

**In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen**

**Septuagesima (2022)**

**The Foolishness of Human Comparison**

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***“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” So the last will be first, and the first last.” (Matthew 20:15–16, ESV)***

Is God fair? You know, is God fair compared to human standards? This is an age-old question, one that Jesus answers in His parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

To get a true sense of the meaning of the Gospel Reading for today, we need to look at the previous chapter where a rich, young man comes to Jesus and asks, ***“Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16, ESV)*** After listening to Jesus tell him that if he would enter life, he must keep the commandments, the young man insists that he had kept them, so what more should he do? Jesus tells him to sell all that he owns and give it to the poor, and he will have treasure in heaven. Telling the young man to sell all his possessions was simply preliminary. To ensure his reception of eternal life, Jesus tells him, ***“Come, follow Me.” (Matt. 19:21, ESV)*** If you would seek eternal life in heaven, you must be a follower, a disciple of Jesus. But the young man was unwilling to part with his possessions, and he walked away in sorrow.

Knowing His disciples had heard this conversation, Jesus turns to them and says, ***“Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 19:23–24, ESV)*** If the conversation with the rich, young man hadn't been enough to confuse the disciples, what Jesus has just told them certainly was. So, they ask, ***“Who then can be saved?” (Matthew 19:25, ESV)*** Who indeed! Thus, to calm their anxiety, Jesus tells them, don't let this question about eternal life bother you, because ***“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26, ESV)*** Salvation is completely the work of God.

All things are possible with God, but our Lord's answer doesn't seem to be good enough for St. Peter. But should this surprise us? St. Peter's track record at understanding Jesus is not known for its perfection. So, answering for all the other apostles, St. Peter blurts out, ***“See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (Matthew 19:27, ESV)*** We have just left all our possessions behind. What will be our reward? But hadn't Jesus just told him what they would have, eternal life? Obviously, St. Peter wasn't listening. In the eyes of God, were not the possessions of St. Peter and the other apostles just as valuable as the wealth of the rich, young man? Sure, they were, for the material possessions of men, regardless of their value to man are valueless to God. But now listen to the wealth that Jesus promises to St. Peter and the other apostles who follow Him. Listen to what they will inherit. Jesus says, ***“Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Matthew 19:28–30, ESV)*** As followers of Christ, the apostles will occupy unique offices on Judgment Day, sitting in judgment of the twelve tribes of Israel.

This conversation set the stage for the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, whereby Jesus assuages the anxiety of His apostles. Our Lord's parable answers the question, is God fair? Can we judge God according to human standards or is it *Foolishness to Judge God according to Human Comparisons*? Jesus answers this question by first answering the question, are disciples of Christ to compare themselves to other disciples?

In the parable the Vineyard is a metaphor for the Church and the laborers are a metaphor for the members of the Body of Christ. All who have become disciples of Jesus having suffered the loss of leaving behind relationships, possessions, and families for faith in Christ Jesus and His meritorious work for our Redemption, they will be abundantly recompensed and blessed by the gift of eternal life. All will receive the same treasure. There is no distinction between believers in God's kingdom of glory, and there must not be any prideful comparisons in the hearts and minds of the Body of Christ today. There shall be no *Human Comparison* amongst Christ's disciples. This is *Foolishness*. All who are disciples of Christ wait for the same thing, resurrection to eternal life on the Last Day. Thus, when our Lord says, "***But many who are first will be last, and the last first,***" He levels the playing field for all believers.

This truth deflates many people who call themselves disciples of Christ as they receive a negative answer to their question, "Doesn't my length of service as a member of this congregation carry more weight and earn a greater reward than some newcomer? All my hard work for missions, my generous contributions, my days in Bible class, my efforts at maintaining the church, and so forth. Don't these things count for more in the eyes of God than the small contributions of a newcomer?" God's answer is no, your length of service and your labor in the Church do not earn you a greater reward. Everyone is treated equally. All receive the same treasure. Ah, but you say, this goes against our understanding of fairness. So, isn't God being unfair by giving the same to all believers, no more and no less?

