

Septuagesima (prelent-1)

Hymns: 134, 129, 312, 32

The INTROIT

(Ps.18:4,5,6:18:1,2)

P: The sorrows of death compassed me;

C: the sorrows of hell compassed me about.

P: In my distress I called upon the Lord;

C: and He heard my voice out of His temple.

P: I will love Thee, O Lord, my Strength;

C: the Lord is my Rock and my Fortress.

The COLLECT

O Lord, we beseech Thee favorably to hear the prayers of Thy people that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Thy goodness, for the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Savior, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end,

The FIRST LESSON

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.

But the LORD said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD. Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

The GRADUAL

(Ps.9:9-10;18-19a)

P: The Lord will be a Refuge for the oppressed, a Refuge in times of trouble: and they that know Thy name will put their trust in Thee; for thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek Thee.

C: For the needy shall not always be forgotten; the expectation of the poor shall not perish forever. Arise, O Lord; let not man prevail.

The EPISTLE

1 Corinthians 9:24- 10:5

Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual

drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

The TRACT

(from Ps.130:1-4)

P: Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice.

C: Let Thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.

P: If Thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?

C: But there is forgiveness with Thee that Thou mayest be feared.

The HOLY GOSPEL

St. 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.

Matthew 20:1-16 — “The Kingdom of Heaven”

INTRODUCTION

I. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

II. IS LIKE UNTO A MAN THAT IS AN HOUSEHOLDER

III. WHICH WENT OUT TO HIRE LABORERS INTO HIS VINEYARD

CONCLUSION

Matthew 20:1-16 — “The Kingdom of Heaven”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you all from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Today is Septuagesima and the appointed Gospel reading is Matthew 20:1-16:

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So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Today is Septuagesima, which means seventy. We are in the final days of the Epiphany, in the final three Sundays leading to the forty days of Lententide. Lent itself is a season of preparation. Perhaps it seems odd to have a pre-season that prepares us for a season of preparation. But then, the things of the Kingdom of heaven are indeed foreign to our senses according to our fallen human nature. This is indeed the point of the parable in today's text. Everything that we would imagine about the Kingdom of God, everything that we would expect or design, is contrary to and falls far short of what God has established. Therefore, rather than leaving us to the imaginations of our own hearts and minds, the LORD declares to us what is good, what is of heaven.

I. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

In our text the Lord Jesus begins a parable, saying, **“Like for is the kingdom of heaven . . .”** In the English language we say things differently. We use a word order that flows more smoothly. But in the Greek texts of the Scriptures the word order reflects the intent of the speaker. Thus the text begins not with *For* but with *Like*. The Lord Jesus is making a comparative statement, thus He begins with *Like*. He wants us to realize that what He is telling us is something that we need to stop and consider. It is not like what we would be inclined to think for ourselves. Rather, it is like this . . .

Now that the Lord Jesus has our attention, He tells us the subject of the comparison. This subject is the kingdom.

Next the Lord Jesus tells us which kingdom. It is the kingdom of heaven.

Now this really is a foreign concept for us to consider. This is very, very different from the way that we think according to our own reason and strength. We are inclined to evaluate everything from our perspective, from the perspective of earthly thinking. In our attempts to understand anything whatsoever, we approach the subject from our earthly perspective and try to deduce the facts from what we observe. But here the Lord Jesus teaches us that we must abandon our own perspectives. He tells us that this is not an earthly kingdom that can be understood in earthly terms. What we observe through our earthly senses must be ignored, or at least calibrated. All of our calibrations are made through defective observations that are merely guesses based upon approximations. The truth is far above our ability to observe on our own. The truth is not from this world but from beyond.

Thus the Lord Jesus declares to us that it is the kingdom of heaven.

By this statement alone we should be stopped in the tracks of our thinking. But we are hard of hearing and slow to learn. In the prayer that the Lord Jesus gives us He teaches us to stop and hear again this clear distinction. He teaches us to pray, **“Our Father, who art in heaven.”** Right from the start, with the most basic part of worship, that is, prayer, we are to realize that everything that we bring to the relationship of worship is wrong and must be calibrated according to the standard that is true. Our Father is not like what we imagine from our earthly perspectives. His is our Father who art in heaven. He is far above anything that we would expect.

Next the Lord Jesus teaches us to pray, **“Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. They will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”**

Again He teaches us that what we think is holy and good and true needs to be calibrated according to the true standard. We imagine that we make the name of God holy by what we do. Jesus teaches us that God’s name is holy of itself, because it is the name of the One who IS holy. Completely contrary to what we think stands the Truth. God’s name is not kept holy among us by anything whatsoever that we do. Rather, we are made holy by the holiness of God’s name that He places upon us and keeps us in by His gracious works. God’s name is holy by what He does among us, not by anything that we do. Our works are made to be holy because God’s holy name is kept among us by what He does in our midst. He calls us to Himself to receive His holy name by which we are made holy. He calls us to receive the blessings that come with the gift of His name. He washes us in His name and makes us entirely clean. He keeps us in His name and feeds us the life that His name gives.

This is how His kingdom comes to us. Notice how this language emphasizes the foreign nature of this kingdom. It is not of us. It is not of this world. It is the kingdom of heaven. No matter where we look on this earth, we will never find it. No matter how hard we look and no matter how long we look, we will not find it on this earth unless God brings it to us from heaven. We cannot reach up and obtain it for ourselves. It must be brought to us by God Himself.

II. IS LIKE UNTO A MAN THAT IS AN HOUSEHOLDER

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, .

..

Now we really encounter how foreign this kingdom is to anything that we can understand. This kingdom, which is not of this earth but from heaven, is like unto a man. How on earth can this be? It cannot. For this man is not of the earth. He is from heaven. This man is from eternity.

This is so foreign that we cannot even begin to grasp it. This doctrine is not of the earth. It has absolutely no resemblance to anything that we can formulate. We can only recite the formulation of what has been declared to us. Jesus, the man from heaven, came from heaven to bring the kingdom of heaven to man on the earth.

This man from heaven is a householder, the head of God's household. It is in His image that Man has been created. It is His image that Adam relinquished. The man from heaven came to the earth to restore His image to Man so that once again Man would belong to God's household in the kingdom of heaven.

This household is the Church of God on earth. Yet it is nevertheless not a kingdom of the earth, but the kingdom of heaven. This is why so few enter into it. Many claim it for themselves, but this is the very reason that they cannot enter it. For it is not our kingdom. It is God's kingdom. It is the Father's kingdom. He is the Father who art in heaven. His kingdom is of heaven. This kingdom is not of the earth. His kingdom comes to earth through the body of God's Son, Jesus Christ. His kingdom is like unto a man, an householder. His kingdom can only be known in connection with this man. Apart from this man the kingdom of heaven cannot be known on the earth. Only through the works of God in the flesh of this man can the kingdom of heaven come to us on earth and be made manifest among us.

Yet how often we ignore this fact. How often we treat the kingdom as though it were of the earth and that it comes by what we think, say, and do. That is why we form church bodies. That is why we try to take hold of what is in heaven and make it in our own image. That is why we establish church bodies that are defined by constitutions that we compose for ourselves.

This is why our bodies do not unite. This is why our bodies disintegrate into disunity. This is why we fight amongst ourselves trying to reestablish what has disintegrated. This is why once our bodies have failed we insist on reforming them. After all, how can we exist without our bodies? Right?

But the body that we need is not of our own formation. It is the body of Christ to which we are called to live by faith. His body is not of this earth. It comes to us from heaven. His body is pure and holy. It is without blemish or spot or wrinkle. His body is perfect and continues in perfect unity.

When we do not see this, we wonder why. The reason is that we look for it from the wrong source. We forget that He is the man, the householder. He builds the house. He maintains the house. He protects those who dwell within His house. All that is truly in connection with His house is by His doing alone. Therefore it is and it continues just the way that He says. It is by His Word and by His works that the house exists and endures. Therefore His house endures forever and those who dwell in His house dwell in safety.

III. WHICH WENT OUT TO HIRE LABORERS INTO HIS VINEYARD

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.

This part is absolutely impossible for us to understand according to our own reason and strength. This part is so foreign that we always get it entirely wrong. The LORD Himself must teach us what this means and put it into effect in our hearts, minds, and souls. We cannot do this for ourselves. He must set it straight for us.

Again, the chief issue is the matter of whose vineyard it is. We respond, “The LORD’s!” of course. Yet that is not really what we mean. For the vineyard truly is the LORD’s, even though we treat it as though it were our vineyard. We imagine that we must plant and establish the vineyard. But the LORD has already planted and established it. We imagine that we must put our names upon it, but the LORD has already placed His holy name upon it. We imagine that we must make the vines grow, but the LORD Himself is the Vine. We imagine multiple vines when in fact there is only the One Vine, which is from heaven. This vine cannot die. The vine is eternal. The fruit of the vine is without limit.

So then, why does the man from heaven hire workers for His vineyard if He is the one who has planted it and established it and He is the one who maintains it? This part we simply cannot understand unless we remember what has been declared from the Scriptures. Moses records for us what the LORD God established from the beginning.

But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; And the gold of that land is good: there is bdellium and the onyx stone. And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. And the name of the third river is Hiddekel: that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates. And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou

eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Genesis 2:6-17)

God did all the work. He planted and established the garden of Eden and then He put the man in the garden to work it and keep it. What exactly does this mean in connection with the statement that the man could eat freely of all of the trees of the garden except the one? If the man eats freely of the trees, of what does his working consist? When a baby is delivered into the world and then is placed into his mother's arms and his mother exposes her breast so that he begins to nurse, what work is required of the baby? The baby sucks and continues at his mother's breast until he is full.

However, something terrible happened that disrupted this. Adam disobeyed. Instead of keeping the garden as the LORD had given for him, he formed His own opinion about how to keep it. Instead of leaving the one tree as an object of worship unto the LORD, instead of trusting God's goodness, Adam chose to reach out for more than the LORD his God had given for him to eat. With this choice he relinquished his place in the kingdom of heaven and traded it for a kingdom of his own imagination. Thereafter none of his descendants would be born of the kingdom of heaven. Moses records what the LORD says to Adam:

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Genesis 3:17-19)

This is why in the parable the Lord Jesus speaks of the man from heaven who has to go out into the world and hire workers into His vineyard. The workers are no longer born in the vineyard but must be sought out and hired into it. The workers cannot find the vineyard. They are unable to locate it and enter it. They stand around waiting, trying to scratch out a living from the cursed earth. But the householder goes out seeking the hungry to hire into His vineyard. He promises them that they will receive a full day's portion unto the day and with this promise He set them apart or made apostles of them into the vineyard. So they are set apart into the vineyard to gather fruit for themselves to eat all day long.

Again we learn from the prayer that the Lord Jesus teaches us, **"Give us this day our daily bread."** If only we would hear Him! How delighted we would be to undertake the work that has been apportioned to us. How many people who have been seated at a banquet consider it hard labor to lift the food from the plate to their mouths?

This is what the Lord does for us. He comes to us out in the world by means of the preaching of the Gospel. By His grace in the gift of faith He hires us into His vineyard. He places His name upon us through Baptism so that we may freely enter the vineyard and eat and drink a full day's portion.

Yet we somehow turn this in our own minds into some great work that we have done. We imagine that we have established the vineyard. We imagine that we have maintained it through our efforts at holding fast to the true doctrine and practice. We imagine that we have struggled to remain in the Church of the pure Gospel and Sacraments. We imagine that our sacrifices have kept the Church functioning. When this happens, what happens to the Eucharist?

Into what do we transform the Lord's Supper of Thanksgiving?

Rather than concerning ourselves with the preaching of the pure Gospel by which faith is freely given and rather than concerning ourselves with knowing that all who gather are eating only of the good food of heaven and not of the food that is mingled with what is impure, instead we focus upon who has worked longer or harder. Since we all have been hired into the vineyard from outside the vineyard by the man who owns the vineyard, how does this make any sense at all? Rather, should we not rejoice that we all have been restored as workers in the vineyard?

How often does the householder's question apply to us, where he asks, "**Is thine eye evil because I am good?**" The actual word order is, "**If (how can) the eye of you evil be that I good am?**" In other words, "*How can your perception be made evil when you see that I Myself good am in Myself?*"

Truly, how can we perceive something evil in the good that God is? Have we made the Church what it is? Is not the Church the body of Christ? Is Christ not the vine into which we are incorporated by God's grace poured out to us in Baptism? Is it not the blood of Christ that keeps us alive? Is it not the body of Christ into which we are united? Is this not what the Scriptures teach? Since this is true, what work then are we to do in the vineyard of Christ's Church on earth?

We are to gather to the administration of the pure Gospel and Sacraments. We are to keep ourselves in the holy communion of the saints and not join ourselves to that which is not what God has established. How hard is that? It means that we do nothing more than to hear what is preached and observe what is practiced and discern whether or not what we hear and observe being practiced are truly the works of Christ or whether they are the works of some other man. Those who have been hired earlier in the day and have worked in the vineyard longer naturally are better prepared to make such discernment. They are the pastors and teachers entrusted with administering the Gospel and Sacraments rightly and purely. The newer ones learn from the more experienced ones and together they feast unto their hearts' delight.

CONCLUSION

The parable concludes with the words, "**So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.**" How many times does the Lord Jesus give this warning throughout His ministry? We only have the times that the Holy Spirit led the evangelists to record for us, and even so, they are many times. Do you suppose He means for us to take these words to heart?

"**So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.**" These words are declared not to those who are outside the Church, but to those who believe themselves to be inside the Church. These words are declared unto us. The Lord Jesus is warning us not to forget whose Church we have been called into. We must never forget Who brought us into this vineyard of life. We must never forget who it is that planted the vineyard and who it is that keeps it. It is the Lord's vineyard. He planted it. He established it. He keeps it. He causes us to be born into it. We do not choose to enter the vineyard. He brings us in and gives us our identity as workers in the vineyard. He gives each of us a full portion in the blessings of His grace, mercy, and peace. What is meant for one is meant for all, all who are truly brought in by His grace through the faith that He alone gives. This faith is His faith. This faith is clear and unadulterated. This faith is not of this earth, but from heaven, just as also the

kingdom is not of this earth but is from heaven. We are gathered here not by our own design or choice, but by God's design and choice. He has called us by His grace to partake freely of Him in His goodness. There is no requirement placed upon us except that what we receive is received in Christ Jesus, the householder. It matters not how well we have worked, but how well He has worked, and He has done all things well. This truly is cause for rejoicing, for we do not receive what we have earned, but what Christ has earned for us.

Truly the last shall be first. The one who acknowledges his condition as a poor, miserable sinner receives the full redemption into Christ's perfect body and the remission of all sins through Christ's blood. The one who imagines himself to be first, that is, righteous, receives only what he has earned for himself, that is, the imaginary righteousness of his own sinful life. Many are called. The Gospel is preached for everyone. From among the many, some actually hear and believe the Gospel. By the power of God's grace through faith some do indeed trust in the merits of Christ and eat and drink freely at the table of His mercy. Thanks be to God. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.