Believe in Me and the One whom I send, and your wages shall be eternal life.”* There is no further need for arbitration, for there is no other way unto salvation but through CHRIST JESUS, our LORD, and God’s SON.

Thus, God the FATHER is like a Landowner who makes lazy, jealous men and women into His own children. He is like a Landowner who gives away the Vineyard to those who do not deserve it; who have done nothing to earn it; who provides a happy ending greater than anything you could ever imagine. He is generous to the point of sacrificing His only SON for the laborers. There is nothing the God of Abraham will not give you.

Thus it is, prostitutes and adulteresses are in the ancestral line of the MESSIAH. Just as uncouth soldiers and tax collectors, just as greedy merchants and adulterers, just as teachers and criminals, murderers and liars, thieves and policemen, bank tellers and embezzlers, politicians and bureaucrats, teenagers and drunk drivers, liars and delinquents, mechanics and salesmen, daydreamers and gossipers, bullies and cowards, fire-fighters and traitors, pastors, and arrogant, sinful men and women of every stripe, vocation, class, and nation, enter into the Kingdom of Heaven by grace alone—or not at all.

Therefore, even the rich might pass through the eye of a needle. Still, this is not for you to judge. For all things are possible with God who is Redeemer and Judge. You see, He is no respecter of persons. He died for all. Our LORD JESUS reconciled all men and women to His FATHER and counts all as worthy of His love. He gives away for free what cannot be earned or bought.

Thus, there is a warning here in our Gospel text for you, for me, and all mankind: Do not think you can earn the Kingdom of Heaven. For if you insist upon being rewarded for your work or merit, you will receive *exactly* what your works and merit deserve. The Landowner says to the disgruntled worker, *“Take what is yours and go your way.”* The disgruntled worker is cast out, to leave with nothing more than his guilt and sin. Indeed, he has been judged and has already received his reward!

Yet, even knowing this, we continue to judge the worthiness of others against our records, using ourselves and our own worthless works as our benchmark and standard. We are far more adept at finding fault in others than we are at finding reasons for praise. While we call those who do good works, *“self-righteous”* or *“goody-two-shoes,”* is it not also true that we are quick to deride those who are not as worthy as we judge ourselves to be?

We look around us and praise God that we are not like the tax collector and other sinners without ever realizing that we are no better than are they. As it is written, *“...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* and again, *“They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.”* If you have money and possessions, do you not complain about the poor getting something for nothing all the while forgetting that out of God’s abundance He has blessed you so that you may serve Him by loving and serving your neighbor who is less fortunate than are you?

Those of you who are not so blessed, are you not envious of the rich man whom you believe was born with a silver spoon in his mouth? Do you not believe that the treasures of the rich should be redistributed among the poor? Do you not judge this as being more equitable, fairer? Do you not contend with God? Is your eye not evil? Do you not realize that this murmuring is nothing more than sinning against God? Is the Landowner not right in giving His possessions to whom He will?

Shall you be judged then, according to your heart—by your words and deeds? Do you dare to demand that God look upon you according to what you have done and send you on your way? God forbid! For such a judgment would expose you and your secret sins. What others have done in public without shame, you have done in your heart and behind closed doors—even though you knew better.

Repent! Stop counting the blessings of others. Stop comparing yourself to others. Stop judging, for it is not given to you to judge. Instead, throw yourself upon the mercy of God. Count the good things He has given and done for you instead of looking with envy at what He has given and done for others.

Yes, count the good things God has given and done for you, for you are indeed, blessed. You have been spared the shame of notoriety and the temptations of fame, power, and wealth. The Kingdom of Heaven is open to you through the death and resurrection of JESUS CHRIST. You belong to God. You are forgiven. In Baptism, He has marked you with His Name. He feeds you with His Body and Blood. He sustains and speaks to you in His Word. He hears and answers your prayers. You ask for mercy and receive His absolution with no questions asked. God is generous and always keeps His promises. He provides for and gives to you what you in no way deserve.

All this, though our love for God and neighbor runs cold. All this though mankind greedily uses and abuses all the gifts God gives that we might be sustained in this body and life and then selfishly demands even more. Yet, the odd thing, the thing that makes absolutely no sense at all, is that God consents to give us more. He gives us the life of His own SON. He sacrifices JESUS, as a Lamb led to slaughter for the sins of the world.

Still, the tendency is to take credit for our own salvation. We mistakenly believe that it is our faith that saves us, and because our faith may be stronger than our neighbor's faith, we deserve more than our neighbor. Yet, can you not see that this is a lie? In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. 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."*

You see, even your faith is a gift of God. It can be no other way, that is unless your faith 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 as nothing more than an unclean thing. To make faith your own work is nothing less than bringing CHRIST JESUS down from His Cross and despising His sacrifice, but dear ones, without the Cross of JESUS CHRIST, we have nothing.

The Cross of JESUS is the greatest symbol of God's grace and love. It is God's guarantee that He has given you far more than you deserve or could even desire. For there, on the Cross of Calvary, JESUS received the payment you deserved. There JESUS received the wages that should have been yours. There, the unblemished Lamb was roasted by God for your sin, and death passed over you. Death has passed over you because the very same Blood of that Lamb, poured out on the Cross, has been painted on the doorposts and lintels of your heart through Word, Baptism, and the LORD's Supper.

Therefore, in the Kingdom of Heaven, God gives to you not as your labors deserve, not as your sin requires, but as His love and grace desire. His love and grace desire to give you salvation and eternal life with Him in heaven.

Therefore, instead of giving you the death your sin and the Law demand, He gives you the sacrifice of His only-begotten SON who died in your place. This is a Gift you have no right to demand or expect. It is the free Gift of God's immeasurable 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 of our text this morning—that God’s blessed gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation are not based on your works, nor any merit or worthiness on your part whatsoever. They are given to you based solely upon God’s divine goodness, and mercy—they are gifts of pure undeserved grace made possible by the sacrifice of His only-begotten SON, JESUS CHRIST. Therefore, you receive not what you have deserved. God gives you far more than you deserve! As sinners, we deserve eternal death, but as forgiven children of God, He gives to us eternal life.

Dear children of God, 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 boundless love for you and even now you have a part in His grace and mercy. For here, at this very altar, is a sign of His love, His true Body and Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.

At this Feast, He calls you to the head of the line. You were last, but now you are first. It is not a reward for your work. It has nothing to do with your merit or worthiness. It is pure grace—God’s grace! It is the way of God and the way of His righteousness. So come and receive what you did not earn, but what CHRIST died to give you—Himself.

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

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