

Rev. Danny Mackey
Septuagesima
January 28, 2018
Matthew 20:1-16
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

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

“As the heaven are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:9).

There was once a man who didn't have a job. His days were long and boring. He tried to find work. He had children to support. But there just wasn't any work. No one was hiring. So, he spent a lot of time looking for odd jobs, hoping someone would need extra help. Early every morning this man hit the pavement, looking to shovel or to carry something, any odd job to make a little money. But no one was hiring. By noon, his chances for the day were getting slim. The workday was half over. You can't get a full day's work out of someone by hiring at midday. When three o'clock rolled around, he gave up completely, found a shady spot, sat down, and thought about what he would say to his family that night. Another day not working. Another day bringing nothing back. Another day coming home empty-handed.

But around five o'clock a man walked up and wanted to hire him. Well, he thought, quitting time's only an hour away, but still it's better to get paid for one hour's work than nothing. So he went with his new boss to a field, where the newly hired man was put to work. His job was to pile up mulch around the base of grapevines. He also had to tie up little vines so they didn't break off. If there were dead leaves, he was to snip them. But before he could even begin to get his hands a little dirty, the whistle blew. It was quitting time already. His “workday” was finished. The workers came out of the field and lined up to get paid. The people who were hired last that day were to be paid first. The man wasn't too thrilled with the money he was expecting to get. He'd only worked one hour. But when he held out his hand, something odd happened. He didn't get paid for one hour—he was paid for a full day's work! “There must be some mistake,” the man said to his boss. “You only hired me an hour ago, but you paid me for a whole day's work. You paid me for something I didn't do.” “You're right,” said the boss. “I've paid you for something you haven't done. But I want to be generous to you. Go home, feed your family, fix your home, enjoy your time. This

is a gift.” So with mouth open and a puzzled look on his face, the man said “thank you” and went home.

What an odd story! It shouldn't have happened. It just ... shouldn't ... have happened. No one should be paid for eight hours of work when they only put in one hour—and that hour was spent with him being told what he was to do. That man didn't earn his money. He didn't deserve to get what the boss gave him. The other workers were out in the hot sun all day. Their clothes were drenched with sweat. Their hands were cracked and bleeding from the thorns. They earned their pay. But this man—this man who worked only one hour—was paid for a full day's work. If the boss was a fair boss, he should've given each worker only what he earned. If he was a fair boss, he should've paid the man who worked for one hour only enough money to cover that one hour. That's how we live in this world. If you work by a time clock, you get paid for the amount of time you work, not a minute more and not a minute less. Anything more is called stealing. You punch that time clock and know exactly how much you'll get paid. It's all very fair.

But not everyone in this world works by a punched time card. As Christians we can sometimes stand before God with that dropped jaw and that puzzled look on our faces. “God, what are you giving me? I don't deserve the life I have. I've sinned against you since I was a child. I've done some terrible, stupid things in my life. Even the little things I mess up time and again make me realize how disgusting I must be in your sight. I haven't loved you with my whole heart. Rarely do I treat my neighbor or co-worker the way I'd like to be treated.” We hand God our time card and say, “Look, God, here's what I've done, here's what I've put in, but here are also so many, many times when I've failed. In fact, as I look more and more at this time card, I realize I haven't done anything for you. The best I've done is sleep on the job.” But God reaches out to us, takes that time card and tears it in half. What God hands back to us is something much greater than a full day's pay. He hands back to us something we could never dream of having. “Here,” he says, “here is life. Here is My life for yours. Here is a new life for you right now and a new life after you die. You didn't earn it. You don't deserve it. But I want to give it to you. I want to give it to you because it's something you could never earn for yourself.”

In the story, the people who worked only one hour were shocked. The people who worked all day long were also shocked. But the boss was happy. The boss was happy to be

able to show kindness to those poor people who worked only an hour. After all, they had families to feed too. They had children who needed clothes, debts to be paid just like everyone else. How generous of the boss to help these people out. He was able to do it, and he wanted to do it. When that hired man stretched out his hand to be paid, he wasn't given what he deserved or earned. He was given so much more.

Likewise, we don't deserve our salvation. We haven't earned it. We haven't put in the full eight-hour workday, so to speak. But we need it. God gives us salvation anyway. The Father gives it to us for Jesus' sake. Jesus is the One who did all the work. Jesus is the One who put in all the time and effort. Jesus gave His very life, so that we might share in it. When God demanded a perfect sacrifice from us, we, like that man, were still looking for work or sitting in the shade. Jesus provided the sacrifice we couldn't. He gave Himself on the cross.

And when God helps us to stretch out our hands to receive something from Him, they never come back empty. That's right,

JESUS NEVER LEAVES US EMPTY-HANDED.

When we fold our hands in prayer to take hold of the promises God has made to us, we're never disappointed. We know God will always give us just what we need at just the right time. When we stretch out our hands to receive the Lord's Supper, they never come back empty. Jesus gives us something we could never work hard enough for. He gives us what He has worked for. Jesus gives us His life. He is so happy to be able to give us what we need. It can be a big shock to us to realize that God gives us things we don't deserve. But that's God for you. That's God ... for you. His generosity never ends. God is always ready to hand to us what Jesus has done for us. All day, every day, God comes to you and says, "It's time to be paid. You don't deserve to be paid, and you didn't earn it. But I am generous, and I want to give you something you could never get yourself." God is always generous. He has been generous to us when we were young, He is generous to us today, and God will truly be generous toward each of us in the life to come.

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus + to life everlasting.