



The Last Will Be First

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June 13, 2004

We are in a June series called "Did Jesus Say That?" We're encountering some of the difficult but transformational teachings of Jesus. I think everyone would love to have Jesus as their pastor. But His teaching is tough and I think we'd have a hard time with some of His sermons. This is one of them.

A few years ago I signed up for a cell phone plan. I discussed the plan with the representative and was happy. I signed the agreement. Everything was cool. A few weeks later, I was talking with someone and we got on the subject of cell phones. They got a better plan than I did and suddenly I was not so happy. The one good thing about cell phone companies is—even though you are under contract, you can change your plan. I got the better plan.

There's a story like this that Jesus tells in Matthew 20:1-16. I invite you to turn there. I'll tell you the story and then I want to draw some powerful transformational lessons for life from it.

A man owned a vineyard. It was probably time for the harvest. It was important to pick the grapes at the right time and swiftly. So the owner goes to the market place where itinerant workers hang out waiting for temporary work. It's **six** in the morning and he makes a proposal for wages. "I'll give you a denarius for a day's work." A denarius is the average pay for a day's

work. They agree and off to work they go in the vineyard (verses 1-2).

At 9:00am, the business owner hires some more guys waiting for work in the market place. The owner says, "I'll give you what's right," and off these workers go in the vineyard (verses 3-4). The owner did the same thing at noon and at 3:00pm (verse 5).

Around 5:00pm, the owner found some more guys without work in the market place. He asked them why they were not working and they said, "No one hired us." They agreed to go to work in the vineyard for the last hour although not a word was spoken about compensation (verses 6-7).

In those days, everyone got paid at the end of the day (Deuteronomy 24:15). When 6:00pm came, the owner told his foreman to pay the workers—beginning with the last ones hired to the first (verse 8). When the guys who were hired at 5:00pm got paid, they each received a full day's wage and everybody knew it (verse 9). The late hires weren't expecting that and they were thrilled.

When the foreman got to those who were hired first, they were all expecting to get more than they agreed upon. But guess what they got? The same amount as the guys who had worked only the last hour (verse 10). They were not happy. They started to grumble at the business owner saying, "They

worked one lousy hour. We slaved the entire day under the scorching sun. And everyone got equal pay (verse 12)!”

The land owner responded to one of the guys who tried to give the money back: “Friend, I didn’t wrong you. Didn’t you agree to work for what I paid you? Take your earnings and go. I chose to give you all the same money. Did I break the law in doing what I want with my own assets? Or are you jealous because I was generous with someone (verses 13-14)?”

That’s the story. The Bible calls stories like these parables. A parable is a short, simple fictional story designed to teach a spiritual or moral lesson. The word “parable” means a comparison or analogy, literally “to cast or place alongside of, to compare.” It is a teaching device by which you compare the known with the unknown or the familiar with the strange in order to make a profound spiritual point. Parables were Jesus’ main vehicle of teaching when He taught the crowds. The parables explained various aspects of the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is not about some future state after we die. It’s about what things are like when God governs life. And the parables have two major themes. They either speak of some aspect of God and His dealings with us or our need to repent. That is, parables either enlighten us about how God behaves or we are urged to take decisive action to submit to His rule in our lives.

The parables are trying to teach us a main lesson or two. We are not to look at each detail as having a special spiritual identity or counterpart. There is no question as to what the main point of today’s parable is. It is stated before and after the parable—the last will be first and the first last (Matthew 19:30;

20:16). It’s unfortunate that there is a chapter break where it is. This parable builds on Christ’s response to what the disciples will get for giving up so much to serve Christ (19:27-29).

I think there are two features about this parable that we can probably agree to at the outset. First, the parable is an illustration of how God deals with those who serve Him. The landowner corresponds to God. The workers are those who God recruits to work in His kingdom.

Second, this is not a teaching that we are naturally going to enjoy. It cuts to the heart of how we are wired. Self is at the forefront of our lives. We want the advantage to come to us and not to others. This is some teaching we all need to take to heart.

Jesus is strong about role reversal in this parable and in His teaching ministry—the first becoming last and the greatest becoming the least. So what is this great reversal all about? I think it is this. At the end of the day, God determines our rank. What we gain or lose in serving God or what position we hold should not be our focus or concern. The moment it is, we move in the opposite direction. In the kingdom of heaven, any attempt to move up the ladder on our part is a mandatory move down.

In order to understand this, there are two very clear lessons that burst upon us in this parable. We must be careful not to miss them or dismiss them.

