

The Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

The Wage and the Giver

Roman Missal, Third Edition · Lectionary for Mass, no. 133 · 20 September 2026

A homily

Evening has come in the vineyard, and the labourers are standing in line for their pay. At the back are the men who were hired at dawn. They have worked twelve hours, and the heat of the day is still in their shoulders. At the front are the men who came an hour ago, when the light was already going. The steward begins with them, and into each of their hands he puts a denarius, the coin agreed that morning as the wage for a whole day. The old Douay Bible calls it a penny.

You can feel the arithmetic begin at the back of the line. If one hour is worth a denarius, what must twelve be worth? Then their own turn comes, and each of them receives a denarius. And they say what any of us would say. In that Bible's words: "These last have worked but one hour, and thou hast made them equal to us, that have borne the burden of the day and the heats."

If we are honest, we are standing with them. Their complaint sounds like plain fairness. So ask the question the parable asks. What, exactly, have these men lost?

Nothing. They agreed for a denarius, and a denarius is in their hand. What pains them is nothing that was done to them. It is the good that was done to somebody else.

That is where the householder's answer goes. "Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst thou not agree with me for a penny? Take what is thine, and go thy way: I will also give to this last even as to thee." Saint Augustine, preaching on this Gospel, supplies the words the householder leaves unspoken: "I have paid thee what I agreed for. To this other it is my will not to render a payment, but to bestow a gift." Justice to the one, a gift to the other, and no one robbed. Today's psalm says both things of the one Lord: he is "gracious and merciful", and he is "just in all his ways".

Then comes the last question: "Is thy eye evil, because I am good?" Saint Thomas Aquinas says

what an evil eye is. A man is properly called evil, he says, when he grieves at goodness. And Saint Jerome finds the wish hidden under the complaint: you do not so much want more for yourself as you want the other man to receive nothing.

The first reading was chosen to stand beside this Gospel, and it gives the householder's reason before the parable is told: "My thoughts are not your thoughts". We reach for that line when God's ways bewilder us. But listen to where the prophet puts it. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unjust man his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God: for he is bountiful to forgive. For my thoughts are not your thoughts: nor your ways my ways, saith the Lord." The line is about pardon. Saint Thomas gives the whole contrast in a breath: you think of requital, of paying back; I think of mercy. The men at the back of the line reasoned by the thoughts of men: more hours, more pay. The householder's reckoning is as far above theirs as the heavens are above the earth.

But we have not yet asked what the coin is. Saint Augustine says it plainly: that denarius is eternal life. The saints will shine, he says, some more and some less; but in living for ever no one will live more than another. Saint Jerome noticed what is stamped on a denarius: the figure of the king. You have received the wage I promised you, he hears the householder say, my own image and likeness; what more do you seek? And Augustine, preaching on today's psalm, comes to its promise that the Lord is nigh "to all that call upon him in truth." To call on him in truth, he says, is to want the giver more than his gifts. How much more blessed will you be, he asks, when he gives you himself?

That is why this wage cannot be cut into shares. What God holds out to the labourer of the eleventh hour is himself, and he has no smaller self to give the latecomer. The man who thinks he has been paid short has not yet looked at what is in his hand.

Saint Paul has looked. In the second reading he is the labourer those grumblers might have been. Few have borne more of the day's burden, and he writes as a prisoner, in chains. His wage is within reach: "to die is gain"; to be with Christ is "a thing by far the better." And he is willing to stay at his work: "to abide still in the flesh is needful for you." The grumblers reckon their hours against the latecomers. Paul adds hours for their sake. He can, because for him the wage was never a sum: "To me, to live is Christ". Whoever has Christ already loses nothing when Christ is generous to someone else.

Saint John Chrysostom says that this parable is spoken to two kinds of people. It is spoken to those who came to God early, "that they may not be proud, neither reproach those called at the eleventh hour". And it is spoken to those who come late, "that they may learn that it is possible even in a short time to recover all." Both kinds are here today.

