

“Friend, I Am Doing You No Wrong.”

Text: Matt 20:1-16

Suggested Hymns:

324, 352, 851, 415, 332

1) Those Who Demand What They Deserve
Shall Have It

2) Those who Plead for Mercy
Shall Enjoy God’s Grace Abundantly

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 20:1–15, ¹ *“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. ⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.*

⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’

⁸ “So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ ⁹ And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. ¹⁰ But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. ¹¹ And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, ¹² saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’

¹³ But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. ¹⁵ Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’ (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Lord says in Isaiah 55:8, ⁸ ***“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways.”*** How true! And how often God is criticised on that account by the children of men for what He does!

“If there is a just God in the heavens, then why are things what they are?” questions the unbeliever. And now and again there escape even over the unguarded lips of Christians the complaints, *“I don’t see why.”* *“It doesn’t seem right to me.”* *“It just isn’t fair.”*

God’s reply is: ***“Friend, I am doing you no wrong.”*** ***“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts”***¹ says the LORD. These are the basic facts in our text.

In the parable which Jesus tells something has happened which looks to some people like an injustice. According to the thinking of a whole group a wrong has been done. And there is resentfulness and complaint. Then comes the unruffled, even-toned, firm, and definite reply of the accused landowner of the vineyard: ***“Friend, I am doing you no wrong.”***

With this parable, then, Jesus teaches that *There Is No Injustice in God*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Those Who Demand What They Deserve Shall Have It

The disciples had heard Jesus say to a very rich young man: ***Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.***² They had seen him slink away in a dejected mood, and they somewhat understood his feelings.

But Peter was bold enough to ask, ***“See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?”***³ In answer he got this parable as a warning against the dangers lurking in the attitude his question revealed.

The Wrong Attitude Of Dissatisfied Labourers

Jesus says that a landowner one day bargained with a group in the village square for a day’s labour in his large vineyard. They were canny people, who insisted that a man has to live, that he cannot work for nothing, and that there is no reason to work unless you can make a fair profit. So they struck a tight

bargain for a good day's wages and went to work. And what they had agreed upon they received, all of it, at knock-off time.

But they did not like it, and they said so. They grumbled because other labourers had come to work at nine and at twelve, and some even as late as three and five in the afternoon, and when the day was done, all of these others received, every man, just as much as they did.

This to them did not seem fair and just, because they had "*borne the burden and the heat of the day*," and they had put in more time and more labour. Didn't they have a right to expect more money than the rest?

The owner of the vineyard replied to their spokesman: "*Friend, I am doing you no wrong.*" And a moment's reflection would reveal how altogether right he was. They had agreed on a certain wage. They received it. The bargain was fulfilled. Let them take their wages and go their way. Strict justice had been done to them. How others were dealt with was none of their business.

God Never Deals Unjustly

That landowner is God, who never does any wrong. You can count on that. If it was not so, He could not be God. He is the perfect God, the law of whose holiness is absolute justice. Unfairness is a stranger to Him. We read in Psalm 92:15, *the LORD is upright; ... there is no unrighteousness in Him.*

In all the years no man has ever had the right or any reason to say: "*God has dealt unjustly with me.*" No matter what complaints and how many complaints have issued from the dissatisfied hearts of men, God has always answered them in unchallengeable truth, "*I am doing you no wrong.*"

If, therefore, you desire to bargain with God for wages, you shall have them. If you demand that He deal with you on the basis of merit, He will certainly do it, for God points to the unquestioned standard of goodness in His holy Law and says: "*Do this and you will live!*"⁴ And God will keep that promise absolutely.

Bargaining with God on Basis of Merit

Now, multitudes of people are only too ready to bargain with God on the basis of merit. The reason for such readiness is that they know neither the justice of God and its unqualified demands, nor themselves and their abilities. They count themselves good, noble and worthy.

They do not base this self-estimate on the standard of God's Law. Or if they do, they do not recognise the "Thou shalt" of God's Law as a demand for absolute holiness and perfection. They have changed the "Thou shalt!" into the advice: "This do as best you can!"

They do not recognise their failure to comply with the stringent requirements of God's Law and realise their shortcomings. Reluctantly they may even agree to call them "sins." As for the justice of God, they expect that He will not be uncompromising. At least where they are concerned, they expect God to water things down a bit, to tip the beam in their favour with the finger of His love, to err a little on the side of tenderness and long-suffering.

If they knew it, the justice they want is no justice at all, but a miserable caricature. Let them demand what they deserve, and they will get it. But they will not like it.

Sinful Man's Rightful Lot

For what is it that all people deserve? Scripture says in Ecclesiastes 7:20, ²⁰*For there is not a just man on earth who does good And does not sin.* And in Romans 3:23, ²³*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* All the supposed good they do cannot counterbalance their sins. For *"all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags."*⁵

What do people earn for themselves by their sinning? Scripture says in Galatians 3:10, *"Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.*

With such a curse as their rightful lot, can people complain of injustice or unfairness when adversity, sickness, suffering, and calamity come their way? Should they not, then, hear a voice from heaven: *"Take what is yours and go your way."* Have they a right to expect a blessed place in God's kingdom, in His love? And, ultimately, what can they expect when the time comes for the heavenly landowner to pay in full?

What have people deserved of God by their sins? His wrath and displeasure, temporal death and eternal damnation! See Question 70 in *Luther's Small Catechism*. What does God threaten to do to all who hate Him and break His Commandments?

