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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 20: 16 So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few are chosen.

GOD'S WAGES

I have been a Christian practically all of my life. When only a few weeks old, my parents brought me to the Lord in Holy Baptism. They brought me up in a Christian home, teaching me faithfully the Word of God and the Will of God. As a child I attended a Christian Day School, where day after day I became increasingly more aware of the greatness of God's love for me in Christ. At the tender age of 14 I left home to begin preparing myself for the holy ministry. Eleven years later I graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, and entered into the full time work of the Lord..... I mention all this because from the human point of view I might well ask myself: Doesn't God owe me something for my faith, my loyalty, my service? Shouldn't I receive a greater reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?

I suppose that most of us are inclined to brag once in a while about what we have done for the Lord and His church. We are inclined to resent those who come at the eleventh hour and receive the same goodness and love and forgiving grace from God as we who have borne the burden and heat of the day. And it is just toward this kind of a vain, arrogant attitude that Jesus tells this Parable of the Laborers in the Vineward. At precisely that moment when we in our pride and self-esteem might imagine that we are at the head of the line - at that moment we will most certainly find ourselves to be at the very end, if we are there at all. So the last shall be first, and the first last; for many be called, but few are chosen.

The Parable teaches us that we can make no claims upon God. Every sacrifice which we make for God carries its reward, in itself. It must be good enough for us to have the privilege of serving God. There is nothing more that we can claim. Just ~~to be able to do something for our~~ the fact that we have been called by the Lord, to work in His vineyard, to know His love and concern for us, to surrender to Him our life with its joys and sorrows, its passions and despondencies - that in itself must be enough, that in itself is an undreamed-of fulfillment of life. The story is told of two children who broke throught the ice near Stuttgart, Germany. At the same time an automobile stopped on the shore. The driver threw off his coat, jumped into the water, broke

through the ice, and brought up the children. Their mother was beside herself for joy. How can I thank you? How can I repay you? she asked. I don't want any reward nor any thanks, replied the man. It is enough that I have experienced this moment. Thereupon he got back into his car and drove away without even leaving his name. The man was right. Even if there were no eternity for us; if if we were nothing more than clumps of clay which God used for a little moment and then discarded - there still could be nothing greater and more glorious than to be used by Him. The great apostle Paul put it this way: Even if my life is to be poured out as a libation upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and congratulate you all. It was honor enough for him to be poured out as an offering of wine for the work of God. That was more than enough recompense.

It is a wonder that we should be called to work in the Lord's vineyard at all. When once the rays of God's love in Christ have burned their way into our hearts, then we will lose our lives in His service. There will be no thoughts of how much we are giving up for Him, what we are sacrificing, what we will receive in return for our labors. Does a mother, who watches at the bed of her fever-stricken child, count up how many hours she has watched and how much of her health she has sacrificed? No, she has no time for that. She has forgotten herself altogether. Her thoughts are on her sick child. Everything else is unimportant; everything else is forgotten.

Christ literally gave Himself away for us in His love for us - that we might have the joy of forgiveness and live everlasting. If we would follow Him and be His disciples, we must give our lives away with the same kind of reckless abandon Only in this way can our lives find real meaning and purpose. Otherwise we live only in selfish solitude and lonliness. Ask yourself: Why is it that ~~so many~~ the in America wealthy people, who can buy every satisfaction the world can offer, lack complete happiness? They can go to the mountains, and live in the best hotels. All the pleasures of the world are available for their amusement. Why are they often so dissatisfied in spite of all these things? Because they have never given themselves

away. Jesus said: Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone. But if the grain of wheat dies - if it gives itself - it brings forth much fruit. Then it multiplies itself, and a harvest of grain comes from it. Or, take another illustration which Jesus used. He said to His disciples: Ye are the light of the world. If we possess a beautiful Christmas candle, for example, there are two things we can do with it. We can preserve it carefully in a box where it will retain its color and form. It will remain spotless - but everything about it will remain dark. Or we can light it and let it burn itself out. Its form will change; it will grow steadily smaller, it will melt away and the wax will drip down - but it will cast a light all about itself. Even so, we can preserve ourselves as we might the candle. Maybe we should remain youthful for a much longer period. We could have much more time for recreation and fun. But everything around us would remain dark. Or we can give ourselves, bit by bit . We can give our strength, our youth, our time, our rest. We may become old before our time, since we shall feel the burden of human suffering. We will become smaller, but there is light all about us - and the warmth of this light is a thousand times more wonderful than anything else we have given up. It is really ridiculous to speak of them as sacrifices at al

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth. We are, then, not to look at our sacrifices at all. Otherwise we will be plagued by the thought: How much have I given up! How much worse off I am than others! How much I have suffered! While others enjoy themselves, I must lie on a sickbed. We ~~will~~ look askance at those who have it easier than we do. Then we begin to complain: These others have wrought but one hour, and thou hast make them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. God's goodness comes to the other person because it didn't come to me And then we begin to reason: Because of all the hardships I have had to undergo, God must surely give me a higher place in heaven..... A man who suffered a great deal during his lifetime was asked how he could be so cheerful. He replied, Not until I went down into the depths of hunger, fear, and loneliness did I experience the nearness of the Lord. There is where I first learned who Jesus is and

and how He can save and comfort and sustain a man. For the rest of my life I shall live by the blessings of those hours.... I had to be sent down those rough roads in order that I might see that He really does know the way. I had to go through the valley of the shadow to learn to know the Shepherd. Otherwise I would never have experienced all this.

This is the way the Christian meets the sufferings and sacrifices of life. He is under no illusion about himself. He sees himself as a sinner in need of grace, the undeserved love and forgiveness of God. In that picture of himself he can also find the sure sign that he is forgiven - the sign of the cross. The one thing that matters, the one great fact that changes everything and sustain him, is the figure of his Savior crucified just for him. Christ died for all, even for me! -- this is the Gospel, working itself out in a new life for every follower of Christ.

Of course, it is possible to pretend the whole thing. It is possible to impress other people with our sacrificial life, for they can see only the outside. But Christ looks deeper. His eyes pierce to the heart. He does not look to see how much money, now much energy, how much time we have given. He see if we have really given ourselves. That is why there is a notable reversion of rank with God. Many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first! It is a noticeable fact that people who, after a wasted life are called at the eleventh hour to God's vineyard, frequently show greater zeal for Christ than others who have been brought up as Christians from childhood. For they know, better than the others, that they have no claims upon God, that everything is a gift of His grace.

A man was convicted of murder and sentenced to die. Lacking a way of escape he fashioned a noose from his bed-sheets and sought to hang himself. At the last moment he was cut down by a prison guard. Through the ministry of a chaplain, he came to a living faith in Christ just before his execution. He was called into God's vineyard at the eleventh hour. But in that short time je became a witness to the saving power of Christ. He told the prison inspector what had happened to him

and prayed publicly at his execution: Christ, Thou hast redeemed me, Thou hast forgiven me. Help me! We cannot understand that God receives such a person and permits him, at the eleventh hour, to work in His vineyard, and uses him as a witnes But if such a man is received, there is no one among us, no matter what he has done, who should be rejected. God does not look, as we do, upon the success of our labors in the vineyard or how many hours we have been able to work. He sees only a heart the overflows with thankfulness to Him.

Amen.