Many of us were hired at dawn. Baptized as infants, we have kept the faith through long years, and it has cost us something. Thank God for every hour of it. But long service has a temptation of its own, and it is the evil eye. It wakes when a man who mocked the Church for forty years is reconciled on his deathbed; when someone who has carried none of our burdens is given everything we have been given. Something in us begins to keep accounts.

Chrysostom is certain that there is no such grumbling among the saints: heaven, he says, "is pure from envy and jealousy." So the murmur in this parable is no report from heaven. It is set before us now, while we can still be healed of it.

And some part of us may still be standing in the market-place. We are here, and yet there is a confession put off for years, a wrong never set right, a call from God that we are keeping for later. Do not reason that the eleventh hour pays as well as the

first. Augustine saw that reasoning coming. The householder has promised you a denarius if you come at the eleventh hour, he said; but whether you will live even to the seventh, no one has promised you. "Why then dost thou put off him that calleth thee, certain as thou art of the reward, but uncertain of the day?"

Look, last, at how this Mass prays. The antiphon the Missal sets at its entrance is spoken in God's own voice. Before anyone has asked him for anything, he names himself the salvation of his people, and promises to hear them from whatever trouble they cry out of. The psalm takes him at his word: "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him". All of them: the one who has called for seventy years, and the one who calls today for the first time. Then, in the opening prayer, we spoke to the God who has made his whole law rest on the love of himself and of our neighbour. We asked that those who keep his commandments may come to eternal life. We did not present a bill. We asked. The keeping and the arriving both stood inside a prayer.

Before this Mass ends another line will form here. Those who bore the burden of the day will stand with those who came at the eleventh hour. Each receives the same Lord Jesus, who gave himself for us in his death and rising: the pledge of that one wage. Having received him, we ask to hold in our lives what we have received in these mysteries.

So carry one thing out of the door with you. This week someone will be given a good that looks to you unearned: a mercy, a welcome, a second chance. When it happens, hear the householder say to you, gently, "Friend, I do thee no wrong". Then do what the grumblers could not do. Be glad of it. And look at what is in your own hand. It bears the image of the King. What more do we seek?

Note on Sources and Delivery

Audience and occasion. An adult parish assembly, at the Mass of the Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A: *Dominica XXV “per annum”* of the *Roman Missal*, Third Edition, for the dioceses of the United States, with no. 133 of the *Lectionary for Mass*, for the occurrence of 20 September 2026.

Length and pace. The spoken body runs to 1,463 words: about 11.3 minutes at 130 words a minute, 11.7 at 125, and 12.2 at 120. That is arithmetic on the word count; no speaker has delivered these words and no delivery has been timed. The prose was read through in full for sense, sentence length and ease of speech, silently and not aloud.

Relation to the reviewed interpretations. The argument preached is the third of the expansive study’s three interpretations of this Mass, *Because I Am Good: The Wage as Gift and the Giver as Reward*, joined to the second, *Seek the Lord While He May Be Found: The Day as a Human Life*, from which come Chrysostom’s two kinds of hearer and Augustine’s answer to delay. Both take the householder as God, the denarius as eternal life, and “my thoughts are not your thoughts” as a word about mercy. Where they differ the speech keeps the difference: for Chrysostom no one murmurs in the kingdom and the complaint is a device of the story, so the murmur is applied to the hearers and not to the saved. Augustine’s sentence that the saints differ in brightness and are equal in living for ever stands beside the claim that the wage cannot be divided. Each Father is credited only with what he says of his own passage. Identifying the parable’s wage with God’s gift of himself joins Jerome on the coin to Augustine on Psalm 144:18; it is the study’s synthesis. Other editorial connections include the application of Isaiah’s contrast to the labourers’ arithmetic and of the murmur to the hearers now; the psalm’s two words describing the householder’s two dealings, Paul adding hours where the murmurers reckon theirs; the Collect’s keeping and arriving standing inside a prayer; and those hired at different hours receiving the same food at Communion. These connections are drawn from the texts’ wording; no Father makes them. Left to the studies are the first interpretation, the ages of the world; the saying on first and last, on which Augustine, Chrysostom and Jerome differ; the Alleluia verse, with what Augustine and Chrysostom each say of Acts 16:14; the Prayer over the Offerings; and the two Communion antiphons.

