

“The Last Shall Be First”  
(Matthew 20:1-16)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. We saw last week,
  - a. That to inherit eternal life
  - b. We must be willing to give up
  - c. Everything we have to the Lord.
  - d. Everything must be His.
  - e. As John Gerstner once said,
    - (i) You can't have so much as a nickel
    - (ii) That you claim to be yours and be saved.
    - (iii) It's all or nothing.
2. But that's exactly what every Christian
  - a. Will be willing to pay.
    - (i) You will do this because you love the Lord.
    - (ii) And because of what you'll gain:
      - (a) If you give up your family
      - (b) You will gain a much larger one.
      - (c) If you give up your possessions
      - (d) You will gain many more times as much here,
      - (e) Along with persecutions,
      - (e) And eternal life hereafter.
  - b. Don't forget that Jesus isn't saying
    - (i) That you need to liquidate all your assets
      - (a) And give the proceeds to the poor,
      - (b) As He told the rich young ruler.
    - (ii) But He is saying
      - (a) That you must have a loose hold
      - (b) On the things of this world,
      - (c) And be ready to part with some or all
      - (d) At a moment's notice
      - (e) As part of your stewardship to Him.

B. Preview.

1. But then Jesus closed on a particular point –
  - a. One that we'll be looking at for at least a couple of weeks –
  - b. One that will help you gain more of these blessings
    - (i) Because it will help you
    - (ii) Let go of what you have here.

2. Peter pointed out to the Lord
  - a. That the disciples had left everything to follow Him
    - (i) And asked what would be there for them.
    - (ii) Jesus told them their blessings would be many.
  - b. But so that they weren't tempted to become prideful,
    - (i) He added, "But many who are first will be last, and the last, first."
    - (ii) Mark doesn't record what Jesus said next,
    - (iii) But Matthew does.
      - (a) Since this is such an important point
      - (b) I thought we should pause here and consider it,
      - (c) Especially since the Lord will return to this topic
      - (d) In just a few verses.
  - c. Let's consider that this parable is teaching us a lesson in humility.
    - (i) First, that you should be humbled by the fact the Lord calls you into His kingdom at all.
    - (ii) Second, that you haven't done more for Him than you have.
    - (iii) And finally, that the Lord is sovereign over whom you will serve.
  - d. Each of these points comes
    - (i) From different interpretations of this parable.
    - (ii) Only one of the interpretations can be true,
    - (iii) Though all the elements are present.

## II. Sermon.

A. First, you should be humbled by the fact the Lord calls you into His kingdom at all.

### 1. What do we know about this parable?

- a. One thing is that Jesus intends to explain
  - (i) The closing statement of our last passage:
  - (ii) "But many *who are* first will be last, and the last, first" (Mark 10:31).
- b. In Matthew's Gospel, we have exactly the same context:
  - (i) The same events have just taken place
    - (a) The words of Jesus to the rich young ruler,
    - (b) His words to the disciples regarding the cost of discipleship,
    - (c) Peter's words to Him on behalf of the disciples
    - (d) That they had already paid this price,
    - (e) And Jesus' promise to them of a reward.
  - (ii) He also closes with the same words,
    - (a) "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first" (19:30).
    - (b) And He closes this parable with the same words,
    - (c) "So the last shall be first, and the first last" ((20:16).

