

SEPTUAGESIMA

Text: St. Matthew 20:1-16

In the Name of the FATHER, and of the ✠ SON, and of the HOLY SPIRIT. Amen.

Perhaps the most fundamental thing one learns from the Holy Gospel is that forgiveness of our sins, Heaven, and eternal life, cannot be either earned or bought by mankind at any price. Such is impossible. The price for our salvation has already been paid by our LORD JESUS CHRIST who bought our freedom not with gold or silver, but with His own precious Blood. We have only to believe.

Still, this is not license. It is true that as Christians, as children of GOD, we live in the freedom of the Gospel, and therefore, freedom from the law, but we do not live as we please. To live as we please without regard to who we are in CHRIST would be pure hypocrisy. It is for this reason we confess,

“It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before GOD by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before GOD by grace, for CHRIST’s sake, through faith, when we believe that CHRIST suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For GOD will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21–26 and 4:5.” (AC IV: Justification).

In addition, we also confess,

“It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as GOD has commanded, but we should do them for GOD’s sake and not place our trust in them as if thereby to merit favor before GOD. For we receive forgiveness of sin and righteousness through faith in CHRIST, as CHRIST Himself says, ‘So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, “We are unworthy servants”’ (St. Luke 17:10). The Fathers also teach thus, for Ambrose says, ‘It is ordained of GOD that whoever believes in CHRIST shall be saved, and he shall have forgiveness of sins, not through works but through faith alone, without merit.’” (AC VI: New Obedience).

Therefore, whether we have done our best in this life or have only performed what is our duty to do as children of GOD, we remain unworthy servants. Yet, even our duty we cannot do, for it is our duty to fear, love, and trust in GOD above all things and love our neighbor as ourselves; things of which we continually fall far short.

If one simply adheres to Christianity for the sake of reward and not for the sake of CHRIST JESUS who saved us, then he or she is surely no Christian. For one is a Christian who loves and serves our LORD GOD believing our reward is to possess and be possessed by our loving SAVIOR.

Therefore, I pray you will not be disappointed, but in the Kingdom of Heaven there will be no salary or contract arbitration. No unions, no union stewards, no union bosses, no board of directors, or owners with which to deal, no contracts to approve or sign.

Nor is the Kingdom of Heaven a democracy where the wishes, desires, and demands of the majority rule the day. Neither is it some kind of socialist utopia where all things are necessarily equal. GOD never promised equality; He did, however, promise salvation.

Therefore, who are we to judge GOD and His will? Who are we to begrudge the benefits our neighbor received from our gracious God lest we become like Satan who, in his jealousy, hates mankind for the love shown to us by our FATHER in Heaven. Satan has received His reward. So, also, shall those who do likewise.

You see, the Kingdom of Heaven 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, GOD's will is done. GOD sets the rules and no amount of arbitration will change He who is unchangeable, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He will not negotiate nor will He compromise. You may think that unfair. I would agree. It is eminently unfair, but not for the reasons you may believe.

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 and placed the sun and stars in the heavens? No, and far less can we poor sinners comprehend the mind, or heart, or will 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 He 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, 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, as did the pharisee in the temple, that you have acquired GOD's favor based on your piety and service to GOD and His Church?

Repent! Take heed lest you fall, for 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, are a free gift of GOD. I cannot emphasize this truth enough, it is completely a matter of grace; it is that simple!

Still, your tendency is to desire some amount of credit for your salvation. 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.

GOD does not declare the sinner righteous because his faith is so fine and morally excellent, but only because one’s faith believes in the promise of JESUS’ all-sufficient sacrifice 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? Listen closely! Your faith is the gift of GOD. You cannot by your own works or merit add one jot or tittle to GOD’s gift. 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, leaving you as 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 looks. For Satan and his demons have faith of a sort. They confess who JESUS is, and surely, they know exactly what He has done. Yet, theirs is nothing more than an intellectual knowledge, an acknowledgment of undeniable fact.

They no more worship the GOD of Heaven and Earth, or look to Him for every blessing, than does a rock. 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 guarantee of GOD’s grace and love. It is GOD’s assurance that He has given to men far more than they deserve or could even desire, and far more than they could pay for the forgiveness of their sins. 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 the unblemished Lamb was roasted by the fiery, blistering, wrath of GOD’s justice for your sin; and death passed over you.

Death has passed over you because the very same Blood of that Lamb shed on that Cross has been painted on the doorposts and lintels of your heart 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.

Therefore, instead of giving you the death your transgressions of the Law demand, He gives you His only-begotten Son. This is a Gift you have no right to demand or expect. It is a free Gift of God's boundless 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 us in today's Gospel—that our GOD rewards sinners by grace alone, and gives to us poor miserable sinners more than we deserve. We deserve eternal death and instead, He gives to us forgiveness of sin, salvation, and eternal life; and 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 a Kingdom of GOD's 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, with 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 grace. It is the way of GOD and the way of His righteousness. So, come and receive what you did not earn, but what He 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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