Texts quoted, and their route. Scripture is quoted in the Douay–Rheims version as revised by Bishop Challoner, a public-domain study translation, at Mt 20:12, 13–14 and 15, Isa 55:7–8, Ps 144:8, 17 and 18 (Psalm 145 as the *Lectionary* numbers it) and Phil 1:21, 23 and 24. It is not the English proclaimed at Mass, which is that of the *Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America* and is not reproduced. The Entrance Antiphon, the Collect and the Prayer after Communion are described after the study’s descriptions of the Latin of the *Missale Romanum*; the descriptions are not translations and are not the prayers’ words. Augustine’s *Sermo* 87 and Chrysostom’s homily are quoted in the English of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Jerome, Aquinas and Augustine’s *Enarrationes* are reported without quotation marks, in English that renders the Latin the study prints; Augustine’s sentence on the psalm rests on the electronic Latin text of augustinus.it alone.

Exact loci. Augustine, “I have paid thee what I agreed for . . . to bestow a gift”: *Sermo* 87.4; the denarius as eternal life, and the saints unequal in brightness and equal in living for ever: 87.6; against delay, “certain as thou art of the reward, but uncertain of the day”: 87.8. Augustine on calling in truth, *quanto beatior eris, cum seipsum tibi dederit?*: *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 144.22. Chrysostom, “that place is pure from envy and jealousy”: *Homilies on Matthew* 64.3; the two kinds of hearer: 64.4. Jerome, *Denarius figuram regis habet . . . imaginem et similitudinem meam, and non tam ipse plus accipere, quam alium nihil accipere desideras*: *Commentarii in Matthaeum* III, PL 26, col. 142. Aquinas, *nequam est proprie qui de bonitate dolet*: *Super Matthaeum* c. 20, lect. 1, p. 262; *vos ultionem cogitatis, ego misericordiam*: *Super Isaiam* c. 55, p. 556. That the first reading is chosen in relation to the Gospel: *Ordo lectionum Missae, Praenotanda* 106. Paul a prisoner: Phil 1:7, 13. Christ’s death and rising: Mt 20:17–19, the Passion prediction immediately after the parable, and Jn 10:17–18, the Good Shepherd discourse; both belong to the study’s biblical context.

References

- *Missale Romanum*, editio typica tertia (Typis Vaticanis, 2002), *Dominica XXV “per annum”*.
- *Ordo lectionum Missae*, editio typica altera (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981): *Praenotanda* 106; no. 133, *Dominica vigesima quinta*, Year A.
- *Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America*, second typical edition, vol. I, no. 133, as witnessed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Liturgical Calendar* 2026, pp. 5 and 38, and its page of readings for 20 September 2026, <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/092026.cfm>.
- The Holy Bible, Douay–Rheims version, revised by Bishop Richard Challoner (Project Gutenberg text): Ps 144:8, 17–18; Isa 55:6–9; Mt 20:1–19; Jn 10:17–18; Phil 1:7, 13, 20–24.
- St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 64.3–4, trans. G. Prevost, rev. M. B. Riddle, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1st ser., vol. 10 (CCEL electronic text).
- St Augustine, *Sermo* 87 (Sermon 37 on the New Testament Lessons), sections 4, 6 and 8, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1st ser., vol. 6 (CCEL electronic text).
- St Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 144.22, in the Latin text of https://www.augustinus.it/latino/esposizioni_salmi/.
- St Jerome, *Commentarii in Matthaem* III, on 20:1–16 (Migne, PL 26, Paris, 1845, col. 142).
- St Thomas Aquinas, *Super Evangelium Matthaei* c. 20, lect. 1, in *Opera*, editio altera Veneta, vol. 3 (Venice: Bettinelli, 1745), p. 262; *Expositio super Isaiam ad litteram* c. 55, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 14 (Parma: Fiacadori, 1863), p. 556.

Last revised (UTC): 2026-10-01T22:25:46Z

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