

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday after Trinity
July 7, 2019

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Throughout the Old Testament descriptions of Almighty God portray Him as a *judge*, invariably a detached and almost impersonal judge. The stereotype comes down to modern times, with bewigged and be-robed justices still the custom in many countries. In more recent times the judge has become involved in what we call “creative sentencing”, which has rehabilitation as an end goal. But in Old Testament times, the prevalent view of a judge, and of God Himself, was far more formal and *formidable*.

Our Lord Jesus broke up that prevalent concept. In all of His descriptions of what God is like, Jesus portrayed Someone Who is *involved*, *committed*, and *watchful*. We think of the parable of the prodigal son. Jesus says this is what God is like.

We do not know anything about the seventy disciples who were sent out on a missionary journey. (By the way, if you want to get Biblical fundamentalists into a cat fight, ask whether there were seventy or seventy-two sent out!) But in this gospel incident Our Lord Jesus gives a pep talk to the missionaries before they set out. And Jesus gives the impression Almighty God is like a farmer who has a harvest to get in. He is recruiting the help of those who profess loyalty to him. The farmer has one concern: the harvest has great potential. But when the crop is ready it must be gathered quickly. It can only be gathered quickly if there are enough laborers who are willing to work hard and fast. Our Lord’s parables teach us about Almighty God and the Kingdom. And so if we think of this farmer we will begin to understand a few things about Our Heavenly Father and His work.

A farm easily represents the world in its variations. Even before any human intervention, the farmland is an ecological system with rich soil, thin soil, rocky hillsides, perhaps a river or stream, several types and directions of runoff, prevalent wind conditions, and areas of thick woods. The good farmer commits himself to being the guardian and director of this ecological system. He decides what land to clear, how to match crops with soil, water, and sun conditions. He decides when to plant and when *not* to plant. He knows how to rejuvenate tired soil. He keeps an eye on the weather and seasons. Rather than buying new, he repairs his old equipment, keeping machinery lubricated and blades sharpened. In all these ways the good farmer maximizes the land’s use and productivity.

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Jesus describes God as a farmer and that all of this farming activity can be applied as an analogy to the Kingdom of God and its relation to souls. God is repeatedly planting, harvesting, rehabilitating, and salvaging *souls*. Like the farmer who rises early each day, Almighty God has much to do. In this way God's Own Son gives us a vastly different impression of Almighty God than the Old Testament concept of a divine judge.

The Lord's teaching also involves the recruited laborers in a far more intimate way than the conventional "I hire-you work-I pay" transaction. In Brighton you used to see men standing on street corners waiting to climb aboard a truck for a day's work. That happens daily around the world and there is no such thing as a long-standing relationship between the boss and the worker. But when the seventy return and rejoice with their Master, Jesus gave thanks that their names are found written in The Book of Life! Results and success do not define the spiritual life of a Christian disciple, but what these souls *are* by adoption and grace! The chief end is not to live a good and useful life. The chief end is *to be approved by God*.

So Jesus says "Rejoice not that the spirits are subject unto you, but rejoice that your names are written in Heaven." Success is not the measure of our worth. Our redemption, and our servant ministry, are *a seamless garment*. The saving of our souls by means of the sacrifice of Christ is our first responsibility. But those who have been reborn in Christ do not hoard salvation as if it were a product we can place on a shelf and get back to business as usual! No. Christians are those who have learned to trust God with their lives, just as the seventy did, and that they are *acceptable to Him*.