Lord Jesus, it is a privilege and pleasure to gather together as brothers and sisters in Christ to hear your Word. Bless our time together and strengthen our faith, deepen our understanding of your truths and grant us wisdom as we learn to apply all that you tell us. Amen.

When someone criticizes or expresses disappointment with the outcome of a situation, we call that kind of a reaction “sour grapes.”

- The 4th grade children whine “why do the Kindergarteners get an extra recess?” Sour grapes.
- A candidate loses an election, and then afterward he says some nasty stuff about those dumb voters who chose the other guy. That’s “sour grapes.”
- A man loses out on a job, and then he speaks behind the back of the employer he was just flattering to his face. Again, sour grapes.

It’s not a very attractive characteristic. But it is a very common one.

In our text today, Jesus addresses this grumbling, sour-grapes attitude.

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”
And coincidentally enough, he does it in a parable about people who work in a place where grapes are grown.

Now in Jesus’ story, the master, of course, is God. The vineyard is the kingdom of God. And the laborers are those who work in God’s kingdom – you and me. Now this labor may be any of the tasks we take up in the service of the church. It could be the altar guild, the acolytes, the council members, the ladies, the men, any of the numerous volunteers, those who donate items for the pantry, or the activities we sponsor.

This work may also be the vocation or place where you live. It may be doing the housework, doing the “honey-do lists,” it may be doing homework for your teacher, putting in extra time for the boss. The list is endless.

When the workers who were hired first got their wage they were happy. That is until they saw what those hired at the end of the day got – the same amount! It’s not that they had been short changed. They got the amount they had agreed to work for. The master makes that clear. And so it wasn’t really their work or their pay that got them upset – it was the grace and generosity of the owner. What made them grumble is what the others received. When they saw that – suddenly, their pay wasn’t good enough. They wanted more.

How easily that can become our thinking. “I worked hard to get the “A” on this group project. But the other guy in my group didn’t do a thing. And he got an “A” too. That’s not fair!” Maybe we think we should get more recognition from our spouse or our kids for the work we do around the house. Maybe we think we should have our name in the bulletin for what we do or give. Perhaps we think that our name should always be at the top of the promotion list. Or perhaps the woman thinks “I’m just as smart as any man. I should be able to be a voter or on the council.”

I’m steamed, I stew. I resent. I get mad at the people who are applauding him instead of me. And of course I inevitably grumble and get mad at God for letting this happen. Sour grapes have been planted in the vineyard of God.

We can easily begin to think that we deserve more than we get. There is one instance where we get exactly what we deserve. St. Paul tells us in Romans 3 that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and the wages for that sin is death.” All means everyone; every man, woman, and child—even newborns. Everyone is a sinner and everyone deserves temporal and eternal punishment for that sin in the eyes of God.
But now we object. We want God to use the sliding scale of fairness, don't we? I know I'm not perfect, but I'm better than so and so. I know I'm not perfect, but at least I haven't done what he/she did! I meant well. I tried real hard. I had no other choice. We expect these excuses to win us some slack from God.

But God doesn't cut any slack to sin. All sins, great or small, many or few are all capital crimes against God's holiness. Each and every one is deserving of the ultimate payment – DEATH!

We may be outwardly respectable people in most all features of our life, very moral, hard-working, devout, dedicated. In fact, these are the people who are most susceptible to getting “Sour Grapes Syndrome.” It's people like you and me. So often we may feel underappreciated, under-rewarded.

But that means our thinking is out of whack. No, let’s call it what it is: Sour Grapes is sin. Sour grapes is complaining against God – that’s sin. Sour grapes is not being content with what He gives us – that’s sin. Sour grapes is envying what others receive – that’s sin. We just work here. The church, the vineyard, is all about Jesus.

Has there ever been anyone more underappreciated than Jesus? Has anyone ever been treated more unfairly? No, not by a long shot. Here was the Lord of life, God’s own Son, coming into the vineyard and outworking anyone who’s ever set foot there. Only a few years in his public ministry, but, oh, the results! So many sick people healed from their diseases. So many demonized delivered from oppression. Multitudes fed and taught. Intense training for his disciples. The preaching of repentance and forgiveness, both to the crowds and to troubled sinners one-on-one. What a worker for God's kingdom!

And yet, what did Christ receive? Rejection, humiliation, abandonment. Persecution even; unjust suffering. A death sentence, cruel death on a cross, hung out to die. What kind of a reward is that for the best church worker that ever was?

But this is precisely how Christ won the great reward that each one of us will receive in the end. That reward will be based, not on our works, but on his. It won’t matter how long you've been a Christian or how many years of dedicated service you’re put in along the way. Because none of that would ultimately earn our salvation. Our master's gracious generosity toward us in giving us eternal salvation--this is way better than we sour grape workers deserve. Any reward that we receive at all comes to us only by way of the grace of God. “For the wages of sin is death,”
that is all we can earn, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And so it’s good that we are here today. To repent. To let go of this sin, and ask God not only for forgiveness for it, but also to ask God to prune out the sour grapes in our lives, – and not only be happy (truly happy!) for what others receive; but even more important, that we might love God, and not be angry at Him for giving to others, but be thankful to Him for what He has given me.

And that’s the key. To not base our relationship with God upon our comparison with others – but to know that all that I have and receive is a gift from God from His fatherly divine goodness and mercy, and not because I have earned or deserve it.

But now we need to be careful because our sinful nature is going to spring into action. If it doesn’t matter how hard I work, how long I’ve been a Christian, then why bother. Let somebody else do the work. May God curse that kind of thinking to hell from which it comes. We serve not to earn a reward but to thank God for the reward He gives us. Can we ever do enough to sufficiently thank Him? We work to glorify Him who loved us and whom we love. Can we ever love Him enough? We labor to serve the one who served us with His life and death. Can we ever serve Him enough. No, to think “why bother working” to again plant sour grapes in God’s vineyard.

And so, my fellow workers in the vineyard: Although we are poor, prideful, self-centered sinners . . . even though we are, and will remain, unworthy servants . . . even though you and I get that Sour Grapes Syndrome from time to time . . . even so, in spite of our sins, by God’s great grace and the merits of Jesus Christ our Savior, one day our master will welcome us home, and to our astonishment he will greet us with these welcoming words, so much better than we deserve, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

† Soli Deo Gloria †