

Sermon for Septuagesima Sunday

Sermon for Septuagesima Sunday – Matt. 20:1-16

Hauspostille

Martin Luther, “Septuagesima,” Matthias Loy, ed., *Dr. Martin Luther's House-Postil, or, Sermons on the Gospels for the Sundays and Principal Festivals of the Church Year. Volume 1. Two Volumes. Second Edition.* (Columbus, Ohio; J. A. Schulze, 1884), pp. 280-292.

Matt. 20, 1-16.

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the market-place, and said unto them: Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the laborers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the good man of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

This Gospel is intricate, and very difficult for the young and the simple; but since it is set apart for this Sunday, we will say a few words concerning it.

You hear from this parable how the householder goes out early in the morning and hires laborers into his vineyard, who labor there twelve hours. Afterwards he hires others who labor but nine hours; then again some who labor six, and some but three hours; finally he hires those who

perform merely one hour's labor. The work done by these laborers is evidently very unequal, and yet they have all the same reward. The householder had entered into no agreement as to the wages, except with the first, and now when pay time comes he gives to the last, who labored but one hour, exactly as much as to the first, with whom he had agreed upon a penny a day. This transaction meets with severe condemnation before the world, where labor and wages are fixed by defin-

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ite rules, he who labors much receiving greater pay than he who works but little. And this is right; it must be thus. Nevertheless it would be very unbecoming if a laborer, who had agreed with his employer to work for a certain stipulated price, would undertake to find fault with his master because he, from mere charity, bestows gifts upon others. We of course admit that it is not right to pay equal wages where the labor is unequal.

Christ employs this parable to teach us the difference between His kingdom and the kingdom of this world. Affairs in the former differ entirely from those in the latter, in which there is an inequality among persons. Our Gospel has nothing to do with this existing inequality in the world, where the master has many possessions and the servant who labors for him none, or but few; the parable simply refers to the kingdom of God, and teaches us that in it all inequality is abolished, that everything is common property there, and that one shall have as much, and be esteemed as much, as the other. In our daily life, however, there will always be a marked distinction among men on account of their various pursuits. The peasant will have a mode of life different from that of the citizen, and the prince from that of the nobleman. In these matters there is inequality everywhere, and so it must remain. But in the kingdom of Christ it is otherwise; there is no distinction there among believers; they are all alike, whether they be kings, princes, governors, masters or servants. All have the same Baptism, Gospel, Faith, Sacrament, the same Christ and God. They all attend divine worship in perfect equality; the servant, the mechanic and the peasant hear the same Word as the mightiest lord. The Baptism wherewith I was baptized belongs to every other child, whether rich or poor. Magdalene and the malefactor on the cross have the same faith which St. Peter and St. Paul had; yea, the selfsame faith which you or I have, if we are Christians. All sinners, if converted, have the same God and Christ whom John the Baptist had. There is no difference

here, though one may by far excel the other in his station in life, in his calling, or in his talents.

The comfortable knowledge that we Christians are all alike in Christ, is to be obtained first of all from our Gospel to-day. In our earthly relations a distinction must remain; the father will be above the son, the master above the servant, the king and ruler above his subjects. This is according to God's arrangement, who ordained the various offices and callings among men. If we would undertake to introduce innovations in this regard, so that the man-servant would be on an equality with his master, or that the maid should have equal authority with her mistress, or the citizen as much as the rulers, we would surely have a sorry time of it, as we experienced during the rebellious days of the peasant-war in Germany.

Whatever the diversities of position in this world may be, we will not be troubled thereby if we remember that for all, whether they be of high or of low degree, there is but one Christ, one Baptism, one Gospel and one Spirit. No one can claim a better Christ, Baptism or Gospel than belongs to the most humble servant. Others may have more money, possessions, or other gifts than we, but they have no other or better God.

This should be well known and remembered, so that every one might be content with his calling and ready to serve God in it. Let each one say: Though I am no emperor, nor a king, though I own no cities nor castles, as do the princes, still I have with them the same Baptism, the same Christ, who died for me and achieved salvation for me. These magnificent gifts which we possess in Christ should make us so well satisfied that we scorn all earthly glory and derive our courage and comfort solely from the fact that we are baptized in the name of Jesus, that He died for us and ascended into heaven, where He sitteth at the right hand of God as our Mediator, and as our Savior from sin, death and all evil.

Whoever is aware of this, and believes that we are all one in Christ, will gladly perform his

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labor, whatever it may be, and will not be annoyed by the inferior position which, for this short life, may perchance be his destiny. For thus it is in the present world; various will be the positions of men; the one will have much, the other but little; one will be the master while the other is the servant. This state of affairs will not disturb the Christian; he knows that it is God's will, and can calmly exclaim: Though my duties are heavier than those of others, though I have no authority over others, yet I will not complain, but remain cheerfully in my position until it pleases God to elevate me to another. Meanwhile my consolation shall be that neither emperors nor kings have another Christ, or more of Him, than I have. If these would have more, they cannot be of this kingdom, for in it full parity exists, inasmuch as we all can come unto God and be pleasing unto Him only in Christ Jesus, who suffered for us and achieved salvation with His blood for one and all. This treasure is mine entirely; why therefore should I be distressed on account of any temporal privation, when in spiritual things I am thus equal to the saints?

