

The First and The Last

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Scriptural Text: Matthew 20:1-16, ESV

This parable is a very interesting parable. It is one which causes many commentators to scratch their head over its meaning. We will attempt to get to the root of it in this study. Jesus is describing aspects about the Kingdom of Heaven to us. He wants us to know what life is like in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Laborers in the Vineyard

¹ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

We have read the story. A landowner had extra work which needed to be done in his vineyard. He undoubtedly had regular servants, but this likely was the time of the year, such as harvest, where he needed extra hands. He went into the village to the marketplace where day laborers hoped to find jobs.

These workers, these day laborers, were the most at risk in this 1st Century economy. They had no steady work. If they did not find a job each day their family might not eat that day. At six o'clock in the morning the landowner meets with the laborers and discusses their pay. They come to an agreement and a contract is written for a denarius a day. This is a very generous wage.

By nine in the morning the landowner realizes there is more work in the vineyard to be done than he has laborers. He goes back to the village and he finds more day laborers to hire them. But, this time he does not make a contract with them. He simply says, “At the end of the day I will give to you what is right and what is good.” In essence he is saying, “Trust me.” They trust him and without a contract they go to work in his vineyard.

He does the same thing at noon and at five in the evening and then six o'clock comes on. At six o'clock the work day closes and the quitting bell rings and the day laborers line up to receive their wages. The owner does something incredibly interesting. He talks with the foreman of the crew and he gives to him special instructions, “I know you usually pay the people who arrive early in the day first, but this time I want you to reverse that. This time I want you to pay the people who arrived at five and who have only worked one hour today. I want you to pay them first and I want you to pay them a denarius. Then pay those who arrived at three in the afternoon, then those at noon, then those at nine, and last I want you to pay the people we hired at six in the morning and with whom we agreed to a contract.”

The foreman must have been a bit shocked by that, but he was a good foreman and he does not argue with the boss. He lines up the workers, from the last to the first, and he begins paying each one a denarius. As these workers who have been contracted at six in the morning, and who are waiting in line, they observe those who arrived at five and only worked one hour received a full denarius. This is amazing and more than generous. Their expectations begin to rise and they think, “Wow! The owner is so generous, he is paying the workers who worked only one hour a full

denarius. What will he give to us, we who endured the grueling hours of the heat of the day and who worked for a full twelve hours?”

When it came time for them to receive their pay they, too, received a denarius and they are grumpy. Their expectations are not met, “What? This is not fair and it is not just.” They point to the men who are still standing there, enjoying the generosity of the owner, and they said, “You have made them equal to us! We are the ones who labored twelve hours and who bore the scorching heat of the day.”

This is where the story gets really interesting. The owner takes one of these workers aside and he says, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did we not write a contract at six in the morning that you would work for me all day long and I would pay you a very generous wage, a full denarius, for today’s work? Is that not what we agreed upon? Take, then, what is yours. I am giving to you willingly and freely. Take what is yours and go your way. But, I desire to give the last workers the same amount of money I give to you. Is it unjust for me to be generous with my own money? Is your eye evil because I am good?”

When my son Jackson was five or six, I asked him, “What is your favorite story in all of the Bible?” I expected him to say, “David and Goliath,” “Daniel in the lion’s den,” or “Jesus feeding the five thousand with the five loaves and two fish.” But, that is not what Jackson said. At six years old, he shocked me. He said it was the story of the laborers who were all paid the same wage. I had to look that up in the Bible! I asked him this week why he thought that was his favorite story ten years ago. He said it was because it showed, “God is generous and He is able to give to everyone equally because everything is His. God can give generous grace to anyone at anytime.”

I loved that response. I loved that Jackson, as a child, listened to that story differently than I listened to that story as an adult. A six year old boy, Jackson, identified with the workers who came at five o’clock and he said, “This is awesome! God is so generous He gives to the workers who arrive at five o’clock this equal wage and great benefit.”

Do you know who I identify with when I read this story? I identify with the workers who arrived at six o’clock. As I read this story I grumble a little that this does not seem fair and it does not seem right. What is the good of this story? I almost do not like it. Do you know why I do not like this story? It is because I do not read this story with the heart of a child. I read this story with the heart of a proud man.