- c. What He says in between is meant to explain these words.
2. Here are a few other things that seem clear:
- a. The vineyard is the kingdom of heaven.
  - b. The landowner is Jesus Christ.
  - c. The workers are His people.
  - d. The end of the day is end of human history –
    - (i) Judgment Day –
    - (ii) When all will receive rewards or punishments
    - (iii) According to what they've done.
  - e. Each man receives the *same reward*
    - (i) For doing more or less work
    - (ii) In harder or easier situations.
  - f. And the Lord purposely pays the men hired last,
    - (i) To make a point about his justice and generosity –
    - (ii) That He was just to give each what He and they agreed on,
    - (iii) And that He was generous to give those hired later
    - (iv) The same He gave to the first group.
  - g. What exactly was Jesus teaching His disciples?
    - (i) Whatever it is
    - (ii) It must include a lesson in humility.
3. Some believe the Lord was showing us
- a. What the reaction of the Jews would be to the Gentiles
  - b. When He would later call them into His kingdom.
    - (i) The Jews are those called at the earlier hours –
      - (a) Called first by the Lord
      - (b) To labor in His vineyard.
      - (c) This would refer to the call of Abraham
      - (d) And the subsequent patriarchs and generations.
    - (ii) The Gentiles are those called at the later hours.
      - (a) Since they were called later in time,
      - (b) They would not have labored as long,
      - (c) Nor through as many difficulties as the Jews.
    - (iii) As to the fact that those called first grumbled
      - (a) It is true that the Jews had a difficult time
        - (1) Accepting the Gentiles –
        - (2) Especially that they could partake
        - (3) With them in the covenants
        - (4) Without first becoming Jews.

- (b) That was the scuffle that was dealt with
  - (1) At the Jerusalem Council,
  - (2) Where it became clear
  - (3) That the Lord had accepted the Gentiles
  - (4) Through faith in Jesus Christ alone (Acts 15).
- (c) By accepting the Gentiles by faith,
  - (1) He didn't short the Jews
  - (2) Who labored so long under the Ceremonial Law –
  - (3) He gave them exactly what He promised:
  - (4) Salvation through their Messiah by faith –
  - (5) Though it may have looked this way
  - (6) Because the Gentiles didn't have to endure
  - (7) Nearly the hardships the Jews had.
- c. Now this is true,
  - (i) But is this what the Lord
  - (ii) Is teaching through this parable?
  - (iii) That the Jews would become jealous of the Gentiles?
  - (iv) It's certainly possible:
    - (a) We know this is one thing He intended
      - (1) When He turned to the Gentiles –
      - (2) To make the Jews jealous
      - (3) That He might save some (Rom. 11:11)?
    - (b) And it would have the effect
      - (1) Of humbling, at least the Jews,
      - (2) Since they would no longer be able
      - (3) To glory in their privileged position as God's people
      - (4) Since the Gentiles who were called in later
      - (5) Had the same status and privilege they did.
- d. You and I aren't exactly in this position,
  - (i) But we can still learn from it.
  - (ii) Some of us have been Christians for a while,
    - (a) Some of us have had to deal with hardship,
    - (b) Have made great sacrifices,
    - (c) And sometimes we might be tempted
    - (d) To think we're being shorted
    - (e) When someone comes in late in life
    - (f) Doesn't have to deal with the things we have,
    - (g) And enters into the Kingdom.
    - (h) Or when the Lord shows honor to others first
    - (i) When we have worked for so long without it.
  - (iii) If you're ever tempted to think this way, remember:

- (a) You don't deserve the Lord's salvation in the first place –
  - (1) It's purely a gift of His grace.
  - (2) And if you've had a rougher go than others
  - (3) The Lord will compensate you for it in the end –
  - (4) As we'll see in a moment.
- (b) You're not losing out on anything.
  - (1) The Lord isn't shorting you.
  - (2) You would be infinitely blessed
  - (3) Even if you were the very least in the kingdom of God.
- (c) The only way you can avoid
  - (1) These kinds of thoughts and feelings:
  - (2) Is to humble yourself as the Lord is exhorting you.
  - (3) When you really see yourself as the least,
  - (4) Then you'll be more thankful
  - (5) For every blessing the Lord gives you,
  - (6) And the blessings He gives to others.

B. Second, you should be humbled by the fact that you haven't done more for Him than you have.

- 1. Still another view is
  - a. That Jesus is telling us
  - b. That everyone will receive the same reward on Judgment Day.
    - (i) That it doesn't matter how old you are
      - (a) When the Lord calls you –
      - (b) Whether from the womb
      - (c) Or on your deathbed –
    - (ii) That it doesn't matter
      - (a) How much you do for Him in life –
      - (b) Whether you give yourself unreservedly to His service,
      - (c) Or serve Him very little –
    - (iii) That it doesn't matter what sacrifices you make –
      - (a) Whether you give up all your possessions
      - (b) And go to the mission field,
      - (c) Or give up very little
      - (d) And stay at home.
    - (iv) Everyone will receive the same reward.
      - (a) Those who were hired at the first hour
      - (b) And worked through the heat of the day,
      - (c) Received the same amount
      - (d) As those at the eleventh hour
      - (e) Who worked only one.