Be very careful of self interest

I am convinced that there is nothing we care about more in this world than looking out for ourselves. Even after we come to Christ, that is our main

preoccupation. We live very self-oriented lives.

I suppose there is no greater test of self-interest than when we become aware that someone else has fared better than we did. It rankles us. The workers were happy in this parable with what they agreed to work for until they found out that someone got the same for much less work. They got very angry. Jesus made a strong point in the parable—do you become envious when someone else gets the advantage? We don't want anybody to get more than we do. This starts young. It lasts our whole lifetime.

It flows to all areas of life. How about the grocery checkout or the Wal-Mart line? I'm standing in line for 15 minutes. They open a checkout line for those who just got in line and they checkout immediately. Am I happy for them? No. I paid my dues. I should have gotten through before them.

It can really get serious. You work at a place a lot of years. You have your eye on a promotion and more money. Someone newer and less experienced gets the job. You get angry. You have the job you agreed to, but you're really not happy for the other person and you're upset with your boss. When we see these kinds of things happen, we want to cry, "Foul! This is not right!" But has an injustice really happened? Is it a bad thing that someone else got something we didn't get?

I have no doubt that the heart we are born with has a strong tendency towards self. Without the transforming power of Christ, each of us turns to our own way (Isaiah 53:6). Let me share with you the subtle doctrine that promotes the self along the lines we are talking about today more than anything else. It is the doctrine of fairness. The guys in this

parable who worked all day were shouting, "This is not fair!" If we were in their shoes, we'd probably be feeling the same way.

The idea of fairness is not in the Bible. It is said of God nowhere that He is fair. God is just and He is merciful but He is not fair. God always does what is right and He is generous with us. But He does not cater to our self interests and therefore withhold His generosity to others. Fairness is a doctrine of the self. It is an expression of human reasoning about man's value system based on comparisons. Fairness is a system of equal treatment and it is built upon self as the reference point. It protects the self against the gains of others. It's okay to get more than someone else but if they get more than we get, our sense of fairness is violated. Fairness is really a fleshly disguise to protect self.

I'll tell you what really exposes the fairness doctrine for what it is. When the doctrine of fairness is violated, what do we feel and what do we do? Our anger flares and we begin to complain. We are not happy that someone else got more. We are not thankful. These are behaviors of the self and not of the Spirit of God. Fairness is a servant of the self and Jesus wants us to admit that we are very selfish. The greatest spiritual stride we can make is to deal with our strong tendency towards self. Well, God turns our human sense of merit and fairness upside down in this parable. His perspective is vastly different than ours. Those who clamor for themselves will end up last. Those who don't will end up first.

Before I go on to the second lesson, I want to touch on two areas. First, if we shouldn't be concerned with fairness, what are we to be concerned with? Answer—love. Love always promotes the other person. Love always seeks

their good. And love is willing to make the sacrifice to make it happen. Love is the Christian measure of how we see other people in relation to ourselves. The measure is never self.

Second, if you can better your situation, do it. If the guys who started working at 6:00am would have come to the owner and said, "We are amazed at your generosity. We know we agreed to work all day for a denarius. Would you consider a bonus for us considering the circumstances?" I think the owner would have considered it. If you can better yourself, do so. But not in a bitter spirit and not because others got more than you did.

There is a second lesson in this parable:

God's generosity with others reveals our spirit

The Bible is clear that every good thing anybody has comes originally from God (Deuteronomy 8:10-18; James 1:17). We also know by now that not everyone has the same as everyone else. Not even all Christians are equally blessed. There are many reasons for that. Some people are lazy. Some people have adversities come upon them. And for some reason God chooses to bless some more than others. When we see others get more than us and we think they don't deserve it, it is a test of our spirit. It will show us if we have the mind of Christ or the mind of self. There will be no question. It will be very evident.

God's generosity with others will reveal two things about our spirit. First, God's generosity with others will reveal how we feel about God. When the workers saw that the landowner was generous, they grumbled against him. They really weren't upset that those who worked one hour got a denarius. They were

upset with the landowner because he was not as generous with them as they had expected.

We might be thinking, "What the landowner did was not good for his business reputation or for the morale of his workers. It was not wise." One of the things that gets in the way of our relationship with God is the sense that He isn't treating us right. Sometimes we feel like others get more from God and we less, and yet we have served Him more than the other person. The landowner had done no wrong. He had a right to do what he wanted with his own things. His only fault was his generosity. When we feel bypassed by God's blessings, we can develop some bad feelings towards God. That is a huge signal that self wants to be first. Be careful.

