

A Sermon for Septuagesima, February 1, 2026
The Epistle, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 - The Gospel, St. Matthew 20:1-16
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The paradox of grace and labor

Septuagesima is the first of three Sundays in the season of “pre-Lent.” It means “seventieth day.” Next Sunday is Sexagesima, which means “sixtieth day.” Then comes Quinquagesima, which means “fiftieth day.” These titles are symbolic numbers that begin the countdown to Easter. Only Quinquagesima is accurate, being exactly fifty days before Easter.

Pre-Lent marks a change in focus. From Advent through Epiphany, we focused on the Incarnation and the ways Jesus is revealed as the Son of God. Today we begin to look forward to the Resurrection and to the way of the Cross that leads us there. Pre-Lent is a time to prepare for the Lenten fast.

The gospel for Septuagesima teaches that it is never too late to be saved. The laborers hired at the eleventh hour got the same pay as those who worked all day. Thus, a person who comes to faith at the end of life will receive the same gift of salvation as the person who had life-long faith. In contrast, the epistle warns that it is never too late to be lost. St. Paul says, “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27). This suggests that a believer can fall short of the goal of the resurrection by becoming unfaithful.

Taken together, the lessons highlight the paradox of grace and labor. Salvation is a free gift that requires us to work hard. How can this be? A closer look at the Bible’s teaching about sin and salvation helps us to resolve this tension. After the creation of Adam, Genesis 2:15 says “The LORD God took Adam and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.” Before the sin of Genesis 3, God gave Adam work to do. After the Genesis 3 sin God said to Adam, “Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you” (Gen. 3:17-19).

Two things can be observed here. First, the human vocation always involved work. Second, the consequence of sin is that work became hard and fruitless. The difference was the human relationship with God. Before the fall, Adam lived in communion with God—“in the Spirit.” His labor was fulfilling and fruitful. Sin severed the natural relationship of communion with God. Work became toilsome and fruitless. This is the background for the New Testament teaching that we are saved by grace and there is nothing we can do to earn salvation. Our work in the state of separation from God cannot produce anything that is eternal—“thorns and thistle it shall bring forth for you.”

This can be illustrated by two Old Testament stories. In the story of The Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, the people worked to build a city that would unify them and keep from being scattered—a goal that was notable for being the opposite of God’s command to be fruitful and fill the earth. They said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen. 11:4). The project failed because “The LORD

scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city” (Gen. 11:8). Their labor apart from God was fruitless.

In contrast, in Genesis 6 God commanded Noah to build a large ship—a task that required a lot of work. But Noah had found favor with God, and Noah built the boat according to God’s design. Noah’s labor was fruitful. It contributed to God’s new creation.

The Implications for the Christian Life

These observations from Genesis inform our understanding of grace and work. There is nothing we can do, by human effort alone, to solve the problem of sin. Jesus did for us what we cannot do. We receive the gift of salvation in baptism through faith. However, this gift restores us to communion with God, and God gives us work to do in his vineyard. We are given spiritual gifts. Our faithful use of those gifts—our labor in Christ—is essential to the health of Christ’s Body. In Christ, our work in the Spirit can produce eternal things.

The epistle is a warning about how our behavior impacts others. Some Christians in Corinth had qualms about eating meat that had been offered in sacrifice to idols—a common thing in the ancient world. Other Christians in Corinth felt free to eat this meat because they knew Jesus was the true Lord of all things. Those who felt free to eat the meat offended those who did not. Paul criticized the idol-meat eaters notion of freedom. Freedom must be governed by love. We must be free, if love requires, not to do things that offend our brothers and sisters in Christ—even if the thing itself can be justified.

This criticism resonates in our culture. We often exalt individual freedom over the greater good of the group. The individualist’s anthem is, “I did it my way.” But true Christian freedom is not freedom to do whatever I want to do. True freedom is the freedom to do God’s will in all circumstances.

This requires self-control and a right definition of freedom. There is a distinction between genuine freedom, on the one hand, and compulsion and addiction on the other. We are not free to do something if we are not also free to not do it. As 2 Peter 2:19 says, “They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.”

This helps us understand the practice of fasting. True fasting is the practice of saying no to things that threaten to enslave us. The goal is the develop true freedom. The “no” of fasting is always in service to a greater “yes” to God and others. The errors of fasting result from focusing only on the no.

Salvation means being restored to communion with God. Our life of prayer is the foundational work of this restored relationship. Fasting is an essential part of our prayer. We practice saying no in order to cultivate our freedom to say yes in love. Often, the refusal to fast is merely a sign of captivity. People claim that they don’t have to fast when they really mean that they are unwilling and unable to say no. Their claim to freedom hides their underlying captivity.

This is why our practice of prayer and fasting must be assessed by our growth in true freedom and the ability to love. This assessment provides warning and counsel as we begin to think about Lent. The warning is not to make Lent a list of rules to follow in the state of being the Bible calls “the flesh.” This turns Lent into the fruitless labor of fallen man. The counsel is to use Lent as an opportunity to cultivate genuine freedom. What things stand in the way of a closer relationship with God? What attachments hinder my ability to love as I have been loved by Christ? Consider how you will practice saying no to those things in planned ways, and, instead, will practice saying yes to God and others through prayer and good works.

We won’t do it perfectly, but if we embrace the spiritual exercise of fasting “in the Spirit” our labor will be fruitful. We will grow in freedom and love during the coming season. As Jesus said, “I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (Jn. 15:16).