

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 20:1–16

Sermon: “Comparing and Grumbling”

These Sundays after Pentecost show us how to live and labor in God’s vineyard as we rely solely on his boundless, undeserved grace and mercy. *“We cannot stand before [God] relying on anything we have done,”* but we do seek to grow in trusting his grace and living according to his Word (Collect).

Our Lord invites us to seek him while and where he may be found; he calls us to forsake our wicked ways and unrighteous thoughts; he summons us to return to him. However, none of these actions earns our way into his vineyard, because his ways of giving abundant pardon are higher than our ways (Old Testament Reading).

Since our God graciously invites us to seek his face (Psalm), we may engage in the labors of our vocations with the same courage and confidence evident in the apostle Paul (Epistle). God’s salvation through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus, leads us to fruitful labor in the flesh even while we look forward to eternal life with our Lord.

Regardless of how long we labor in his vineyard and how arduous that labor may be, our labor is “rewarded” with the same boundless grace that called us into the vineyard in the first place (Gospel).

In Matthew’s Gospel, after Peter’s confession of Jesus as **“the Christ, the son of the living God”** (16:16), the shadow of our Lord’s coming crucifixion looms large over Jesus’ words and deeds, including this parable, on his way to the cross.

Jesus has interacted with the rich man who inquired what he must do to be saved (19:16–22) and then with his disciples to stress that salvation comes not by wealth, which brings spiritual danger, but only by the work of God (19:23–26). This leads Peter to ask what gain he and the other apostles may expect to receive for leaving everything and following Jesus (19:27). While the Twelve are unique and will join Jesus in his end-time judgment (19:28), all of Jesus’ followers are the same on the Last Day (19:29), because they all will inherit eternal life solely by God’s grace.

Many people, especially our older generation say they had or have a Protestant or Puritan work ethic. An approach to work and life that focuses on hard work, discipline, and being frugal. “Work hard, and you’ll be paid what you deserve.” “Don’t spend more than you make.” In the workplace of the civil arena, this is most certainly true. Many of the older generations say we could use much more of that work ethic in today’s world. They compare themselves and their work ethic over against the people and work ethic of today’s generation.

God’s vineyard does not work that way. God’s vineyard, his gracious reign in Jesus, is no place for Protestant or Puritan work ethics or for disciples of Jesus to compare themselves to one another. God manages his vineyard by means of grace and mercy. When we are confronted with God’s management-by-mercy, though, we sinners still pervert it with our cursed comparing. Thankfully, that does not stop our gracious landowner Lord from his grandiose giving. Jesus overcomes our cursed comparing with His grandiose giving.

Jesus' parables are always comparing something we know about to something in his "kingdom," so let's see what he's giving us in the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

The vineyard manager is Jesus. He goes out to hire workers at different times of the day and sends them into his vineyard. The first group of workers agrees to the wage offered by the manager (vs 1–2). They, like us, think fairness reigns supreme. The other groups of workers are content to receive whatever pay the manager determines to be right and fair (vs 3–7). They live by faith in the manager's goodness and promise, but perhaps they also think in terms of fairness. At the end of the day, the vineyard manager upends all expectations (vs 8–10). He is very generous with his payroll and pays the same wage a full day's pay to all the workers, no matter how long or hard they worked.

The first group of workers grumble and complain (vs 11–12). They compare themselves to the other workers. They think they are better and more deserving of higher wages.

Such comparing, grumbling, and complaining is the way of unbelief that spurns God's gracious reign in his Son.

Jesus and his "kingdom" are not about what is fair. If it were, we would all be in trouble. Instead, his reign works by the grandiose giving of his grace. We can hear the workers hired first but paid last crying out, "That's not fair!" After all, those who worked only one hour got paid the same day's wage that they received for working all twelve hours. We fallen sinners, like spoiled children, often make the same lament.

Jesus' "kingdom," however, does not function on the basis of fairness or equality (vs 13–16). Jesus chooses to be generous and give away his things, his blood-bought, cross-won forgiveness, life, and salvation as he pleases. Jesus, the vineyard manager, says, ***"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"***

How do we succumb to the cancer of comparing and complaining? We compare others to ourselves as the standard. In their pride, the workers hired first looked down on those who did not measure up to their standard.

In our pride, we also often look down on people around us at home, at work, at school, and even in the church. They do not think, act, or speak as we would expect. Our current situation with both the pandemic and politics make this quite evident. Masks or no masks, social distancing or not. And we all know who to vote for and which party is best. Yes, the world around us does not focus on God's grace and mercy. We would rather grumble, compare and complain. We do not love and forgive as we should, but judge and avoid those different or with different opinions.

And sometimes it works the opposite way. We compare ourselves to others as the standard. When we compare ourselves with others, we may conclude that we fall short of their high standards. That person is a better parent, better worker, or better student than I could ever be. That person is a better Christian than I am, or has stronger faith than I do, is more active in the church than I.

We may despair that we do not measure up. We may conclude that God loves and blesses those other folks more than he loves and blesses us.

We even compare the people of God to worldly standards, instead of seeing them in light of the gracious giving of his Gospel. We compare our congregation to others. If our congregation does not measure up, we despair. If our congregation seems to be better, we become proud. When we get caught up in this cursed comparing, we neglect God's concerns of proclaiming and hearing his Word, Law and Gospel and faithfully receiving his Sacraments.

Christ's kingdom is a different, more radical way for a vineyard to operate the way of grandiose giving and management by mercy. Just as the vineyard manager in Jesus' parable absorbed the costs of paying all workers the same wage, our Lord Jesus has absorbed the full cost of our sins, including our sins of comparing, grumbling, and complaining.

In his death on the cross, our Lord Jesus made himself last in order to make us, by his grace, first in God's vineyard-kingdom. Now we enjoy his eternal "day's wage" of forgiveness, life, and salvation. We live by faith and mercy as grateful workers in the vineyard. We live by faith in our Lord's grandiose giving. We all regardless of age, ability, how long we have been Christians, or how well or poorly we labor in his vineyard receive the same favor and forgiveness. Because our Lord, the vineyard manager, has first shown us mercy and love, we live our lives showing that same mercy and love to our fellow Christians.

If we insist on living in cursed grumbling, comparing, and complaining our Lord's command is clear: "***Take what belongs to you and go***" (v 14). Our vineyard manager, Jesus, does not want grumbling among his workers. Nor does he want his workers comparing themselves with one another.

But thank the Lord and sing his praise! He does not give us what we deserve. He does not give us what is fair. Instead, he gives us what we do not deserve, what is not fair.

He gives us forgiveness and life with him. So, we cling to our Messiah of mercy, our giving God, our lavish Lord. Life is about more than a day's wage. It is about receiving divine favor in the Lord's grandiose giving.

Amen