

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

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Grace Cannot be Compared

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“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’” (Matthew 20:13–15, ESV)

The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is a clear picture of the even handiness of the Grace of God, and how man so utterly fails to understand God’s gracious will. But this shouldn’t surprise us. Truth is, to understand God’s Grace we must first understand our relationship to Him, a relationship in which He commands “Thou shall not,” and then He gives us life lacking the ability to achieve the fulfillment of His command. Scripture is clear, from birth our totality of doing and thinking is contrary to God. From birth our relationship to God is one of enmity and alienism. The Psalmist reminds us, ***“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” (Psalm 51:5, ESV)*** But not all is loss.

To preserve us from ourselves, our self-deception that somehow, we are able to escape sin and ignore God’s “Thou shall not,” God reveals Himself to us in the Law and not just in the Scriptures, but as Scriptures teach, in our hearts. St. Paul reminds us, ***“the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness.” (Romans 2:15, ESV)***

The ears of our conscience hear God speaking, reminding us of our relationship to Him through the Law. But it is a voice we do not like to hear because it causes our hearts to be assailed by doubt causing despair and unbelief to cover us. Making matters more difficult, Satan’s opposition to God blinds our natural heart to God’s desire. The Law of God is written in our hearts, but Satan, using our worldly desire, obliterates its message. Satan, appealing to our reason, causes our worldly heart to say, “yes, I understand, the Law demands fulfillment, but I can’t fulfill it, therefore, let us free ourselves from the Law.” However, the Psalmist again reminds us this is something we cannot do, saying, ***“Not to us, O LORD, not to us!” (Psalm 115:1, ESV)*** By our own strength we cannot free ourselves from the Law or its demands. Only the steadfast love and faithfulness of God’s Grace can accomplish that for us.

However, since natural man opposes God’s desire with his corrupted conscience, God, to help us and awaken our conscience, gives us the Law through His written word, through the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone atop Mt. Sinai. God reveals His Law through the prophet Moses, giving us His Word in time and space, making it clear that He desires a relationship with us. A relationship in which God makes demands of us. St. Paul states, ***“Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.” (1 Timothy 1:8–11, ESV)*** So yes, the Law is good, but this does not remove the truth that we are incapable of fulfilling it. Instead, the Law, affirming our relationship with God, shows us our sin, makes us guilty, accuses us, damns us, and kills us

by showing us the wrath of God against sin. Law leaves us in our wretched state, sinners in conflict with God. Sinners facing God in absolute loneliness, plunged into complete helplessness, driven into despair, and without deliverance or the means to deliver ourselves. Therefore, we cry out, “Who will rescue me?” We cry out with St. Paul, **“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24, ESV)** Who will have mercy on this miserable sinner?

Seeking an answer to this most perplexing question, we look for a Savior, one to rescue us from the consequence of sin. One who will have compassion on us and save us. We find this Savior in today’s Gospel Reading where we see a gracious God in the activity of the owner of the vineyard treating everyone the same, making no comparisons, ranking no one, compensating all with a fair scale. This is how God answers our plea, how He treats man, sinners all, with His scale of forgiveness and salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ.

This, then begs the question, “How do we interpret the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard?” We can look at it from the time in which Jesus lived, seeing the workers as Jews and Gentiles with Jews becoming angry when they discover that the Gentiles are compensated with the same scale as themselves. Or we can see it in the reality of today’s work-righteous believer verses those who seek salvation solely by faith, relying solely on God’s means of grace, Baptism, Holy Communion, Absolution, and the proclamation of the Gospel for salvation. Both of these approaches may be valid, but there is one small problem with looking at it from the latter view, St. Paul makes it very clear, **“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”” (Galatians 3:10–12, ESV)** There is no saving compensation for those who seek salvation through their works, because man cannot fulfill the Law of God.