The final and terrible “*I am doing you no wrong*” “*Take what is yours and go your way,*” will be heard when there resounds through all that is left of time, and throughout all eternity the voice of the Judge: “*Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire.*”⁶

Bargain with God, if you insist, on the basis of your own merit. Ask Him to give you what you deserve. Demand of Him your wages. But be sure you know what you are doing. “*For the wages of sin is death!*”⁷

2. Those Who Plead For Mercy Shall Enjoy God’s Grace Abundantly

Now, certainly, none of us wants that. But what shall we do, then, in our dealing with a God of absolute justice? Strange as it may seem to the human way of thinking, the just God is a merciful God.

There Was No Bargaining On Part Of The Latecomers

Peter had asked: “*See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?*” It was a bad question to ask and revealed a dangerous attitude. But Jesus assured him that those who follow Him, at whatever cost, will not come short.⁸

Jesus illustrates that in the parable with the case of the labourers who had come into the vineyard at later hours. Now, it was characteristic of these men that they had not asked: “What shall we get paid?” They had not negotiated and bargained for wages. They had been content to go to work upon the plain promise: “*Whatever is right you will receive.*”

They trusted to the generosity and the faithfulness of the landowner to whom they were giving their time and their labour. And so in the evening hour they received — not wages, but a generous gift, a gift the landowner justified with the question: ¹⁵ *Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?*” and explained with the words: “*I am good.*”

We have here the characteristics of our God which gives us hope and courage, and which draws us to Him to cast ourselves upon His mercy. We are taught here that if we come to Him in this way, divested of every shred of self-righteousness, with no vain claim of merit, no request for imagined earning, we shall find Him a good, benevolent God; that if we plead for mercy, we shall enjoy at His hand the abundant gifts of His grace.

Grace Is The Kingdom Principle

Grace is the great governing principle in the Kingdom of God. God's children live on it entirely, and they look to God for every good without any merit or worthiness on their part.

We say of all our material blessings: *“I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant.”*⁹ We say of our membership in God's blessed family and of all our spiritual joys, possessions, abilities, and accomplishments: *“By the grace of God I am what I am.”*¹⁰

And we look for heaven, saying, as written in Ephesians 2:8, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.* We give thanks to the Father who has made us fit us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.¹¹ *“The GIFT of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ, our Lord.”*¹²

Christ Has Merited Grace For Men

But how can a just God be that way? Are not those who look to His mercy also sinners like the rest? Have they not also deserved nothing but punishment? Yes, indeed! But they do not ask for what they deserve. They have accepted His offer of mercy.

They confess with the Psalmist in Psalm 103:10, *“He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities.* And here also God does no wrong. He has promised them: *“whatever is right you will receive.”* To those who think that this is not right He says: *“Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?”*

The grace He offers and gives to those who will receive it is truly His very own. He has acquired it at tremendous cost, with the great purchase price of the labours, sorrows, sufferings, blood, and death of His only-begotten Son. At Calvary justice and mercy meet together. There a just and holy God makes final and full satisfaction to the demand of His own Justice, *that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*¹³

There His holy Son pays in His own body and soul the penalty that sin has incurred, pays the penalty that mankind might be free from it and find

forgiveness. There we see the just retribution which a holy and righteous God must mete out to the Saviour of our race.

On the basis of the merit of Christ, God can by grace, without violating justice and righteousness, pronounce the sinner just and holy in His sight, forgive His sins, and shower him with blessings temporal, spiritual, and eternal.

Yes, God can be “*good*,” gracious, to sinners and bestow on them heaven as a pure gift and thus be true to His promise: “*whatever is right you will receive*.” God’s grace is right. It rests on the right of Calvary. And that is the only way it ever could be right for God to receive men to Himself in His kingdom here and hereafter.

Divine Grace Is Our Hope

What then shall we do? Insist on our right or on God’s right? Demand the deserts of our merit, or the gifts of His grace on the basis of Christ’s merit? Let us accept His grace in Christ Jesus. Let us first of all accept by faith His free and full forgiveness of our sins. And let us fully realise that He always deals with us on the basis of grace. That is why it goes so well with us.

And when affliction and sorrow are our lot, let us be assured that He is doing us no wrong, neither has He brought back our sins to vex us with them. Even then we are not getting at all that we deserve. Then also He is dealing with us according to grace and mercy. Happy are we if we know and believe these things. Then we will not complain and murmur, saying: “*Why does this happen to me? It isn’t fair,*” but we will sing:¹⁴

Whatever God ordains is good:
This truth remains unshaken;
Though sorrow, need, or death be mine,
I shall not be forsaken.

We read in Isaiah 55:8–9, ⁸ “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,*” says the LORD. ⁹ “*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.*”

An in Jeremiah 29:11, ¹¹ *For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.*

Therefore do not “*complain against the landowner.*” But rather, receive the manifold gifts of God’s grace “*and let the peace of God rule in your hearts ... and be thankful.*”¹⁵

*Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!*¹⁶ And when things seem all wrong, see the kind face of your perfect Father bending over you and saying: “*Friend, I am doing you no wrong.*” Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Isa. 55:9

² Luke 18:22

³ Matthew 19:27

⁴ Luke 10:28

⁵ Isaiah 64:6

⁶ Matthew 25:41

⁷ Romans 6:23

⁸ Matt. 19:28-29

⁹ Genesis 32:10

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:10

¹¹ Colossians 1:12

¹² Romans 6:23

¹³ Romans 3:26

¹⁴ Hymn 415

¹⁵ Col. 3:15; see also Psalm 103

¹⁶ Psalm 136:1