In the parable, the master of the house goes out in the early morning and hires laborers to work in his vineyard for a denarius a day. He goes out again in the third hour, the sixth hour, and the ninth hour and hires other laborers. But this time he doesn't specify their wage, but simply says, "***whatever is right I will give you.***" (*Matthew 20:4, ESV*) Then at the eleventh hour he goes out again to hire more laborers. There isn't but an hour left in the day, but he hires these laborers too, without mentioning of their remuneration. So, the vineyard is filled with workers and the workday comes to an end, and "***the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.'***" (*Matthew 20:8, ESV*) Pay those who worked the least first, then pay the ones who worked the longest last.

Our sense of fairness would say those who worked the least should receive the least wage and those who worked the most should receive the most pay. But our Lord shocks our sense of fairness as we see the laborers, regardless of the time they have worked in the field, all receive the same wage, a denarius. All are treated the same, there is no comparison, no ranking, no grading, no scale for wage. To our senses this does not appear to be generous or equitable. The master does not pay the longest workers more. Instead, we see that the master simply kept his promise, paying each what they had agreed to. To the first, what he had promised, a denarius. To those hired in the middle of the day, whatever he considered right, and to the last, what he promised the first.

Ah, but this was considered unfair by those who were hired at the beginning of the day. We have worked harder, we have bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat, how can you pay us what you also paid those who worked the least? This is unfair.

Herein lies the rub: the Lord makes no distinction between His workers, and to those hired first it is offensive, even scandalous. It is counterintuitive to our human sense of fairness, but this is what is remarkable about the reign of God. He judges all equally. His disciples are alike in His eyes.

We here at Grace can readily identify with this parable when we think of our brother Cedric. Without question, he was one who stood idle during the day because no one had asked him to come and work in the Vineyard. When he was called by the Gospel to work in the Vineyard, Cedric worked for only ninety days, and his workday was ended by God. Without question he was last, but his reward in heaven is no more or no less than the reward we will receive when our workday in the Vineyard ends. It matters not if we have been a worker in the Vineyard since we were baptized as a baby decades ago, or if we were brought into the Vineyard at a time late in life. When we are called by Christ and made disciples of His, our reward will be the same as all His other disciples.

All comparisons between disciples of Christ are odious to God. You were saved by grace alone, the grace of a gracious and merciful God who sent His Son into this world not only to call workers into the Vineyard, but to be the Master of the Vineyard. At each of your baptisms, God robed you in the righteousness of His Son Jesus, adopting you as a child of His, and thereby made you equal in His eyes. There are no greater or lesser in the Body of Christ. To engage in disciple comparison reveals an envious and evil spirit. All believers will be treated the same on the Last Day.

Each of us laborers work in Christ's Vineyard because He has called us. We all receive the same wage regardless of our time of service or our accomplishments. Therefore, there is no room for self-promotion or competition, there is no basis for one disciple to say to another, "I don't need you" or "I'm more important than you."

Scripture tells us that the apostles got this wrong on more than one occasion. Once, as they walked to Capernaum with Jesus, they argued over which of them was the greatest. When Jesus asked them what they were arguing about, He says to them, ***"If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."*** (Mark 9:35, ESV) He also said, ***"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*** (Matthew 18:3-4, ESV) Now you would have thought that the apostles would have learned how they are not to compare themselves to one another, but shortly after the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, we see that they are upset because a request has been made that St. James and St. John should sit nearest to Jesus in His kingdom. Again, Jesus must remind them, none of you are greater than the other. So, He tells them, ***"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*** (Matthew 20:25-28, ESV)

The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is primarily a message regarding our horizontal relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a message that speaks of God's profound grace in the words of the master, ***"I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you."*** (Matthew 20:14, ESV) It is a message that reminds us that we are workers in the Vineyard because the owner has hired us, it also reminds us that we're all on the same level. Grace, by its nature, gives without regard to merit or worthiness. Every worker of the Vineyard receives the same wage. All comparisons are to be cast aside because all believers will, by grace alone,

inherit the same eternal life. On the Last Day, all disciples of Christ, without distinction, will receive from Him what He deems as just according to Him. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.