

Laboring in the Vineyard
17 Pentecost; September 20, 2026
Saint John's Episcopal Church
Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matt 20:1-16

My very first class in seminary was in a course on the parables of Jesus. As we went over the course requirements, I was unnerved to learn that my entire grade for the semester depended on a twenty-page paper on one parable.

To that point in my life, I had never written a paper longer than about five pages. I was daunted.

Most parables are only about one paragraph long. I figured I needed to find the most challenging parable I could if I was going to fill all those pages. I ended up writing on the parable we just heard.

The owner of a vineyard hires workers first thing in the morning, and again at 9:00, at 12:00, at 3:00, and at 5:00. At the end of the day, the employer pays all the workers the same amount. The ones hired first were angry at the injustice. They, who had worked something like twelve hours, figured they were due more than people who had worked one.

I agreed with the workers. Unfortunately, Jesus does not. It's the opposite. Jesus uses the behavior of the owner to teach us about the kingdom of heaven.

I don't remember what I wrote in my paper, or the grade I received. Let's assume it was brilliant, and I got an A+.

But our parable remains challenging for me. It doesn't seem fair.

I'll get back to that, but first we need some context.

Today we tend to think of Pharisees as the bad guys of first-century Israel. We think of them as hypocritical, self-righteous, and judgmental.

But most first-century Jews would have thought of the Pharisees as the good guys, the people who took religion seriously, the people who interpreted the law faithfully and strictly, and who followed the law as best they could.

This matters because the problem with the Pharisees is the problem of the good people.

We see that in another of Jesus' parables. A Pharisee went up to the temple to pray, and this was his prayer. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income" (Luke 18:11-12). I am super-awesome, and I am due.

It's an obnoxious prayer for many reasons. But the main problem is that the Pharisee believes he has done all that he needs to do, and that he has therefore earned a blessing from God. It is as if he thinks God owes him because he has been so very righteous.

That kind of self-righteousness is a problem that goes well beyond the Pharisees. It afflicts Jesus' own disciples, too. We see that in the story immediately preceding our parable for this morning.

A man comes to Jesus and asks him, "what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus tells the man to keep the commandments. The man says he has done that. And, to his credit, the man recognizes that there must be more to this eternal life thing than what he has done so far.

He pushes Jesus. "What do I still lack?" Jesus responds, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor...; then come, follow me." The man was sorry he pushed. That was not a command the man was prepared to keep.

But the story doesn't end there. Peter, lovable Peter who always runs his mouth when he shouldn't, says to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (20:27)

Peter might as well have prayed, "Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people, including that rich young man. I left everything and followed your Son." I am super-awesome, and I am due.

Jesus promises Peter a reward. And then Jesus tells our parable about a group of workers who have worked harder than everyone else and therefore believe they deserve to be compensated for it.

Now we can restate their complaint. “Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people, people like the slack workers who only worked for an hour. I worked all day.” I am super-awesome, and I am due.

All that is to say, our parable is Jesus’ way of reprimanding Peter for his pharisaical sense of entitlement relative to God.

Now let’s bring our parable up to date.

The temptation of the Pharisees, the temptation of Peter, the temptation Jesus criticizes in our parable, afflicts good Christian people, too. It is easy for us to fall into the exact same trap they did. And the more dedicated we are, the more seductive is the trap. It’s especially seductive for priests.

“Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people, all those folks who aren’t here. I show up at Church faithfully. I give my money and my time. I am super-awesome, and I am due.”

To which Jesus replies, “That’s not how God works. God doesn’t owe you, just because you have done what you should do.”

But we need to stick with the parable a bit longer.

If you were one of the workers in the vineyard that day, what would you do the next day? It would be tempting to enjoy a quiet morning at home and then ease your way over to the marketplace around mid-afternoon, hoping to get hired for the last hour or two and still get paid for a full day’s work.

Or, as an outraged student put it several years ago when I was teaching what I take to be the Christian position on grace, “if that’s true, why do what I am supposed to do? Bring on wine, women, and song!”

It’s an important question that misses the point entirely.

Trying to live faithfully can be hard. It does involve sacrifices. But Christian faith isn’t a burden. Christian faith is a gift.

Last Sunday evening, we had Carrie’s aunt and her partner over for dinner. We served cake for dessert. Carrie was shocked at the size of the piece I cut

for myself. After I finished my extra-large piece, I had another almost as big. All that cake was good going down. But it didn't take long for me to regret it.

Sin is like that. It may sometimes feel sweet in the moment. But over time, it makes life worse.

The same is true on the other side. I started jumping rope a year or two ago. Mostly I hate it.

And yet, jumping rope has made my life better. It has strengthened my lungs and my legs. It helps with coordination and balance. It keeps me in shape. It burns off excess calories from cake.

Christian living is like that. I am not always eager to pray in the morning or do whatever else it is I should be doing on any given day. But living the Christian life makes my life so much better than it would otherwise be.

This is where our parable breaks down. Living the Christian life is not like working in a vineyard through the heat of the day. Living the Christian life is a privilege and a joy. We can't put God in our debt. But we live the Christian life anyway because it's what we were created to do. We do it because drawing closer to God, with God's help, is the only way to experience true joy.

And so, on this seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost. I thank God for the invitation to be workers in God's vineyard. I thank God for the joy that comes with drawing closer to God. And I pray that God will help us to be fruitful laborers.

In Christ's name. Amen.