

Community Church of Issaquah

October 1, 2023

## How Can the Last Become First?

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Today's Scriptures twice state one of the most unusual and often misinterpreted phrases in the Bible. All of us have heard these words before, "The last shall be first and the first last." Matthew quotes Jesus saying this twice in this selected passage. Interestingly enough, it can also be found in two others of the Gospels. In Mark 10:3 as Jesus teaches about how hard it is for the wealthy to find the Kingdom of God he says it, and again in Luke 13:30 when Jesus teaches about how the wealthy feel privilege with priority in the Kingdom. Four times. The same phrase, "the last shall be first and the first last."

In our attempt to understand what Jesus meant, we might ask if Christians who were the first to believe in Christ in this life will be last in the kingdom and those who were last to believe in Christ in this life will be first in the kingdom. The misconception is that Jesus is talking about who gets to go to heaven first and who has to wait, and worse, who gets a first-class ticket and who has to take economy class. At the center of this precept is the bad idea about the concept of wealth being the determining factor in our access to heaven. Each of the three passages I have quoted has in common the idea that the wealthy have preference in the kingdom. Jesus was adamant that it was even harder for the wealthy to seek the kingdom of God.

The Jews believed that wealth could gain God's favor because they had practiced giving money. Jesus wanted to dispel that wrong way of thinking and clarify how difficult it was for many wealthy to focus on anything except money. Peter, the disciple, didn't understand all of this.

He believed that if you gave up something of value to follow Christ, you got to move to the head of the line. When Jesus said that's not how it works, Peter was totally confused. He boldly asked Jesus, "We left everything and followed you, so what will there be for us?" (Matthew 19:27) Perhaps, Peter was asking Jesus who could get into heaven if the wealthy couldn't.

Yes, Jesus acknowledged, many have given up home or family or more to follow him and he then assured the hearers that those who did such would inherit so much more than they gave up and they will be rewarded with eternal life. Perhaps sensing that some did not understand what he was trying to tell them, Jesus decided to tell them a parable or give them a lesson on what he meant when he said "The last shall be first and the first last." Some Bible translations call it the Parable of the Vineyard Workers. In summary, it goes something like this.

A vineyard owner is in need to some laborers to help harvest his crop of grapes. So, he finds some men hanging around waiting for jobs and he hires them. A bit later he sees some more men standing around watching and he asks why they aren't working. He hires the second batch a few hours after the first and they head to the vineyard. History repeats itself and a third group show up and he hires them a few more hours after the first. The vineyard owner goes out at 9 am, noon, 3 pm and 5 pm after the first group was hired and sent more workers out to work in the vineyard. Each group was offered the same salary, which in today's equivalent would be something like \$20 to \$50.

At the end of the day, the landowner called his foreman in and told him to give the workers their wages. He started with the ones who were hired last and then to each group who were hired, ending with those who were hired first. When the men from the first group he hired found out that everyone of them had made the same amount of money, regardless

of how long they worked, they were pretty irritated. How fair was that!? The men hired last only worked one hour and they made the very same amount. One hour as opposed to all day. I can't say that I blame them for being angry. And when the workers approached the vineyard owner, his response was "I'm not being unfair. Didn't you agree to work for that amount of money? So, take your pay and go home. I want to give the man who I hired last the same as you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you angry because I am generous?"

There are some important things for us to remember as we study this parable and Jesus's message here. First, Jesus began this very complex story by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner." Jewish teachings of the days of Jesus believed that the keys to the kingdom were only connected to wealth. The entire story centered on the kingdom of heaven, not property or employers and employees. Those listening more than likely were thinking about the natural world where they lived and how things happened for them. Jesus was talking about God's love for everyone and how we can experience the kingdom of heaven.

Second, we must always understand that Christ views people – that's you and me – through different eyes than the world does. Today's world tends to focus on wealth or the physical appearance or intelligence or such human factors. In the world of Christ, how much money we have is outweighed by our humility, compassion, and love for others. These are much more valuable than our bank account or our position. You may not be familiar with it, but there is a cult of Christianity called "prosperity theology." Its followers believe that the more you put into being a Christian, the more God will reward you with lots of money and material things. I have never understood how any believers could believe that we can tell who the best Christians are by how much money

they have. That is for me a strange concept. If I followed those beliefs, I guess I would be low on God's list of worthy Christians since I'm not Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos.

