

“Firsts and Lasts”
Matthew 20:1-16
February 3, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

The theme of this parable is revealed by the statement appearing both before it and after it. “The last will be first, and the first last.” The parable that explains and illustrates this statement is a parable about the grace of God. The lasts become firsts by grace and the firsts become lasts by the pride that refuses grace.

The parable itself is straightforward and easy to follow. A landowner needs workers, probably because it is harvest season for his grapes. Day laborers, who are at the bottom of the economic scale, gather at a particular place waiting to be hired. The landowner goes there to hire laborers, agreeing to pay them the standard wage of a denarius for the day’s work. A little later, he sees that he will need even more workers, so he goes back out at the third hour, which would be around 9:00 a.m. This time he doesn’t negotiate their pay, but simply promises that he will do the right thing. The same thing happens at noon and again at 3:00 p.m., as even more workers are hired. Finally, as late as 5:00 p.m., the proverbial eleventh hour, he makes his final trip to the gathering place for day laborers. The only ones left are the ones nobody else wanted, but these too he hires. At quitting time, around 6:00 p.m., he gathers them all to give them their pay. Starting with the last ones hired, those no one else wanted and who only worked one hour, he generously gives them the wages for a full day’s work. He then calls forward those who had worked three hours and gives them the same amount, all the way down to those who had worked a full day. When he gets to that last group, they have seen his generosity in giving the other workers a full day’s wages without a full day’s work, and they think they will be getting more than that denarius because they have worked longer than all the others. But when they receive only the agreed upon denarius, they complain of an injustice done to them. The landowner reminds them of their agreement and says that he has fulfilled what he promised. He then warns them against an attitude that begrudges his generosity toward others.

As indicated above, this is a parable about the grace of God. Among other things, it points out how God’s grace goes against the grain of our works mentality. Steve Whitner and I were talking about this passage this week, and he reminded me of a story he heard this week about a class-action lawsuit being filed by federal workers who were required to work during the shutdown without pay. They weren’t suing in order to get their back pay, because that had already been promised them. They were suing to get double their pay because there was another group of government workers who didn’t have to

work during the shutdown but who received back pay. Though we can all understand their feelings, when this works attitude is applied to God, it is a proud denial of God's grace that results in the first being last. So let's look more carefully at these two groups.

I. The Lasts Who Are First

To be last is to be undeserving. The last workers hired don't deserve a full-day's pay. They only worked one hour, yet received pay as if they had worked the entire day. What's more, they were the least able to work, which is why they were hired last. Perhaps they were old or sickly, so all the employers who stopped by the marketplace to hire day laborers passed them by and chose those with a more robust appearance. They remind me of the last ones chosen for an informal sports competition when team captains take turns choosing their players. But in spite of their undeserving nature and the fact that they were picked last, they are the first ones paid and they are paid more generously per hour worked than all the rest.

This parable speaks of the grace of God. All followers of Christ must be like these last workers hired, acknowledging our undeserved salvation. The teaching here connects to Paul's clear doctrine of justification by faith. I have printed in the bulletin for your benefit one of the greatest statements about justification by faith that I know of. It is the answer to Question 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism, a question which asks, "How are you right with God?"

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.

Let me quickly highlight four key concepts of this definition. The first is that the Christian is at the same time justified and a sinner. Martin Luther penned a famous Latin phrase to describe this: *simul iustus et peccator*. We are simultaneously justified and a sinner. This side of heaven we are sinning saints. Second, our right standing with God is based on an alien righteousness. "Alien" here doesn't refer to some extra-terrestrial being, but to someone outside myself. It is based on the righteousness of Jesus. Third, this righteousness is ours by imputation, not impartation. It is credited to our account as a gift. Fourth, we are justified by faith alone, apart from works. Did you notice how those hired later in the day had to trust the landowner? They didn't negotiate an exact pay. Rather, he simply promised, **"Whatever is right I will give you"** (v. 4). This is the great stumbling block we will look at more

carefully in our next point. Human pride wants to earn God's grace, and those caught in such pride resent God's grace. They are the ones in the parable who claim that this is just not fair.

Let me mention two applications of this before we move on. First, the grace of God in our justification gives us both humility and confidence. We are humble because we accept that we are undeserving sinners, yet confident because we also believe that we are loved by God and given the gift of his imputed righteousness. What would it look like and feel like if you moved out each day with this humble confidence? It would be like these one-hour workers after payday, filled with joy and gratitude.

A second application is never to give up praying for those outside the faith. Like the landowner in this parable, God often comes at the eleventh hour, saving people prior to their death. In a sermon he preached on this parable, Charles Spurgeon told of a man who was converted at the age of 103. While resting beside a hedge, he remembered a sermon he had once heard, recalling a striking part of it. He humbled himself, turned to God and found peace and pardon in Christ's forgiveness of him. He lived another three years and when he died, these words were put on his tombstone: "Here lies a babe in grace, aged three years, who died, according to nature, aged 106." Our congregation has had the joy of experiencing at least two of these "eleventh hour" conversions in the recent past. We praise God for his grace.

II. The Firsts Who Are Last

This parable serves as a warning to all who think that God owes them something. They are the ones like those first hired, the ones who end up last. Like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, they resent God's generosity to the undeserving. Let's look first at what it means to be last and then consider the indicators that a person might be in this category.

What does it mean to be last? It is sometimes thought that being last just refers to occupying a lower status in heaven. I don't think that's what it means. Instead, it means to be condemned on Judgment Day. The firsts who are lasts don't make it to heaven. I interpret the passage in this way for three reasons. First, the word "pay" in verse 8 ("Call the laborers and *pay* them their wages") is a technical term used for the final judgment. For example, the same word appears in 16:27, where Jesus is clearly speaking of the final judgment when he says, "then he will *repay* each person according to what he has done."