So in the parable, those who worked the full day, in its scorching heat, are no different than anyone who thinks if they work longer or harder, they should be rewarded more than those who work less. It is a common problem of man, our concept of fairness. But there is one little problem, our concept of fairness is not God’s concept of fairness. God says, He **“desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:3–4, ESV)** Moreover, He makes this available through His Means of Grace, through the application and proclamation of the Gospel. Men, in various stages of life, are blessed by God to hear His clarion call of salvation through His Son Jesus and are brought to faith by the Holy Spirit. Thus, it does no good to focus on our work, or the work of others, we must focus solely on the justifying work of God through His beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we set work-righteousness aside and cleave to Scripture, which clearly tells us there is only one way to receive God’s grace and that is through faith in the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins which is a gift given by God. But Satan does not like this truth and he does everything he can to distort and disrupt this truth. Moreover, he has two willing allies to help him, the world, and our flesh.

Thankfully, the anguish and fear which comes from knowing our inability to fulfill God’s Law is overcome by the Gospel, that which brings us a new knowledge of God, knowledge which comes by faith. Fear of God’s wrath and His judgment of death is replaced by the joy of looking forward to Christ’s return on the Last Day. Through God’s gracious will, we are brought to faith, which grants us the knowledge to see our loving God for who He is through His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Thus, for the Christian it is important that the Gospel move us from sin to grace, not to eagerly await death, but to look forward with joy to the appearance of Jesus. Yet, we also

know that we live in a world of temptation, with a body that delights in temptation, and making matters worse, these sin-tempting sources are urged on by the devil. So, we live in a world that is constantly trying to draw us away from the true joy of God's grace by causing us to work through the sin-filled burden of the day, through the scorching heat of temptation, and the labor of resisting sin, the very scenario of the laborers in the vineyard. It matters not how long or how little you labor in this world, at the end of the day, the Last Day, if the tool you leaned on during your struggle was God's gift of faith in the atoning sacrifice of His Son Jesus on the Altar of the Cross, God will reward you with the greatest compensation you could ever receive, His forgiveness and life eternal for the sake of His only beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

So, when those hired first complain about their wages, the owner of the vineyard does not argue with them, but simply says, ***“Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”*** (Matthew 20:13–15, ESV) Nor will God argue with us. On the Last Day those who labored by faith, believing in the goodness and fairness of their Master, will hear Him say, ***“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”*** (Matthew 25:21, ESV) but those who labored expecting rewards because of their work, will hear Him say, ***“I never knew you; depart from me, you [worker] of lawlessness.”*** (Matthew 7:23, ESV)

Yes, you labor in a sin-filled world, but it is truly not your labor which earns your reward. No, your reward is the result of the sin-forgiving labor of God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. His life, death, and resurrection. It matters not how much you effort you give, but on what God's Son gave on the Altar of the Cross, His life in exchange for your forgiveness, His holiness in exchange for your unholy, sin-filled life, His gracious love for your ungrateful complaining.

Jesus closes the parable by saying, ***“So the last will be first, and the first last.”*** (Matthew 20:16, ESV) To which Luther responds, “The gospel destroys those things which exist, it confounds the strong, it confounds the wise and reduces them to nothingness, to weakness, to foolishness, because it teaches humility and a cross. . . Yet all those whose pleasure is in earthly things and in their own doing shrink back before this rule of the cross, complaining, “This is a hard saying” [John 6:60]. Therefore it is not surprising that this saying of Christ is most odious to those who desire to be something, who want to be wise and mighty in their own eyes and before men, and who consider themselves to be “the first.”

On the Last Day, Jesus will return to gather the laborers, giving them their just compensation. On the Last Day, the reign of God in Jesus will come in all its glory, and all who have been called to faith, called to be workers in His vineyard — all who are disciples of Jesus Christ — will receive from their Master what He deems just, in accordance with His pledge when they were first called; each will receive the fullness of God's promise, a resurrected, glorified body and life eternal in heaven. *God's Grace cannot be Compared* to human effort. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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