This assurance that there is no inequality in the kingdom of Christ is our comfort and reliance, so that every Christian can with alacrity perform his respective duties in whatever station of life he may be placed. Contentment will surely crown a Christian's life, if he with conscious satisfaction exclaims: Why should I complain of my condition in life, it is good and pleasing in the sight of God! Though the sphere of my labors is lowly and arduous, it matters not; if royal honors fall not to my lot, I take the Christian's rank and that is more; yea, what dignity more exalted could I desire or expect!

Those hired first manifest no such disposition; they murmur and complain because their wages are not higher than those of the others. Just so do [some religious]. They demand of God that He should reward them according to their works, and imagine that they have performed much more than others, so that their seat in heaven ought to

be above the rest; they want a greater and a better Christ. They openly taught that if a priest reads the mass at the altar he performs a precious and holy work, the merits of which he can transfer to others, helping them to heaven thereby; and that, consequently, the rank of the priest is by far higher and better in the kingdom of Christ than that of the laity. Hence they murmur against the equality in the kingdom of Christ, and would fain produce therein the same inequality which prevails in the world.

Furthermore they taught that a virgin in a convent is much better in regard to her faith, than a married woman; and they still condemn those who teach otherwise as heretics. In this they resemble the first in our Gospel, who murmur and claim to be better and to have earned more than others. They recount before the Lord their God how long they have labored and how difficult their work has been. But He answers them: In your earthly labors there may have existed diversities among you; some may have worked longer and more diligently than others, but not one of you has a better Baptism or a better Christ than the other, and you all hear the same Gospel preached.

When [some religious] declare married people to possess only the common Gospel and Ten Commandments, while they enjoy the higher Gospel and do much more than those in the ordinary station of life are required to do, they lie most infamously and renounce the Gospel. With such assertions they attempt to establish a diversity of rank in the realm of the Gospel, where Christ has ordained perfect equality, as our text to-day clearly teaches; for from it we learn that in the kingdom of God one is worth just as much as the other. If a virgin has the inclination and chooses to remain in her virginity, it is right enough that she should do so, and no one will object, but it is foolish to boast of it and to think that such a condition in life makes her better before God than others are. Because we condemn this offensive and foolish notion [we are accused] of forbidding

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good works. But in this he slanders us; we do not forbid good works; but this we say, that all are alike in the kingdom of Christ, for there God deals with us all not according to our merits, but solely in grace and mercy for the sake of Jesus Christ, His Son.

If we share in this equality in Christ through faith, then it matters not what we are otherwise, and whatever our duties may be, we ought to perform them gladly and zealously: whether we are teachers or preachers, masters or mistresses, manservants or maid-servants, it is all the same; for in Christ we are one. The world takes great offense at this, and the Jews become well nigh frantic when they hear that we, who were heathens, shall also be saved as well as they, though we are uncircumcised and do not keep the Sabbath, nor carry other burdens of the law, under which they sigh and sweat. Christ refers to this in the parable when He says: "But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more, and they likewise received every man a penny" — the first as well as those who had labored but one hour.

The Lord of the vineyard does not know of any distinction. He says: "Friend, I do thee no wrong; take that thine is, and go thy way;" that is to say: You have received your reward in times gone by, viz. the land of Canaan; now I will establish a new kingdom, in which perfect equality shall reign. The vineyard is mine, so that I can do with it what I please, and it is not your concern how I deal with my servants.

[Non-Christians] begrudge us the life eternal, and will have nothing in common with the Gentiles; they even accuse God our Lord of wrong-doing, who has to tell them: The land is mine, not yours; it is therefore not your business how I arrange it. [Some Christian leaders and their followers] are also opposed to this equality in the kingdom of God, and insist upon especial privileges before they will enter; but these they will not get. It behooves us, therefore to make a

clear distinction between the affairs of the world and those of the kingdom of Christ. In the latter there is no difference in rank, since we all have but one God, one Christ, one Holy Ghost, one Gospel, one Baptism, one Sacrament and one Faith. In this respect, one is as good, as pious and as holy, as the other.

For these gifts we ought to thank God with all our heart; and we should use them properly, so that we can exclaim: Regard me as you please, think much of me or little, I will still be glad; for I have as much as emperors and kings, yea, as much as the saints and angels in heaven have. How so? Through Christ! Therefore, according to the will of God, I will ply with a joyous heart, with energy and love, my task, and will do right gladly what my calling demands of me, be I father or mother, master or servant; this will I do since I have such a glorious treasure in Christ.

