

# Septuagesima Sunday;

## Matthew 20:1-16

*For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers 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 marketplace, 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 labourers, 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 goodman 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.*

### **The Parable of the Householder Who Hired the Laborers**

1. Some church fathers applied this Gospel to all the preachers from the beginning to the end of the world, and taught the first hour was the time of Adam, the third that of Noah, the sixth that of Abraham, the ninth that of Moses, and the eleventh hour that of Christ and his apostles. Such talk is all right for pastime, if there is nothing else to preach. For it does not harmonize with Scripture to say that the shilling signifies eternal life, with which the first, or Adam and the holy patriarchs, were dissatisfied, and that such holy characters should murmur in the kingdom of heaven, and be rebuked by the householder and made the last, that is, be condemned.

2. Therefore we will let such fables pass and abide by the simple teaching and meaning of Christ, who wishes to show by this parable how it actually is in the kingdom of heaven, or in Christendom upon the earth; that God here directs and works wonderfully by making the first last and the last first. And all is spoken to humble those who are great that they should trust in nothing but the goodness and mercy of God. And on the other hand that those who are nothing should not despair, but trust in the goodness of God just as the others do.

3. Therefore we must not consider this parable in every detail, but confine ourselves to the leading thought, that which Christ designs to teach by it. We should not consider what the penny or shilling means, not what the first or the last hour signifies; but what the householder had in mind and what he aims to teach, how he desires to have his goodness esteemed higher than all human works and merit, yea, that his mercy alone must have all the praise. Like in the parable of the unrighteous steward, Lk 16,5f., the whole parable in its details is not held before our eyes, that we should also defraud our Lord; but it sets forth the wisdom of the steward in that he provided so well and wisely for himself and planned in the very best way, although at the injury of his Lord. Now whoever would investigate and preach long on that parable about the doctors, what the book of accounts, the oil, the wheat and the measure signify, would miss the true meaning and be led by his own ideas which would never be of any benefit to anyone. For such parables are never spoken for the purpose of being interpreted in all their minutia. For Paul compared Christ to Adam in Rom 5, 18, and says, Adam was a figure of Christ; this Paul did because we inherited from Adam sin and death, and from Christ life and righteousness. But the lesson of the parable does not consist in the inheritance, but in the consequence of the inheritance. That just like sin and death cling to those who are born of Adam and descend by heredity, so do life and righteousness cling to those who are born of Christ, they are inherited. Just as one might take an unchaste woman who adorns herself to please the world and commit sin, as a figure of a Christian soul that adorns itself also to please God, but not to commit sin as the woman does.

4. Hence the substance of the parable in today's Gospel consists not in the penny, what it is, nor in the different hours; but in earning and acquiring, or how one can earn the penny; that as here the first presumed to obtain the penny and even more by their own merit, and yet the last received the same amount because of the goodness of the householder. Thus God will show it is nothing but mercy that he gives and no one is to arrogate to himself more than another. Therefore he says I do thee no wrong, is not the money mine and not thine; if I had given away thy property, then thou wouldest have reason to murmur; is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?

5. Now in this way Christ strikes a blow first against the presumption (as he also does in today's Epistle) of those who would storm their way into heaven by their good works; as the Jews did and wished to be next to God; as hitherto our own clergy have also done. These all labor for definite wages, that is, they take the law of God in no other sense than that they should fulfil it by certain defined works for a specified reward, and they never understand it correctly, and know not that before God all is pure grace. This signifies that they hire

themselves, out for wages, and agree with the householder for a penny a day; consequently their lives are bitter and they lead a career that is indeed hard.

6. Now when the Gospel comes and makes all alike, as Paul teaches in Rom 3,23, so that they who have done great works are no more than public sinners, and must also become sinners and tolerate the saying: "All have sinned", Rom 3, 23, and that no one is justified before God by his works; then they look around and despise those who have done nothing at all, while their great worry and labor avail no more than such idleness and reckless living. Then they murmur against the householder, they imagine it is not right; they blaspheme the Gospel, and become hardened in their ways; then they lose the favor and grace of God, and are obliged to take their temporal reward and trot from him with their penny and be condemned; for they served not for the sake of mercy but for the sake of reward, and they will receive that and nothing more, the others however must confess that they have merited neither the penny nor the grace, but more is given to them than they had ever thought was promised to them. These remained in grace and besides were saved, and besides this, here in time they had enough; for all depended upon the good pleasure of the householder.

7. Therefore if one were to interpret it critically, the penny would have to signify temporal good, and the favor of the householder, eternal life. But the day and the heat we transfer from temporal things to the conscience, so that work-righteous persons do labor long and hard, that is, they do all with a heavy conscience and an unwilling heart, forced and coerced by the law; but the short time or last hours are the light consciences that live blessed lives, led by grace, and that willingly and without being driven by the law.