How do you listen to this story? How does this story hit you? Do you think like a humble child and say, “How awesome it is to be one of those guys where were blessed so much by this generous owner,” or do you think like a proud adult, “How unfair those workers worked twelve hours a day and they got the same amount of money as those who worked so little.”

This is convicting. Jesus intentionally challenges us and our proud, adult perspective to teach us we must become like little children if we are to enjoy the Kingdom of God. Many commentators consider this parable to be one of the most difficult to understand. It is a curious one. We meet really good people and they say really different things as to what this parable means.

In order to understand this simple story, I believe it is absolutely vital we observe the principle Matthew writes at the beginning of the story and at the end. It is like two book covers between which he sandwiches the story. Matthew records Jesus as saying, in Matthew 19,

³⁰ *“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”*

Then Jesus launches this story. Jesus needs to get this principle established, but it is not enough and as though we would miss the principle, Matthew records, in Chapter 20, after Jesus tells the story,

¹⁶ *“So the last will be first, and the first last.”*

The key to understanding this parable is to understand the principle which acts as the front and back cover of this story book. It is a paradoxical principle of the Kingdom, but what does it mean? It is a simple statement: The last will be first and the first will be last. What does it mean to be “first”? What does it mean to be “last”?

I believe Jesus is teaching us if we strive to be first in this world we will end up being last in the Kingdom of Heaven. If we willingly pursue being last in this world, we will become first in God's Kingdom. At the culmination of God's Kingdom there will be a great reversal taking place. Those who are first in this world will become last and those who are last in this world will become exalted and they become first. This is the essence of this story.

The context of the story is very important for us to catch this. In the previous chapter we read little children are brought to Jesus and He lays His hands on them and He begins to pray for them,

¹³ Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, ¹⁴ but Jesus said, *"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."* ¹⁵ And he laid his hands on them and went away.

But, the disciples rebuked the people to stop bringing the children to their "important Master Jesus." Children are people who have no clout in this world. They have no political influence, no financial means to benefit others, no skills with which to trade, no powerful friends, no subterfuge to scheme. They are just simply humble, needy little boys and girls who depend upon others to care for their daily need. The disciples rebuke these little rascals, "Jesus is important. Get out of the way."

But, Jesus tells the disciples to let the little children come to Him because the disciples do not understand such is the Kingdom of Heaven. These are the kind of people who own and inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. He is telling his disciples to treat the little ones with special honor. The little ones are the last in this world, are they not? They are not climbing any social ladder because they are too small to do that. They are not climbing a business stratus to gain power. They are the very last in this world and Jesus is saying they will be first.

Then Matthew continues to tell the story of this very rich man who is a great representative of the first kind of people in the kingdom of this world. He is a very wealthy guy with much power and influence and many resources in his hands. He asks Jesus,

^{16b} "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"

This is a man who has been chasing after being first-in-this-world for a long time and he has been very successful at it. He has not only chased after being first-in-this-world, but he has obtained it. Everyone knows it. He has achieved almost every goal and everything the world can possibly give to this man is given to him. After challenging the rich man to look at the Law, the man responds, "Yes, I have obeyed the Law,"

^{19:18b} *"You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*¹

²¹ Jesus said to him, *"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."*

Jesus is telling this man the thing that is keeping him from inheriting the Kingdom of Heaven is that he wants to be first in the kingdom of the world. He must get rid of everything representing his pursuit and passion about achieving greatness in the kingdom of the world because it is in conflict with the Kingdom of Heaven. He must sell it all and give it all away and then he will be able to understand the value of Jesus' Kingdom,

²² When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Here is a young man who asked the right question, "What must I do to have eternal life? How can I get eternal life? I know this world is not all there is and I want that which is eternal." He is given the right and clearest of answers by Jesus, but he makes the wrong decision and he goes away sad.

¹ Exodus 20:12-16, Deuteronomy 5:16-20; Leviticus 19:18

This man had driven so hard to be first in his life and he was so successful at it, he felt as though it was too much to give and too much to lose. He pursued this world with its priority and the world has now enslaved him. He feels as though he is in too deep now to turn away from his life he has earned for himself, in the kingdom of this world, and turn and give himself fully to the Kingdom of God.

This is convicting. Friend, are you there? What if God asks you to become last in this world by throwing away all of the first place trophies you have accumulated. Would you do it? For a person who has only a few, or no, first place trophies, they would do that for sure because it is an easy bargain, but what if you have been pursuing this world and you have been really, really successful, it is tough to give up all the trophies accumulated, the prestige, the power, and the resources.

Jesus makes a comment after the rich man leaves and goes away sad,

²³ And Jesus said to his disciples, *“Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

People who have been so successful, pursued so strongly, and have accomplished so much in becoming first in this world, this is very difficult. Jesus continues,

²⁴ *“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”*

This blows all of their categories away. In their thinking, people are wealthy and have advanced in this world because God has blessed them. If the people God has blessed in this world cannot get into Heaven, who can? This really blows away the rich person because they are used to getting what they want. Who gets front row Super Bowl seats? It is the person who is successful in being first in this world.

Some people say the “eye of the needle” is a little door in the side of the city so the camel must be unloaded and walked through on its knees. I do not believe that is what Jesus is saying. I believe Jesus is saying it is easier for a literal camel to go through the eye of a real needle. How does that happen? It does not! It is impossible! It is not just hard. It is not just difficult. It is absolutely impossible. It cannot happen and that is why the disciples express their surprise,

²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, *“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”*

Beloved, the Gospel of Jesus, the Gospel of the Kingdom, tells us there is not one of us who can do anything to get our self, to get our soul, through the eye of the needle. It is too small and we are too big with sin and self and pride. It is impossible and if we are to enter into the doorway to get into Heaven and into God’s Kingdom, we must become “least”. We must be willing to say, “I am willing to give everything up in order to follow You. This world matters nothing. Your Kingdom is what I am seeking and what I desire. I will humble myself to recognize I have nothing to barter with and nothing to bargain and nothing with which to make a contract.”

Peter is quick to jump in and say, “We did it. We did leave everything to follow You.” Jesus acknowledges what Peter is saying is right, but the principle is not just true for them because by Peter’s response he is beginning to take on some of the first place characteristics, that within the Kingdom he has a special place because he was the “first” to lead. In the Kingdom it is always about being the last. This parable is taught to teach us the kind of attitude necessary in order to enjoy the blessings of God’s Kingdom.

This story reveals four last place attitudes essential for us to embrace if we wish to receive God’s generous blessing in His Kingdom. This story describes “first place” kinds of people and then “last place” kinds of people.

The first place people are represented by those workers hired at six in the morning, making a contract with the owner. The last place kinds of people are all of the other workers hired at nine o’clock, noon, three o’clock, and five o’clock. What are these last place people like? There are four descriptors given.

The first “last place” attitude does not bargain with God, but trusts in His generosity.

The first place workers make a contract with the owner: If we give you this you will give us that in return. The last place workers, in Verses 3 and 4, however, simply trust the generosity of the owner. The owner, of course, represents God. When the Owner says, “You go into the vineyard, too, and work. At the end of the day, whatever is right, I will give to you. There is nothing on paper. Trust Me and trust My generosity.” This is the agreement made with all of the other workers hired that day.

There are two kinds of workers represented. There are “first place” workers who do not work without a labor contract carefully defining wages and “last place” workers who trust the generosity of the Owner. How do you relate to God? Do you continue to bargain with God as though you are within a labor contract, “I will do this for You, God, and You do that for me,” or does God say, “Welcome to My Kingdom, a place of grace. Serve Me and then trust Me in the end. Trust Me to be generous to you.”

Many within the Kingdom still bargain with God. If we are out of a job, we may say, “Lord, if you will give to me a better job, or a job, then I will be able to serve You. I will be able to tithe and then I will be able to do something for Your Kingdom,” “Lord, if you will heal my loved one I will stop sinning. I know I have been sinning and I have been living for this world, but if you heal my loved one, then ...,” “God, if you will get me out of this jam, a really tough spot, I will read my Bible everyday. I will find a place to serve in the church. I will ...” Such bargains ask for a contract with God, for God to fairly compensate us for our work, and we do not ask God to be generous.

Beloved, we need grace and we need mercy. This is the foundation of the Gospel, that we come to God, not as workers who can make God our debtor, that God is somehow in debt to us and He owes us something, but we come as paupers. We have nothing in our hands to bring, but simply to the cross we cling.

Bargaining with God is wrong for two reasons. First, bargaining attempts to make God our debtor and God is never in the position of owing us anything. We are always indebted to Him. He gave us His own Son in order to rescue us from the mess we have placed ourselves. He is never our debtor.

Secondly, bargaining deceives us into thinking we deserve God’s blessing. We attach great value to our own work, sacrifices, and righteousness. The truth is we have all sinned and have fallen short of the bargain of God’s glory.

First place people proudly desire to earn their own way with God, to receive what is due them from Him. Last place people realize what is due to them is only condemnation and what we really need is His mercy and grace. Jesus uses this parable to illustrate the proper attitude we must pursue if we are to be honored within God’s Kingdom.

The second “last place” attitude is: do not envy others, but fix our eyes on Jesus. Why do we suppose the eleventh-hour guys were paid first? It was so the “first place” guys could see they were receiving a full denarii. The Owner wanted to create this conflict because He knew there was something wrong with the attitude of the “first place” people. That is why Jesus set up the story this way. It was so they would be tempted to compare and recognize how wrong and evil it is to have such comparisons. It is easy for us to make comparisons as we see how God blesses others.

If we focus upon others in comparing our self to them, we will become self-righteous and we will become indignant and grumble against the Owner. We will believe God has somehow been unfair to us because we will see how God grants such blessing upon the lives of others. There is a warning: the “first place” people, those pursuing first place in this world, always believe others receive too much and they receive too little. This bleeds into their soul towards a critical spirit and ultimate bitterness toward God,

^{10a} *“Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more...”*

The Holman Christian Standard Version uses the word “they assumed”. The New International Version perhaps says it best, “they expected”. Even though they had made a contract with God they expected much, much more. The application is: if we find our self envious of others’ blessings and we become bitter toward God for being unfair, the problem is never with God’s justice, but the problem is with our “first place” proud heart. That is where we must begin.

When our boys were little, we cautioned about how much sugar they were to consume, so I would divide a can of soda for them. First, I would divide it out, but guess what happened? No matter what I did, both thought they were getting the short end. After a while I decided one would divide the soda and the other would choose. That, also, created a problem because as long as our focus is on what the other person is getting we will always feel as though we are not getting what is right and what is due us. That is the heart of a “first place” person.

How do we conquer this sin of comparison? We must keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus. We do not compare our self to others; we look to Jesus. He sets the standard and He is so very generous as we trust Him.

Billy Graham was asked by Diane Sawyer, “How would you like to be remembered?” There was a certain sadness which came across his face and he said, “I would like to hear the Lord say to me, ‘Well done my good and faithful servant.’” Then he looked down and said, “But, I do not think he will.” Billy Graham’s answer betrayed this “last place” attitude, “I am the recipient of God’s mercy. I have earned nothing. I deserve nothing. If I hear those words it is only because God, in His grace, has been merciful to me.” Billy Graham, of all people, can say, “I have labored all day long in the heat of the sun. These other folks do not seem as though they have done much for the Kingdom of God.” If there is anyone I can think of who could say that kind of statement it would be Billy Graham. He does not know whether or not he will hear God say that to him because he realizes he is simply a recipient of God’s mercy and God’s grace.

Earlier, in Matthew, the Apostle Matthew records Jesus as saying,

^{5:3} “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

That is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Do you want to be in the Kingdom of Heaven? Do you want to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven? Then you must have a last-place-poor-in-spirit-heart-attitude. Fixing our eyes upon Jesus helps us to keep a right perspective regarding our performance. It protects us from envy. It provides us with strength. It provides us with motivation to keep moving forward in our service, not because we know we are giving God such labors to observe for something in return, but because we know the Owner is incredibly generous.

The “last place” people have no contract with God. There is no envy of others.

The third “last place” attitude is: they do not demand their rights, but they enjoy God’s goodness,

¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you.’”

This is where the conflict gets interesting. These workers were relating to the Owner on the basis of their performance. God is sovereign in the distribution of His blessing. He has sovereign grace. He has the right. He is always fair. He is always just, but He is sovereign. That means He does not consult with us.

Commentator Alfred Plummer writes, “God keeps His promises to those who serve Him, but He remains Master in His own world. He is the Sole Judge of what each servant ought to receive. No one receives less than what has been promised, but many receive more. And, in these uncoveted awards there are that in a man’s eyes which seems to be unfair, but God sees not as man sees and shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?”

I talk with a friend recently about this parable and asked, “What do you believe this story means? What is the message?” He responded, “You get what you get.” That is a pretty good lesson in life. God is sovereign. He is always just and He is always fair and with us He is more than generous, but you get what you get and God is sovereign over that and “last place” people rejoice in God’s generosity.

But, the truth is, God does not treat everyone the same. That is an absolute, undeniable fact. There are some children born into families who are secure. Their parents have great jobs, they love each other, and they love God. What a blessing that is, but there are other children born into this world whose parents care nothing at all for them and their bellies are hungry.

But, God is sovereign in His grace. That is the message of this story. We can trust Him. The last will be first and the first will be last. God has an eternal plan to unleash His grace on those who humble themselves before Him. This world does not have the last say, but if we demand our rights from God, as “first place” people do, we will become a complaining, grumbling Christian. We will overvalue our contribution and undervalue God’s goodness. All blessings from God rest upon God’s goodness and not upon our merit. Is it not lawful for God to do whatever He wants with His own stuff to be generous.

The fourth “last place” attitude is: do not pursue being first in the kingdom of this world, but pursue God’s Kingdom. This is the heart of this whole parable and certainly the heart of the bookends,

¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

In other words our life is not about us, but it is about God. As Christians we know that to be true, yet the challenge is to live like it. In Matthew 6, Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount and this same kind of idea,

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Jesus is teaching being anxious about what to eat or what to wear is for the idolaters who are outside of the Kingdom. They seek these things because this world is all there is to them. It is all they know. But, we have a heavenly Father who knows we need them so we are to live as Kingdom people and not as people who are striving to be first in this world which is passing away.

Why would it be wise to seek the Kingdom of God first? Why is that the wise route to go? I believe Satan often tempts us to believe it is wisest to pursue being first in this world and we become clouded and darkened in our understanding of what life is all about.

Why is it wise for us to seek first the Kingdom of God? It is because God is real and His Kingdom is eternal. If God were not real and His Kingdom is not eternal this message would make no sense whatsoever, but God is real and His Kingdom is eternal and that is the reason why John catches this theme in his letter,

¹ John 2:15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

Remember the rich man who came to Jesus and asked, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” What he wanted to do was to hold onto his pursuit of all the things important in this world and make it his priority, but he also wanted the Kingdom of God with it. Jesus answered him by saying, “You cannot do it. It is impossible. You must choose. As long as you are holding on to be first place in this world, you will be last in the Kingdom of God and you will loose. You must choose.”

Moody Bible Institute graduates John and Betty Stam served as missionaries to China. In 1934, the Stams were in their twenties and they had a three month old girl. They freshly arrived on the mission field in China and they believed they were safe, but a revolution occurred. The communists came into their village and grabbed them. During the first night of captivity John was able to scribble this note, “My wife, baby, and myself are today in the hands of communist bandits. Whether we will be released or not no one knows. May God be magnified in our bodies whether

by life or by death.” Shortly after he wrote this note John and Betty were assassinated. The baby, Helen, was miraculously kept safe.

One of the officers responsible for their death ended up becoming a Deputy Minister in the Department of Agriculture and he lived a prosperous life to 1966. Think of this for a moment. These missionaries are giving their lives for Christ and they die in their twenties. There is a baby without parents. The man who committed the crime rose in this world. Who do you believe made the right choice? If God were not real and His Kingdom was not eternal we would say, “I want to be that guy. That is the path I want to choose.” But, if you say, “God is real and His Kingdom is eternal and I want to be like John and Betty Stam. I want to be last in this world. If it means losing my life in my twenties, I will do that because God is generous and He is gracious. The last become first and the first become last and that is what I know and that is the way I am going to live.”

May God give us grace to apply this striking truth in our life today for the sake of His Kingdom and for the joy of our soul forever.