

Payday

(From the Septuagesima Epistle & Gospel)

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 118

1 Corinthians ix: 24 Know ye not that they which run in a race run all , but one receiveth the prize? So run , that ye may obtain . **25** 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. **26** I therefore so run , not as uncertainly; so fight I , not as one that beateth the air: **27** 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.

Matthew xx. 1 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. **2** And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny 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 unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way . **5** Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. **6** 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? **7** 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 . **8** 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. **9** And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. **10** But when the first came , they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. **11** And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, **12** 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. **13** But he answered one of them, and said , Friend, I do thee no wrong : didst not thou agree with me for a penny? **14** Take that thine is, and go thy way : I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. **15** Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own ? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? **16** So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

Payday, here on earth, is generally received with at least some degree of satisfaction: a week, or two weeks, worked hard and long, all for a small piece of paper with a lot of potential, or for others, the knowledge that one's bank account has been swelled a bit by the impersonal magic of electronic transfers. We trade our labor, our skills, our time, for the means we need to live on. This arrangement seems to be practically as old as history itself.

Today's Epistle and Gospel, however, present to us an entirely different reality and set of values associated with the whole matter of employment. Here, the Boss is, as it were, God Himself, and the payday would seem to be a long way off. It as a day awaited in faith, to which all our labors for the Lord are aimed. It will be paid out in coinage that will abide forever, and the whole process of earning it will never have to be repeated.

As we study today's texts, we will notice that they each possesses a different approach to this matter of reward. St. Paul likens the Christian life to an athletic contest requiring discipline and concentration, whose end for the winner will be the prize of a crown. But our Lord compares our labor for Him to that of work within a vineyard, for a fixed payment which He Himself has

set beforehand. These two concepts of reward are complementary, and it's important that we fully understand them if we are to intelligently and happily live out our lives for Him.

The Epistle puts *our efforts* to the forefront, and so for that reason it may well make us uncomfortable. The image here is unmistakable: the apostle pictures himself as a runner in a race who is absolutely bent upon winning it. All of his faculties are occupied toward that end. He does not run *uncertainly*. There is no apathy, or lack of focus, or half-heartedness here.

This latter attitude, sadly, is the spirit of the age in which we live. We are a spoiled people, bored with virtue and with noble causes, and uninterested in expending the effort to stand up for principles and ideals or any of those invisible motivators to righteousness which once filled the hearts of Americans with purpose and passion. We are far more engaged with that which provides immediate gratification, whether a hamburger, or a musical concert, or a game of professional sports.

But St. Paul not only *runs*, he also *fights*, but *not as one that beateth the air*. The picture here is a strange one: he is not aiming pointless blows at invisible enemies, making a show of pretending to be, one might say, a heavyweight boxing champion, merrily landing well-placed punches on the points of hapless chins, and looking for applause. No, his blows are in fact aimed at himself! *I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection...* [New International Version: *No, I beat my body and make it my slave...*]. He is constantly laboring at self-control. He understands the weakness and vicissitude of his human nature. It tends to sinfulness. It is not inherently disposed to obey God's commandments nor is it inclined to holiness. The possession of any gracious and holy tendencies, he knows, is the work of God alone. This great saint realizes the danger of not disciplining himself. Even he could be a *castaway* [literally, "not standing the test, not approved, as of metals or coins..."]. If this struggle marked the great Apostle's life, how could it be any different for us?

Let's turn now to the Gospel. It begins with the very significant words: *For the kingdom of heaven is like...* This phrase is very important, and appear many times in St. Matthew. The *kingdom of heaven* is utterly unlike the "kingdom of earth". It operates by different laws and standards and rules, and they are presented throughout the canon of Scripture. For us who must operate day to day wholly within the realm of this earth, learning a completely contrasting way of doing things amounts to a lifetime of reprogramming.

Whereas the Epistle emphasized *our* part in self-discipline, the Gospel speaks of God's part in inviting us to work in His vineyard, and in offering us reward. We don't want to stretch the details of this parable too far, but there is much here for us. First of all, we must get the terms straight: *penny* here is actually "denarius", a silver coin which was a day's wage, which would also have been received by Roman soldiers. The implication is that it is fair pay for the work entailed. Now, we may be inclined to think that the *householder* in this parable could have been a

bit more generous, especially since he is an obvious type of the Lord Himself. But we must focus on the most important details of this story: unemployed men are invited to receive the reward of labors that are offered at the good graces of the landowner, who is a man of such extraordinary generosity and benevolence as to confer exactly the same fair wage even upon those who hardly deserve it, those who are hired very late in the day. The terms of employment have nowhere been violated. It's simply that the longterm employees have made the mistake not only of not minding their own business, but in drawing the wrong conclusions from the *householder's* totally unexpected generosity.

This Gospel also makes us uncomfortable. Although our Lord more than likely was aiming this lesson at His enemies, who deeply resented His teaching that the poor, the helpless, and those they considered to be sinners might be freely welcomed by God into His Kingdom, it also presents us with a challenge. Why am I working for Christ? Do I believe He owes me anything? Have I any right as a lifelong Christian to conclude that He wouldn't possibly bestow on others blessings equal to those I might expect for myself?

Now I want to hasten to affirm that I believe with all of my heart that God will offer rewards commensurate with the love and service and devotion that His children have demonstrated to Him throughout their lives. He would never hold anything back. But let's think about the implications of the parable. If all I ever gained from my life lived for God was the opportunity merely to be with Him, I would have received all that I could ever possibly desire. And the same salvation --forgiveness of sins and eternal life-- is freely granted to the seasoned believer as to the new convert. The "day" of labor spoken of here is our life here on earth. It has a glad end for the faithful, for God is indeed the *goodman of the house*.

In lining the two texts up side by side, then, we can clearly see that they offer us two sides of a very important issue. St. Paul makes it clear that although grace is indeed freely bestowed, and that salvation is an undeserved gift unconnected with our merit or our efforts on any level, we are nevertheless not passive recipients. We cannot, as participants in a race whose significance is eternal, afford to lazily wander off the track, and suppose that we will stroll blissfully and glibly through the Pearly Gates. Doing so invites the awful possibility of being *a castaway*. The Gospel, on the other hand, emphasizes God's goodness in even inviting us at all into the privilege of laboring within His vineyard, and the enormity of His grace in offering a just reward to all who obey that call, even the very last. A "day's wage", in the heavenly economy, is something truly beyond our ability to comprehend.

This is a paradox: our efforts; God's free grace. Our responsibility, and God's reward, which is entirely within the realm of His sovereign will. A crown for a contest well-won, and a wage acquired through whatever time of employment in His Kingdom we've been granted.

The Gospel text closes with some of our Lord's gravest words: *for many be called, but few chosen*. This may in fact be an even greater paradox. The invitation to the Kingdom and its reward is vast and welcoming. It is trumpeted throughout the world in the clarion call of the Gospel. There are no conditions associated with it; it is free. *Many, indeed, be called*. But the cost of discipleship, of actually winning the Kingdom, and proving ourselves, on some level, worthy of the call, is very great. The terms of grace are unalterable, but so are the requirements. *Few, indeed, are chosen*.

Help us, Lord.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.