- (v) On the surface, it does appear
    - (a) That this is what the Lord is teaching.
    - (b) Several years ago,
      - (1) When I was dealing with degrees of reward,
      - (2) One member in the congregation –
      - (3) Who is no longer here –
      - (4) Challenged that teaching
      - (5) By bringing up this passage.
  - c. Is Jesus saying here –
    - (i) That every believer will receive the same reward
    - (ii) Regardless of what they do?
2. This can't be what He means:
- a. He already told the apostles
    - (i) That they would receive a greater reward
    - (ii) Than others for leaving everything and following Him –
    - (iii) That they would sit on twelve thrones
    - (iv) Judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28).
  - b. James and John would soon ask Jesus
    - (i) If they may sit on His right and left –
      - (1) If they could have the places of honor
      - (2) In His kingdom.
    - (ii) Jesus won't deny such places of honor exist
      - (1) But that they are for those
      - (2) Prepared by the Father (Mark 10:40).
  - c. Jesus just told the rich young ruler
    - (i) That if he would sell all his possessions
    - (ii) And give his money to the poor,
    - (iii) He would have treasure in heaven (Matt. 19:21).
    - (iv) Jesus tells us to store up treasure in heaven (6:20).
    - (v) He wouldn't have done so
    - (vi) If there wasn't some way to do it.
  - d. Paul tells us that each man will receive a reward
    - (i) According to what he has done (Rom. 2:6),
    - (ii) Whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10);
    - (iii) And that though each believer
    - (iv) Will receive eternal life,
    - (v) Some will have all their works burned up
    - (vi) And receive no reward,
    - (vii) While others will be rewarded

- (viii) For their works that endure (1 Cor. 3).
- e. If the Lord rewarded everyone's work exactly the same,
  - (i) Then the person who received Christ on his death bed
    - (a) Would receive the same as the one
    - (b) Whose life was one continual sacrifice to the Lord!
    - (c) That would hardly seem just.
  - (ii) It would also lay the ground work
    - (a) For every one of us here this morning
    - (b) To become lazy.
    - (c) We would be tempted to do
    - (d) What many professing believers in fact do today:
    - (e) Just sit back and enjoy the ride to heaven.
  - (iii) Love, of course, would continue to compel us forward,
    - (a) But our sin would take every advantage of this
    - (b) To try and do as little as possible for the Lord
    - (c) While as much as possible for ourselves.
- f. The Lord makes it plain in this parable that He wants us to work hard –
  - (i) None of the workers in the vineyard
  - (ii) Were taking it easy;
  - (iii) They all worked hard,
  - (iv) Only some worked harder and longer.
  - (v) Paul writes, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).
  - (vi) And James reminds us, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26).
- g. The Lord has made it equally clear
  - (i) That He intends to reward each of us
  - (ii) Consistent with our efforts,
  - (iii) According to our works.
- h. Notice too that this interpretation
  - (i) Isn't consistent with the opening and closing words: “But many who are first will be last, and the last, first.”
  - (ii) Jesus isn't talking here about equality –
  - (iii) And He certainly isn't telling us
    - (a) That the more you do,
    - (b) The less you'll get,
    - (c) As His words would seem to imply
    - (d) In this context.
  - (iv) No. He means something else.

- i. Jesus didn't intend to teach
  - (i) That all will be rewarded the same.
  - (ii) The more you do for Him, the greater your reward will be.
    - (a) And so be encouraged to do all you can for Him
    - (b) Knowing that the Lord will not be a debtor to anyone.
    - (c) He will reward you with His rewards of grace
    - (d) For absolutely everything you do for Him –
      - (1) For every sacrifice you make.
      - (2) You will reap the benefits forever.
- (iv) But also be humbled by the fact
  - (a) That you haven't done more
  - (b) For the Lord than you have.
  - (c) We all could have done more,
  - (d) And still can,
  - (e) And so set yourself aside
  - (f) And strive to live for His glory.