At the time of Christ, there was a very strong belief among the Jews that it was only the righteous who were rewarded by God with prosperity. Each time the phrase "the last shall be first and the first last," it means that your position in this life does not give any person an advantage in gaining access to heaven or the kingdom of God. Jesus had the single message, it does not even matter who we are in this world or what we even have done. Eternal life and the kingdom of God is for those who profess belief in Christ. The Greek word used here for "belief" means to trust or to have faith. When Jesus tells us that our place in the kingdom of heaven is directly connected to our belief in Christ. That is the bottom line of the parable. Believe and follow Christ, then we inherit the kingdom of God.

Third, our life as Christians often contradicts the world in which we live. We cannot only look out for ourselves as number one and be following the teaching of Christ. Jesus teaches us to love others more than we love ourselves. You can't do that if you think you are the center of the world. As Christians, we attempt to choose a life where the first – meaning me – is last, and the last – meaning others – always comes first. The promise of God is that when we adopt that life, we have a prominent place in the kingdom. We will be known by our works.

There are 27 books in the New Testament, but of all those gospels or letters, there are only two that never mention the concept of eternal judgment and the promise of entering the gates of heaven. Those would be the books of Philemon and Third John. The Scriptures are filled with words of guidance for us about how we can enter the kingdom of God.

Perhaps that gives some credence to the phrase, “you can’t take it with you.”

There are indeed some similarities to consider in this parable of the landowner and his vineyard. In the times of this story, it was not uncommon for day laborers to be hovered around a property with the hope that they might find work and make some money. Each time I need to go to Home Depot for any reason, I must drive past groups of men, usually Hispanic, gathered at the entrance hoping someone will stop and offer them a job. Is that only in my neighborhood? No. It’s a site I see often in a variety of places. This was what happened in the parable Jesus told. Workers were outside the vineyard hoping to be hired, if even for only one day.

As the parable progressed, another reality occurred. Based on the time of hiring, there were levels of working, some with hours of labor behind them and some with only minutes of work completed. Every workplace has the concept of seniority – who’s been here the longest. And every person on the roster of employees believe they should be paid more than anyone else hired after them. It’s only fair, isn’t it? We should be rewarded for the length of service we’ve given and that reward should be larger than the new hire.

Often in the Christian world, we find the same thought. We might think if we’ve been a Christian since we were kids and we’re old timers now, shouldn’t we have a seat closer to the front pew of the Heavenly Church? That is the very core of this parable and passage of Scripture. “The first will be last and the last will be first” never means that anyone will gain more honor than another believer. It means that while someone may be first on the list of successful business individuals or has been a church member longer than anyone else or has acquired fame and notoriety or has won more acclaimed status, it does not guarantee you a

matching place in the Kingdom of God. Eternal life is not earned that way.

Imagine the discomfort and confusion of the religious leaders of that time, and even the individuals who chose to follow Christ as disciples. In their minds, the more good they did, the bigger their space in heaven would be. Now here is this rabbi, teacher, Messiah, telling them that it is only when we are committed to Christ fully and put others before ourselves that our place in heaven is guaranteed. How many conversations do you think these people had about this concept after hearing Jesus tell this story? How many of them must have boldly said, “I’ve given a lot of my resources away. Doesn’t that give me a bigger role here in this heaven thing?” The answer is no.

Following Jesus does indeed have its challenges, but it also is flooded with blessings. I must confess that when I first read the words, “The first will become last and the last will be first,” I wondered where I fit into the waiting line? When I learned that my place was to be determined by my devotion to Christ and placing others before myself, it didn’t matter to me anymore if I even was at the tail end of the line at the pearly gates. The blessing is, I’ll be there. First or last? I could care less. I simply want someone to say when it’s my turn, “Well done thy good and faithful servant.” That’s all.