The Gospel to-day thus instructs us that there is, and ever will be, an inequality upon earth in regard to the persons of men. A prince is a different person from a preacher, a maid-servant from her mistress, a school-teacher different from a mayor, and hence there will be various customs and modes of living, which will ever remain. In Christ's kingdom however another rule prevails: the one shall receive as much as the other; for salvation, redemption from death and sin, are no merits of men, nor are they due to them, but they are free gifts of grace to all who earnestly seek them. Such mercy of God we ought to recognize with a joyful heart, and not complain nor murmur on account of its universality, as do the false saints, who claim eternal life as a well-deserved reward and not as a free gift of grace. Let us praise God for this equality in His kingdom, and from it derive such consolation that we can easily endure all outward diversities of rank and station in life.

From the last words of our Gospel: "For many be called, but few chosen," foolish and wicked thoughts have been drawn by idle fellows,

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who say the meaning of this sentence is that God has chosen some unto salvation, and these will be saved without a doubt, while on the other hand those who are not thus chosen will be damned, no matter how piously or how faithfully they may live; for it is the will of God that such shall fall and not be saved. Hence they conclude that it is a matter of indifference how they live; for if I am to be saved, it will take place without my concern about it, and if I am not to be saved, all my concern about it will avail nothing. What reckless, secure people such ungodly thoughts will produce every one can judge.

When we considered the Gospel for Epiphany, and pondered the saying of the prophet Micah, we learned that all such thoughts as imprudently meddle with the incomprehensible providence of God are of the devil, and that it behooves us to pursue another method of contemplation in regard to the will of God. For such thoughts are sure to bring man into despair, or to render him reckless and regardless of consequences.

The proper course to know the will of God aright, and to avoid offense in this regard, is to trust implicitly in Christ, as He Himself declares: "No man cometh to the Father but by me." Whoever wishes to know the Father and to come unto Him, must first come unto Christ and learn to know Him as the Son of God, as the omnipotent, eternal God. And what did the Son of God achieve? He becomes man for us; He submits Himself to the law to free us from the law; He is crucified and dies upon the cross to pay the ransom for our sins; He arises from the dead to open for us through His resurrection the entrance into heaven, and to defend us against everlasting death; He sitteth at the right hand of God as our Mediator, and through His Holy Spirit He rules and guides His people and protects them against the wiles and persecutions of the devil. To know Christ thus is to know Him aright.

If this knowledge is fully and firmly fixed in your heart, then look towards heaven and meditate upon this subject thus: If the Son of God has performed all this for us at the command and according to the will of the Father, what then must be the disposition of God towards us? Surely, your own heart will constrain you to exclaim: God loves us, for He even gave His only Son unto us and for us. He desires not our death, for He employs the noblest and most precious remedy to give us life. In this way we are truly brought to God, as Christ says, John 3: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Compare these truths with the above mentioned thoughts, and you will discover that the latter come from the devil, and that they must cause offense, either hurling men into hopeless despair, or making them reckless; for they can hope nothing good from God.

A few, again, interpret these words: "Many be called but few chosen," to mean that God offers His grace unto many, but permits only few to accept it. Such an explanation is viciously wrong, for it follows from it, as a necessary consequence, that God is to be blamed if we are not all saved; and to believe this would be utter and satanic blasphemy, as every one can see who will but look at Christ as the Son of God and our Savior.

This expression, "Many be called," &c. must therefore be understood in a far different sense. The Gospel is preached publicly, and universally, unto all who wish to hear and to accept it; yea, God has it thus proclaimed, so that every one can hear and believe it and be saved. But what is the result? It is as the Gospel states, that "few are chosen," because there are but few who so receive the Gospel that God can be pleased with them. Some hear it, but heed it not; others hear it and at first accept it, but do not retain it in times of adversity; others again hear it, but value it less than money and worldly pleasures. This is not pleasing to God, nor does He delight in such

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people. This Christ calls not being chosen; that is, not conducting themselves so that God could have pleasure in them. The chosen ones of God are those who love to hear His Gospel, who believe in Christ and manifest their faith by good works, being prepared to suffer for it if need be.

This is the true sense of the words, and this will not offend people, but cause them to amend, so that they will think: If I am to please God and be among the chosen ones, it will not do for me to live with a bad conscience, to sin against the commandments of God, and not to resist sin; but I must hear the Word preached, pray for the Holy Spirit, not suffer the Word to be removed from the heart, contend against Satan and his suggestions, and pray for protection, patience, and assistance. This will make good Christians. On the other hand, those who think that God does not wish all to have salvation, either fall into despair or become reckless, ungodly people who live like brutes, thinking: If it is ordained beforehand whether I shall be saved or not, why should I put myself to any inconvenience about it? No, this is wrong; we have the command to hear the Word of God and to believe that Christ is our Savior, who has paid the ransom for our sins. Remember that command and obey it. Should your faith fail or you prove weak, pray God for His Holy Spirit, and do not doubt that Christ is your Savior, and you shall be saved through Him, if you believe in Him, that is, comfort yourself with His merits. May Christ Jesus, our dear Lord, grant this to all of us. Amen.