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“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.” Ephesians 2.8

“So the last will be first, and the first last.” Beware, my friends, and pay close attention and listen very carefully to that parable of our Lord Jesus. The church is full of dawn-to-dusk, dedicated workers like those pictured in the Gospel. And often it is those same hard-working cornerstones of a church and congregation - committed laity and priests - who allow themselves to be swallowed up by that wicked spirit of self-righteousness. What happens mirrors the Gospel parable exactly. Your work in the Church is never joyfully or freely given. You don't work because you love the Lord Jesus; no, what is most often the dreadful grumbling motivation we hear? “I'll do it, if no one else will.” That attitude, that begrudging of every effort at the beginning, and self-righteousness at the end, makes us less than a delight to be around, and it drives people away.

The hard and long workers in the parable and in our own experience are caught by a spirit of self-righteousness and envy. “Do you begrudge my generosity?” the King of heaven asks. The

older translations speak more literally of an evil eye. The workers gave the owner and their coworkers the evil eye. It is that self-righteousness and envy which will not welcome those who come to help and join in at the eleventh hour. Often this same envy is seen in those who would deny the sacraments of the Church to those who have not paid their dues and borne the burden of the day.

That Gospel then comes with a warning, and we need to heed it, for this wickedness abounds and has consumed many of God's people.

Yet, all our effort and work is necessary, as our Epistle argues. We need to train and run and fight. In the Gospel, everyone gets the reward, the same reward, but in the Epistle only one does. The relationship between God's grace and our works is put before us today. The Gospel reminds us that we are saved by grace through faith, and it is not your own doing, it is God's doing. Your salvation has nothing to do with your deserving, but everything to do with Christ's. It is his gift, they received every one a penny, they all received the denarius. We must be prepared, no matter how hard we work, to receive salvation as a gift not of our earning but of Jesus' deserving. This is such a struggle. Some of you who have given up on your own righteousness and accepted that gift know how you are

tempted to turn back, and many of you, I suspect, still think that you can earn heaven by your own goodness.

We either rely on our righteousness (which requires believing and promoting a lie about ourselves and turning a deaf ear to our conscience), or on Christ's righteousness. We either trust and hope in what we have done, or in what Christ has done. Some labourers in the parable sought their pay, what was their due, while others simply trusted the owner and sought some reward as a gift at the end of the day. The first group are working on a contract, the second group are working on mutual trust. The first group seek their wages, and are unsatisfied with them, while the second seek a gift and are surprised and delighted by what they receive. Those who seek their wages are miserable and grumble, while those who seek the gift are joyous and give praise.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6.23 Think only of the prodigal son, who when he demanded his due of his Father, left home and ended up starving in pig dirt, but when he received the gift of his Father was embraced, welcomed home, and feasted.

What are our rights before God, and what may we demand of him? George MacDonald, so much admired by C.S.Lewis, puts it

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this way: “Lest it should be possible that any unchildlike soul might, in arrogance and ignorance, think to stand upon his rights against God, and demand of Him this or that after the will of the flesh, I will lay before such a possible one some of the things to which he has a right... He has a claim to be compelled to repent; to be hedged in on every side; to have one after another of the strong, sharp-toothed sheep-dogs of the Great Shepherd sent after him, to thwart him in any desire, foil him in any plan, frustrate him of any hope, until he come to see at length that nothing will ease his pain, nothing make life a thing worth having but the presence of the living God within him.”

That Gospel of salvation by grace, which we must receive only by faith - that is, by putting our trust in Christ alone - is matched by an epistle that says: faith without works is dead. In the epistle, we are not told that we must earn our salvation, but we are told that our works - our response to the Gospel in our lives - is truly necessary, only one receives the prize. The Epistle makes us look ahead to Lent, which I like to think of as the Church’s Spring Training. (Unfortunately we will not be able to go off to Florida for the whole thing like the sports players do.)

The followers of Jesus are frequently referred to in the New

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Testament as his disciples, which means learners or students. We are called to be his disciples but friends, you cannot be a disciple without discipline. We need disciplines, in weekly worship, at the absolute rock bottom minimum in the Lord's house once on the Lord's day; in daily prayer; in fasting and alms; in Bible reading and study; in self-examination; in giving of our money; and in works of charity. We need discipline to be disciples, and we need rules to be regular, and in this time before Lent, we are provided the opportunity to assess and shape our Christian rule and Disciplines.

The twin warnings of today are against idleness (an undisciplined life, an unfruitful tree, a lazy athlete) and against self-righteous envy (demanding our wages and resenting others). If you are here not looking for your deserving, but for the mercy and kindness of God; if you know that you have failed God, your neighbour, and yourself; and if you have come to recognize and admit that you cannot save yourself; if you are ready to give up all the pretence of your independence and self-righteousness and self-importance, then you are in the right place today. Jesus gave his life on the cross as a gift to you and for you. The cross is our wage, our earning of sin and death, but he gives forgiveness and life to all who will receive these as the gift of his saving grace.