8. Thus they have now each a penny, that is, a temporal reward is given to both. But the last did not seek it, it was added to them because they sought first the kingdom of heaven, Mt 6, 33, and consequently they have the grace to everlasting life and are happy. The first however seek the temporal reward, bargain for it and serve for it; and hence they fail to secure grace and by means of a hard life they merit perdition. For the last do not think of earning the penny, nor do they thus blunder, but they receive all. When the first saw this, by a miscalculation they thought they would receive more, and lost all. Therefore we clearly see, if we look into their hearts, that the last had no regard for their own merit, but enjoyed the goodness of the householder. The first however did not esteem the goodness of the householder, but looked to their own merits, and thought it was their's by right and murmured about it.

9. We must now look at these two words "last" and "first," from two view points. Let us see what they mean before God, then what they mean before men. Thus, those who are the first in the eyes of man, that is, those who consider themselves, or let themselves be considered, as the nearest to or the first before God, they are just the opposite before God, they are the last in his eyes and the farthest from him. On the other hand those who are the last in the eyes of man, those who consider themselves, or let themselves be considered, the farthest from God and the last before him, they also are just the opposite, in that they are the nearest and the first before God. Now whoever desires to be secure, let him conduct himself according to the saying: "Whosoever exalteth himself, shall be humbled." For it is here written: The first before men are the last before God; the last in the eyes of men are first in

the eye of God. On the other hand, the first before God are the last before men; and those God esteems as the last are considered by men to be the first.

10. But since this Gospel does not speak of first and last in a common, ordinary sense, as the exalted of the world are nothing before God, like heathen who know nothing of God; but it means those who imagine they are the first or the last in the eyes of God, the words ascend very high and apply to the better classes of people; yea, they terrify the greatest of the saints. Therefore it holds up Christ before the apostles themselves. For here it happens that one who in the eyes of the world is truly poor, weak, despised, yea, who indeed suffers for God's sake, in whom there is no sign that he is anything, and yet in his heart he is so discouraged and bashful as to think he is, the last, is secretly full of his own pleasure and delight, so that he thinks he is the first before God, and just because of that he is the last. On the contrary should one indeed be so discouraged and bashful as to think he is the last before God, although he at the time has money, honor and property in the eyes of the world, he is just because of this the first.

11. One sees here also how the greatest saints have feared, how many also have fallen from high spiritual callings. David complains in Ps 131,2: "Surely I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with his mother." Likewise in another place, Ps 36, 11: "Let not the foot of pride come against me". How often he chastises the impudent, and haughty, Ps 119, 21. So Paul in 2 Cor 12, 7 says: "That I should not be exalted overmuch there was given to me a thorn in the flesh," etc. And as we have heard in today's Epistle what honorable men have fallen. To all of whom without doubt the sad secret ill-turn came because they became secure, and thought, we are now near to God, there is no need. We know God, we have done this and that; they did not see how they made themselves the first before God. Behold, how Saul fell! How God permitted David to fall! How Peter had to fall! How some disciples of Paul fell!

12. Therefore it is indeed necessary to preach this Gospel in our times to those who now know the Gospel as myself and those like me, who imagine they can teach and govern the whole world, and therefore imagine they are the nearest to God and have devoured the Holy Spirit, bones and feathers. For why is it that so many sects have already gone forth, this one making a hobby of one thing in the Gospel and that one of another? No doubt, because none of them considered that the saying, "the first are last," meant and concerned them; or if applied to them, they were secure and without fear, considering themselves as the first. Therefore according to this saying, it must come to pass that they be the last, and hence rush ahead and spread shameful doctrines and blasphemies against God and his Word.

13. Was not this the fate of the pope when he and his followers imagined they were the vice-regents and representatives of and the nearest to God, and persuaded the world to believe it? In that very act they were the vicegerents of Satan and the farthest from God, so that no mortals under the sun ever raged and foamed against God and his Word like they have done. And yet they did not see the horrible deceiver, because they were secure and feared not this keen, sharp, high and excellent judgment, "The first shall be the last." For it strikes into the lowest depths of the heart, the real spiritual darkness, that considers itself as the first even in the midst of poverty, dishonor and misfortune, yea, most of all then.

14. Hence the substance of this Gospel is that no mortal is so high, nor will ever ascend so high, who will not have occasion to fear that he may become the very lowest. On the other hand, no mortal lies so low or can fall so low, to whom the hope is not extended that he may become the highest; because here all human merit is abolished and God's goodness alone is praised, and it is decreed as on a festive occasion that the first shall be last and the last first. In that he says, "the first shall be last" he strips thee of all thy presumption and forbids thee to exalt thyself above the lowest outcast, even if thou wert like Abraham, David, Peter or Paul. However, in that he also says, "the last shall be first," he checks thee against all doubting, and forbids thee to humble thyself below any saint, even if thou wert Pilate, Herod, Sodom and Gomorrah.

15. For just as we have no reason to be presumptuous, so we have also no cause to doubt; but the golden mean is confirmed and fortified by this Gospel, so that we regard not the penny but the goodness of the householder, which is alike and the same to high and low, to the first and the last, to saints and sinners, and no one can boast nor comfort himself nor presume more than another; for he is God not only of the Jews, but also of the Gentiles, yea, especially of all, and it matters not who they are or what they are called.

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