

Fr. Curtis Miller September 19-20, 2020 Homily for the 25th Sun. of Ordinary Time

What do the emperor Constantine, the writer Oscar Wilde, and the actor John Wayne all have in common? They all converted to Catholicism on their deathbeds. Constantine came from a long line of pagan emperors, but he had a miraculous vision of Christ's cross before he won a battle. In response, he legalized Christianity, but didn't convert himself until his final illness. Oscar Wilde had been fascinated with Catholicism for years, but he lived a life at odds with the Church's teachings. He once quipped that his Anglican Church just had respectable members; only the Catholic Church accepted both saints and sinners, like himself. On his deathbed, he too asked to be received into the Church. John Wayne was married three times, but always to Catholic women, and their children were all raised Catholic. One grandson even became a priest. But he always resisted becoming Catholic, saying he was too busy to practice the faith, and probably also knowing that his multiple marriages violated the Church's teachings. Yet as he lay dying of cancer, he asked that a priest come to baptize him in the hospital.

When we hear stories like this, we might be tempted to think, "That's the way to do it. Live your life however you want, regardless of whether it follows God's commandments. Enjoy worldly power, fame, and pleasure. And then, just before you die, repent and start following God's way." When we hear today's Gospel parable, about the vineyard workers who just worked a little bit at the end of the day getting paid the same amount as those who labored for the whole day, we might be tempted to think the same. Or perhaps we think that it doesn't seem fair that all the workers get the same wage. But it's a mistake to think this way.

Yes, it is true that God gives the same reward of eternal life to those who have served Him all their lives and those who convert on their deathbeds. But we should not be jealous of those who came to faith later, nor should we look down upon them. God is extravagantly generous in bestowing His blessings. This is a cause for rejoicing, not jealousy. God, like the vineyard owner in the parable, pays the promised wage to those who served the longest. He is not cheating them, just being generous to the others.

It's also important to remember that none of us can earn God's blessings and eternal life. It is a gift too expensive for any of us to afford or earn through our own labors. So while it may be true that the latecomers didn't earn the reward, neither did those who worked from the beginning. God is being generous to everyone.

So why bother spending more of our lives serving God and following Him commandments? Because to love and serve God is its own reward. We shouldn't look enviously upon those who live sinful lives, resentful that they seem to get more pleasure out of a sinful life, while we labor under heavy burdens to serve God. The sinner, though he seems happy, is actually empty inside, otherwise he would not need to commit those sinful actions so as to sooth or cover up that emptiness. In contrast, the faithful Christian,

is able to rejoice and be glad, even when suffering persecution or making sacrifices. That is because serving God and being close to Him is itself the greatest blessing.

Also, those workers who labored in the vineyard all day should not be envious of those who waited around all day, because the first workers were spared the long anxiety of wondering if they would be able to find a job and the depression that comes from feeling useless or unable to provide for one's family. Those who waited in the marketplace all day were not on vacation; they were suffering from want of work. Those who worked the whole day had the privilege of being engaged in productive work, and of being close to the Master.

Another reason that we should want to serve the Lord for as long as we can, instead of putting it off to the end of our lives is that by serving God, we increase our capacity to receive His love. St. Therese [patron of this church] gives a beautiful analogy for this truth. Imagine a large pitcher, a medium glass, and a tiny thimble. If they are all filled with water, they have all received their fill and lack nothing. However, it is undeniable that the large pitcher holds the most water. So it is with the spiritual life. God will pour out His love upon each and every one of us. However, we will only be able to receive as much love as we have the capacity to receive. If we have kept our hearts small and selfish, then we will only be able to receive a little love. But if we have expanded our hearts by selflessly serving God and our neighbors, then we will be like that large pitcher, filled to the brim with God's love.

The other problem with putting off serving God until a deathbed conversion is that we cannot be sure about when the end of our life will come. We have to be ready for it at all times, knowing neither the day nor the hour when we will be called to make an accounting of our lives before the judgment seat of God.

St. Augustine had a sinful youth before his conversion. He lamented not loving God sooner, saying, "Late have I loved You, beauty every ancient, ever new, late have I loved You." He regretted not loving God sooner, and wasting all those years on worldly pursuits that left him feeling empty. Only in God did Augustine experience true joy. We can experience that joy too, if we choose to love and serve God for as long as we can.