

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My dear beloved flock, the text for our meditation today is the Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew the twentieth chapter, verses one through sixteen.

Boys and girls, I pray that you are doing well today. You did a good job cleaning last night so I have a reward for you. I'll give you half a candy bar for the work that you did last night. Was that fair? I told you I would give you a half a candy bar. You picked up the most toys. She only picked up a few. Yet, both of you got a full candy bar. Is that fair? No, it's not fair. That is how God's mercy is as shown in our lesson today. Jesus' parable about God's vineyard shows that He rules 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. How does Jesus overcome our complaining by His death and resurrection? Ponder that question as you hear the rest of the sermon. You may go back to your seats and those who love you.

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.

Let's unpack the parable. The vineyard manager is Jesus. He goes out to hire workers at different times of the day and sends them to work in his vineyard. The first group of workers agrees to the wage offered by the manager (vv 1–2). They, like us, think fairness reigns supreme. They think that it is fair to work a whole day for a day's wages. The other groups of workers are content to receive whatever pay the manager determines to be right and fair (vv 3–7). They live by faith in the manager's goodness and promise, but perhaps they also think in terms of fairness. They think that they will get less than a full day's wage because they worked less than a full day. At the end of the day, the vineyard manager upends all expectations (vv 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 grumbles and complains (vv 11–12). They compare themselves to the other workers. They think they are better and more deserving of higher wages. They endured the heat of the day. They worked the hardest. They should get more. It is not fair that those who worked less should get the same amount. 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’s fair. 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 (vv 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 cursed comparing and complaining?

Our sinful nature loves to compare others to ourselves as the standard for fairness. 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. They do not dress as nicely for Sunday worship as we think they should. They have different ideas on what should be the main direction of the church as a whole. Many times, we do not love and forgive them, but judge and avoid them. We do not talk with them or we argue with them, sometimes over the smallest of things. We look down our noses at them and gossip about how they are dressed.

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. Not everyone can be as skilled at playing as our organists. Trust me, you would not want me on the bench. But at the same token, not everyone enjoys getting up and speaking before audiences. We may despair that we do not measure up because we do not have this or that gift. That we are not as good as those around us because we cannot dress as well or have as good a way with words. We may conclude that God loves and blesses those other folks more than he loves and blesses us. After all, it appears as though they have everything going just right so they must be better off.

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 other congregations around us. If our congregation does not

measure up, we despair. If our congregation seems to be better, we become proud. I have heard this one. Surely Trinity is the better church because they are larger and they have more kids. That makes them better right? Peace is so small in comparison, what can we do? We forget that each congregation is unique with a wide variety of gifts given to them by God that only they can do. Trinity may have more members and children, but that allows Peace to work as closely with Christ Deaf and First as we do. Peace has much more flexibility in what we can do than other churches. Thus, why we do what we do. We reach out to those who cannot hear, to those affected by alcoholism, to help the Boy Scouts in their work out in the community. It is not a competition, rather it is a collaboration. Working together in the vineyard of God. 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 man-age-ment-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, then, 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. We do not look down upon, or gossip about others. Nor do we compare ourselves or our churches to those around us. Instead, we work as our Lord has given us the ability to do so to reach out to those around us in mercy and grace.

If you insist on living in cursed comparing, 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 you what you

deserve. He does not give you what's fair. Instead, he gives you what you *do not* deserve, what is *not fair*. He gives you 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's about receiving divine favor in the Lord's grandiose giving.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.