

Come, Labor On

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 25th-Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 22, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

God is looking for workers. The Lord comes in the person of Jesus Christ and calls men and women to serve him in the vineyard of his church. He comes to us in the dawn of our lives, when we're little babies, when we're baptized, and calls us to serve him throughout our lives, and some, thank the Lord, respond to that call. Many don't. He comes again in the morning of our lives, when we're teenagers - maybe through some youth event like the Great Escape. He invites us to go work for him in the vineyard of his Church - through involvement in Sunday School and worship and youth groups and work projects. Some respond, some don't. God comes again and again until the sunset of our lives inviting us to work for him in his vineyard. God doesn't want anybody to stand idly by while there's work to do. We're here this morning because we've been called by God to serve him.

Baptism into Christ's church is an invitation to go work in the Lord's vineyard. When I baptize an adult I ask, "Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?" In baptism, the Lord Jesus Christ, calls us to work for him. When we join the church, if we know what we're doing, we're telling the Lord, "I want to work for you in some way in your kingdom."

One way we labor in the Lord's vineyard is participating in the Sunday worship service. Worship is not entertainment but work. It requires work. For example, some people serve through being ushers. Others sing in the choirs. We need greeters. We need congregational singing. We need people to share joys and concerns. We need people in the congregation to sing hymns to the Lord. The Lord needs people who will serve him by going up to strangers after the service with a smile and a handshake. Through corporate worship we work in the Lord's vineyard.

Another way we labor in the Lord's vineyard is by praying. Prayer is work. People, young and old can pray even when they're unable to come to the worship service. Young people can pray. The Lord is looking for workers who pick up the membership directory every day and pray for the members of our church.

Another way we can labor in the Lord's vineyard is by physical work. On October 19 we'll have the opportunity to work on a Habitat for Humanity house in Coatesville. Or some of you can work at His Mission in Kennett Square. You can walk in the CROP walk and help raise money for world hunger.

The Lord is looking for workers in his vineyard. There's some kind of work for everybody in God's kingdom. Everybody in the church should have a definite job - maybe stapling the Lamplighter, working in the kitchen, teaching Sunday School, sending "Get Well" cards. Everybody in the church should have a job. The Lord needs workers to visit shut-ins and invite neighbors to Sunday School and church. The Lord is calling some

of you to serve him in his vineyard as elders and deacons. Don't refuse! There's work to do. The Lord is looking for workers.

We can learn something from the Union Fire Company which is celebrating its 125th anniversary this week. When you join the fire company you make a commitment to work. Probably everybody takes CPR training. Some people train for service as ambulance drivers. Others train as fire truck drivers. They learn how to operate the pumps and hoses. Some pretty intensive training is required. And if you're not physically up to the strenuous and dangerous work of fire fighting, the auxiliary can use you to cook and serve meals. The Fire Company has survived and prospered for 125 years because every member is expected to work in some way towards the goal and mission of the fire company.

—Some of us may be wondering, why this emphasis on work. I mean, we're saved by grace, not by works, so why this emphasis on work. Protestants stress that salvation is by God's grace alone, through faith alone, and not of works. We do not and can not earn our salvation by doing good works. But sometimes our belief in salvation by grace undermines our desire to serve the Lord in his church through working in the vineyard of God's church. Maybe you've heard the story of a Presbyterian lying on his death bed. The minister was invited by the family to visit him. When the minister got there, she asked him if he were relying on Christ alone for his salvation and not trusting in good works. The dying man confidently assured her, "I trusted Christ as my personal savior when I was a little boy and I've never done any good works in my whole life."

Too many Presbyterians are like that. A lot of people say they trust in Christ but they don't serve him in God's kingdom - they don't worship with God's people, they don't study God's word, ~~they don't invite others into the vineyard.~~ ^{But the fault may not be all theirs. "no one has hired us" - maybe you also bear the brunt of the work need to ask more often & more looking for workers.} ~~But God is~~ ^{people to help. My experience has been that many people if asked to do a job, will do it. We need to ask more people... we need to make it clear to new} ~~members~~ ^{the Apple Festival...} But there's a twist in the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Those who work in the Lord's vineyard the longest, don't get anymore than those who work one measely hour. We hear the parable and we all say, "Unfair." Workers work a long hot day - twelve hours out in the fields - and get paid the usual daily wage for migrant workers - no great sum of money. Others show up and work one hour and they also get paid a full day's wages. It's not right.

—Back in the thirties, so I've been told, Union halls had a motto on their walls: "A fair dollar for a fair days' work." I can't imagine any union man thinking that what happened in the parable is fair. Those who work longer should get paid more. William Willimon helps us understand what Jesus said by retelling the story in a modern university setting. This is Willimon's updated version of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.

On the first day of class the professor says, "Now students I have this complicated, very complicated, math problem, the solution of which shall constitute your grade for the entire semester. I'm giving you this problem here at the beginning of the semester so you all can start work immediately, and I do urge you to begin immediately if you hope to pass the course. I want you all to make A's."

Well, you want to do well. So you get the problem and go to work, first week of the class. You go to the library. There you search for books that may be helpful. You begin calculation.

To your surprise, you note that, even by mid-February, only a few of your fellow classmates have begun work on the problem. Well, that's their business. They'll be sorry come May. You've been at work since the second week of January.

The week before exams, you're proudly putting the finishing touches on your paper and the solution to the problem. Some in the class tell you that, if they work hard over the next few days, they may get it finished. There are others who haven't even begun. There's no way for them to be finished no matter what. But, that's their problem.

Then comes the last day of the semester. You proudly bring your work by to hand it in to the professor. To your surprise, all the others also have their work finished. How did they do it? You're about to learn how.

"Professor Smith, thanks for helping me figure this out last week. Why, without your help, I'd never have gotten it finished," you overhear one to say.

"Well, here it is, professor Smith. All done, thanks to your kind assistance yesterday," says another.

"Thanks for coming by the dorm last night to help me," says another.

You're aghast. No wonder they finished their work. While you were hard at work, figuring it out on your own, this

professor has been all over the campus spoon-feeding it to everybody in the class, everybody but you, that is.

When you tell Professor Smith what you think of it, she says, "Why do you begrudge my generosity? The goal of the class is to get people to finish the problem. You were able to finish it on your own. Fine. The others needed a little special attention. You get an A. They get an A. What's wrong with that? Am I not doing you right?"

Somehow, it just doesn't feel right. You look at your A. It was what you wanted out of the class. But now that everyone else also has an A, what with Professor Smith's forays into the dorm and everything, it doesn't feel like an A.

The God who comes to us in Jesus Christ is like that professor. God wants everybody to get an A. God wants everybody to get a full days wage - no matter how much or how little they work. God refuses to leave us alone. In ~~Christ~~, God comes to us in Jesus Christ and says, "Follow me." Come, labor on.

Let us pray: God and Father of all, you have willed that the last shall be first, and you have made a little child the measure of your kingdom. Give us that wisdom which is from above, so we may understand that, in your sight, the one who serves is the greatest of all. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.