The second reason I think this is referring to those who are condemned on Judgment Day is the use of the word "Friend" in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus speaks to the complaining laborers hired first, "**Friend, I am doing you no wrong.**" Though it is a polite way to address a person, it is always used in

Matthew's Gospel of Jesus' enemies. For example, in the parable of the wedding feast, the king says to the man who had no wedding garment, **"Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?"** He then goes on to command his attendants, **"Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"** (22:12-13). It is also the greeting Jesus gave to Judas at the betrayal. **"Friend, do what you came to do"** (26:50).

The third reason I interpret the passage like this is the simple command of verse 14: **"Take what belongs to you and go."** Such a dismissal rises to the level of judgment. We read the same in Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, when he uttered those devastating words, **"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness"** (7:23). So when Jesus says that the first shall be last, the last he has in view is the place of judgment and condemnation. Such is the outcome for all who are too proud to accept the grace of God.

If the parable is intended as a warning, how might a person know if the warning is directed their way? Are there some indicators in the parable of those who are the firsts who will be last? I see several such red flags. The first one is a boasting heart. Can you hear the proud boast of their complaint? **"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"** (v. 12). I hear in that a claim to be superior because of their hard work. Those who humbly receive God's grace, on the other hand, boast only in the Lord rather than in anything in themselves.

A second indicator of this kind of pride that rejects God's grace is an appeal to God's justice that reveals a remarkable blindness to one's own sin. We can see in the landowner's response to these workers that they felt themselves deprived of justice. They believed they were being treated unfairly. The landowner had to remind them that they were paid exactly what they had been promised and what they agreed to work for. Where is the injustice in that? When we feel that God is not treating us fairly, we reveal that we have lost sight of his grace. D. A. Carson states this with rather shocking candor. "Do you really want nothing but total, effective, instantaneous justice? Then go to hell." We don't need God's justice; we need his grace. He gives us his grace by visiting upon Jesus the justice our sins deserve.

A third indicator of this kind of pride is the heart that is always comparing itself with others. C. S. Lewis says that this is always present in human pride. "Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride is gone" (in *Mere Christianity*). I read this week of a professor who gave a test to his class that he concluded was too difficult. Even his best students performed

poorly on it. He didn't believe in grading on a curve, but he felt the need to do something to raise the average scores. So here's what he did. He raised by 20 points the grades of every female in his class, and left the grades of the males exactly what they had earned in their tests. The men felt bad when they scored so poorly, but outraged when their grades were not raised similarly. The difference was all in this element of comparison.

The final red flag I want to point out is the one indicated by the landowner's last question: **"Do you begrudge my generosity?"** The truth is that this was their attitude. They should have marveled at his generosity. Instead, they were focused on themselves and what they had done in comparison to these eleventh-hour workers. They were self-focused rather God-focused. The grace of God should always lead us to say with John Newton, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." When God's grace isn't received, we are turned back on ourselves. In his book *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton writes of the person who is self-focused rather than God-focused.

Of all horrible religions the most horrible is the worship of the god within you.... Let Jones worship the sun or moon, anything rather than the Inner Light; Let Jones worship cats or crocodiles, if he can find any in his street, but not the god within. Christianity came into the world firstly in order to assert with violence that a man had not only to look inwards, but to look outwards, to behold with astonishment and enthusiasm a divine company and a divine captain. The only fun of being a Christian was that a man was not left alone with the Inner Light, but definitely recognized an outer light, fair as the sun, clear as the moon, terrible as an army with banners.

CONCLUSION:

Are you ready to be a last who becomes first? All it takes is the humble receiving of the grace God offers to you in Jesus. Jesus has been treated as your sins deserve that you might be treated as his righteousness deserves. And this has been granted to you purely as gift. Is your attitude the same as that expressed by the hymn we will close our worship with today? Envisioning that heavenly banquet called the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9), the author writes, "While all our hearts and all our songs join to admire the feast, each of us cries, with thankful tongue, 'Lord, why was I a guest? Why was I made to hear your voice, and enter while there's room, when thousands make a wretched choice, and rather starve than come?'" Then the answer comes. "'Twas the same love that spread the feast that sweetly drew us in; else we had still refused to taste, and perished in our sin.'" At the end of his life, John Newton wrote these now famous words: "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior." May God help us all to remember the grace of God through these two truths!

Small Group Discussion Questions

Matthew 20:1-16

1. The theme of this parable is the generosity of the landowner to these “eleventh hour” laborers. That portrays the grace of God in conversion. Can you think of a conversion story that portrays God’s grace through an unlikely conversion? Perhaps it was someone converted late in life or just someone who you might consider to be the least likely ever to come to faith in Christ?
2. The lasts who are firsts are those who simply receive the grace of God. The Bible’s theological statement of that is found in the doctrine of justification by faith. Review the Heidelberg Catechism’s definition below of justification by faith. See if you can summarize this definition in at least three points.

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God’s commandments and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.

3. Can you think of at least one application of this definition in your life?
4. Are there some “eleventh-hour” workers, that is, some non-Christians that might easily be considered unlikely converts, that you have been praying for their conversion? Spend some time praying for these.
5. Is it possible to be too grace-centered?
6. The firsts who will be last exhibit several problems, which are a type of red flag or indicator of a proud heart that misses God’s grace. Look over this list and talk about the one that you struggle with the most.
 - Boasting (v. 12)
 - An appeal to God’s justice that reveals a blindness to one’s own sin
 - Comparing oneself with others
 - A self-centered focus rather than God-centered, which fails to marvel at the grace of God