C. Finally, you should be humbled by the fact that the Lord is sovereign over whom you will serve.

- 1. It's possible that Jesus have in view here
  - a. The future bringing in of the Gentiles
  - b. And the Jews reaction to this.
- 2. But it's also possible
  - a. That He didn't have
    - (i) This distinction in mind
    - (ii) But simply was encouraging His disciples
    - (iii) Who were called earlier
    - (iv) That their labor would
    - (v) Be greater than those who followed,
    - (vi) And would actually benefit them.
  - b. Consider the context:
    - (i) The rich young ruler
      - (a) Couldn't let go of his riches
      - (b) But gave up the kingdom instead.
    - (ii) But Peter and the disciples
      - (a) Gave up what they had
      - (b) And had done what Jesus commanded.
  - c. Because of this,
    - (i) They would receive a greater reward.
    - (ii) When you add to this the fact



- (a) That they were the first called
  - (b) Into the kingdom by Jesus,
  - (c) It adds up to a great temptation
  - (d) To think more highly of themselves
  - (e) Than they ought.
- d. To help them, Jesus is warning them
  - (i) Not to become prideful:
  - (ii) Yes, they had a privileged position,
  - (iii) But that also meant their work would be more difficult:
    - (a) They would be laying the foundation –
    - (b) Breaking ground as it were –
    - (c) They would work harder,
    - (d) And make greater sacrifices
    - (e) Than others who would come in later,
    - (f) Even though they would all receive
    - (g) The same prize: Eternal life.
  - (iv) It was their privilege to do the harder work.
    - (a) In this sense,
      - (1) They were becoming the servants
      - (2) To those who would later come into the kingdom.
      - (3) Who would become –
        - (A) At least in the sense of status in the kingdom –
        - (B) Their equals.
    - (b) You are the first,
      - (1) But will take the last position,
      - (2) To serve those who come in later,
      - (3) That those who are last in time
      - (4) Might become first
      - (5) By becoming the focus of your ministry.
- e. If the Lord should make you work harder
  - (i) If He should make you a servant to others,
  - (ii) Should you be upset if by your work
  - (iii) You make things easier for them?
  - (iv) Or lay the groundwork
  - (v) For their becoming coheirs of the kingdom?
- f. Think about how you have benefited from the service of others:
  - (i) From the work of Jesus, the prophets, apostles,
  - (ii) The pastors, teachers, theologians, and evangelists
  - (iii) Even from brothers and sisters in Christ.
- g. I would much rather stand on the shoulders

- (i) Of those who have gone before
  - (ii) And know what we now know
  - (iii) Than to stand on the ground
  - (iv) Of the first and second century church fathers!
- h. And so if the Lord should use you
- (i) To make things easier or better
  - (ii) For those coming after you,
  - (iii) Should you complain?
  - (iv) No.
- i. Instead, be humbled by the fact that you are where you are
- (i) That the Lord has called you
  - (ii) And that He is using you to serve others.
  - (iii) And purpose to humble yourself more
  - (iv) That you might be used even more for His glory.
- j. As was also mentioned last week
- (i) If in this whole process
  - (ii) The Lord should use someone
  - (iii) To a greater extent than you
  - (iv) Don't be jealous!
    - (a) These things are entirely in His hands
    - (b) Either to give or withhold.
    - (c) As we'll see in a couple of weeks
    - (d) The places of honor in His kingdom
    - (e) Are for those whom the Lord has prepared.
- k. May the Lord help us
- (i) To humble ourselves by His grace
  - (ii) And to be thankful
  - (iii) That He calls us and uses us at all.
  - (iv) If we do, we will be more useable.
- l. And if you have not yet humbled yourself
- (i) To receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior,
  - (ii) May He grant you this grace now by His Spirit. Amen.

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