Second, God's generosity with others will reveal how much self is alive in us. If someone gets more than they deserve and more than us, can we be happy for them? Or will it cause a negative reaction in us? Will we get upset and protest? Will we expect more for ourselves and be unhappy if we don't get it?

Let me tell it to you straight. God's goal is to destroy the self in us. He wants to delete the self-preoccupation and replace it with the mind of Christ. We are told what the mind of Christ is in Philippians 2:3-4, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit but with humility of mind, let each of you regard one another as more important than himself. Do not look out for our own personal interests but for the interests of others." Friends, I tell you, this is the hardest thing in life to do—to make ourselves less important than others and to care more for their well-being than for our own.

If we can truly rejoice over the good fortunes of others and not take offence, then we can know we are making significant progress. If we are always checking to see how the other guy fares compared to us, self is in control.

A couple years ago, Pastor Mike and I were at a conference in Ohio. On the way to the meetings that Saturday morning, we went by a sign that said, "Block garage sale," with an arrow pointing into a subdivision. I love garage sales and I asked Mike if he minded if we stopped. He said he'd never been to one. So we stopped.

I came across this pitcher that shouted to me, "Marie would love this." I picked it up and turned it over. It said, "Made in Italy," on the bottom. Mike's wife, Annie, is Italian so I said to him, "Look where this was made. You should get it for Annie." I wasn't serious. But he said, "This is perfect. Annie's redecorating the bedroom and she'll really go for this." He asks the lady, "How much?" and she says, "\$5.00." I'm praying he'll change his mind. He says, "I'll take it," and pulls out his wallet. No money. So he says to me, "Al, do you mind if I borrow \$5.00?" Here I am giving him the money for him to buy what I wanted to buy!

We drive away and guess what I'm doing throughout the day. I'm stewing about the pitcher. I wanted it and I couldn't be truly happy for Mike. Well, we get back in time for the evening service and I'm going to preach. I see Mike in the hallway with a big smile on his face. He says, "Annie loved the pitcher. And by the way, I went on-line and found it. It's signed pottery by a famous Italian artist and it's worth \$250." I smiled and congratulated him but inside I was worse off than ever. I took me until I went to bed to work it through.

Friends, there is a lot of self in me yet

and I've been walking with the Lord for 40 years. It takes a lifetime to deal with it. And I know enough about you to know you're in the same kind of battle I am. God's generosity with others can really enflame the old self.

Conclusion

This business about the first becoming last and the last becoming first is about dealing with the dominance of self. It is an extremely powerful force in all of us. And I want to close with several observations.

First, the more we deal with our selfish nature now, the more prominent we will be in the kingdom of God. God promotes those who make no demands and have no expectations for themselves. The eleventh hour workers went into the vineyard with no expectation of payment. The last became first. Those who clamor for themselves here on earth and get upset when others get ahead of them will become last. It all depends on our attitude in this life.

Second, we need to serve the Lord without thought of reward. All that we do in life is supposed to be for His glory and to advance His kingdom. Our motivation should be to serve the Lord because we love Him and not for something from Him for personal advancement. God will graciously reward our labors, but rewards should never be the reason for our service. Our motivation should be to please the Lord and leave the reward to Him. We are not to call His dealings with us into question. Thomas Aquinas said, "They that work for reward do not get as much as they want. They that work for God get more than they expect."

Third, we should not develop an eleventh hour mentality, that God will

reward us greatly for doing very little. The eleventh hour workers were willing to work. They just got hired late. But if they had avoided work all day, no reward would have been given. God is calling all Christians to work in His vineyard. Don't stand idly by and expect the blessing of the Lord for just a little bit of work.

Fourth, God is very generous with all of us. As Christians, none of us get what we deserve. The wages of sin is death. If God paid us what we earned, we'd all go to hell. We are all eleventh hour workers upon whom God has lavishly bestowed the riches of heaven. God's grace to the undeserving should be a cause for joy, not complaining.

Many of us naturally identify with the workers who worked all day. I think we got the Lord's message today. I think it would be entirely appropriate if right now, as we close, we would take a few moments to pray what John the Baptist that Christ aspired to—that Christ would increase and we would decrease. All of us have work to do in eradicating self. Acknowledge before God that you do not want to be first for yourself but last and that you believe He will deal with you in exactly the right way. Would you humble yourself before the Lord that He might lift you up!?

Scripture References

- **Deuteronomy 8:10-18, 24:15**
- **Isaiah 53:6**
- **Matthew 19:27-30, 20:1-16**
- **Philippians 2:3-4, James 1:17**

Notes: