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When Being Last is Best; Matt 20:1-16

GPBC

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Introduction – It’s really hard to find examples of last place being better than first place. First place means you win. Last place means whatever you were involved in, you were the worst of all involved. Whether that be sports or academics or a friendly game of putt-putt, whatever – no one likes to be in last place. And those dreadful pick up teams in the backyard or in P.E. class. You just hoped you wouldn’t be the last person to be picked. That meant everybody there thought you wouldn’t contribute much to winning. I remember breathing a sigh of relief not being last, but then also feeling sad for the guy who was the last pick.

But there are those occasions, and they are always rememberable and inspiring, when the ones in last place end up in first place! Whether it be fantasy stories, like the Mighty Ducks, or true to life stories, like Hoosiers, it’s always thrilling to see the underdog take first place!

That’s the basic idea behind the words of Jesus, “So the last will be first, and the first last.” But of course, Jesus is speaking about the spiritual realm not competitive sports. The parable that we’ve read today is an explanation of how ch19 ends. 19:30. Remember, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus often used parables to illustrate spiritual truth, and in that way it helps us grasp concepts that are difficult to visualize or understand. Parables usually convey one main truth. Here it is how we are to understand what Jesus means by last being first and first being last. So every individual component of a parable isn’t reflecting a spiritual truth, but rather taken as a whole, it is teaching a spiritual truth. So let’s see what God has for us today in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

- I. The Purpose of the Parable
 - a. We’ve already mentioned that 19:30 introduces the parable and 20:16 repeats the spiritual truth. In essence then Jesus is saying this parable explains what I mean.
 - b. But this spiritual truth is also meant to be understood in a particular time context. Notice with me 19:28-30. In other words, this truth is to be applied to the second coming of Christ. When he returns, we

will see this truth unfold before our eyes. At that time, we won't need a parable to help us understand it. We will be watching it happen.

- c. But it not only has a time context, it has a specific application to a specific group of people. 19:29. Those who have believed in Jesus and treasured Jesus to the degree that they have been willing to let go of earthly treasure, they will receive a hundredfold. Some literally leave all to follow Christ. Some realize they have worshipped things or people or self or even family more than Christ, and the leave them in the sense that they now prize Christ and worship Christ above all.
 - i. Matt 13:44
 - ii. Every one of those – that is, every true believer, is going to receive a hundredfold.
 - iii. The truth, many who are first will be last, and the last first, is meant to illustrate that hundredfold return for following Christ.
- II. Observations of the Parable
- a. “The kingdom of heaven is like” In other words, this story gives us insight into the kingdom of heaven, particularly when the kingdom of heaven is consummated on the earth at Christ's return.
 - b. Vv1-2 – the master of the house goes out to find workers for his vineyard. Notice he doesn't delegate the hiring of workers to a subordinate. No, this master is personally involved in who works his vineyard.
 - i. He finds some laborers around 6am and agrees with them to work a full day in his vineyard for a full days' pay. I imagine these laborers are grateful to have employment for the day and grateful to be paid a suitable amount.
 - c. Vv 3-4 – the master returns about 9am to find more laborers. Notice he doesn't make a formal agreement with them. He just promises them that if they work the remainder of the day he will do right by them. They need the work and evidently they find him trustworthy enough to work without knowing what they will earn.
 - d. V5 – the master goes out again at 12pm and 3pm to secure more workers. He must have known that the harvest was far more than the first two groups could manage. He needed more. And these two

additional groups simply trust the manager's honesty as did the second group.

- e. Vv6-7 is where the parable gets surprisingly interesting. The master goes out again at 5pm – 1 hour before the end of the work day. He finds those who have been overlooked and therefore unemployed. They are “last place” people. No one has hired them.
 - i. Now it's almost quitting time. He's not going to get much labor in return for giving them work. So why hire them, the last place people, at the end of the day? This master must not only be honest and trustworthy; he must be compassionate and very generous.
- f. Now from vv8-10, the surprises multiply.
 - i. The first surprise comes in v8 when the master reverses the order of payments. Instead of beginning with those who arrived first and so on, he begins with those who arrived last. That would seem odd to the first group.
 - ii. Then a major surprise occurs in v9. The last group who only worked for one hour received the same amount as was agreed upon with the first group. The master didn't pro-rate the wages. He freely gave so that these last place people could also go home with a full days' wage. Again, he must really be compassionate and generous.
 - iii. In v10 another surprise awaits the first place people. Seeing that the last workers were paid the wage they were promised, they reasoned among themselves that they are probably going to receive more. After all, they worked more.
- g. So it is now in vv11-12 those first workers respond as we are expecting them to respond. They are responding as we probably would have responded. They are grumbling and complaining about the master of the house.
 - i. Now remember, if not for him they would have had no work that day. They would have made no earnings that day. And also remember they are receiving exactly what they had agreed to. But none of that matters now. They feel cheated. They think it unfair. They should have received more because they worked more.

- ii. They seem to have a pretty good argument here. I mean if we were one of them we would feel slighted too.
- h. Now in vv13-15 the master replies with three gentle rebukes for the ungrateful grumbling of the first workers.
 - i. His first rebuke is to remind them that they have received an honest wage for an honest days' labor. They have not been wronged. They worked and they have money to take home. Don't grumble for being well paid and going home with something rather than nothing.
 - ii. His second rebuke was to remind them that he was the master of the house. He sets the wages as he wishes, and his wages are not unjust or unfair. Its his to keep and his to give.
 - iii. His third rebuke was to chide them a little for begrudging his generous nature. They seem to have a legitimate case against the master but in truth the fault was in their attitude and self-centered perspective.

III. Lessons from the Parable

- a. We might say the main lesson here is for us to not be like these first workers in the spiritual realm.
 - i. May we never serve God in terms of earning favor or deserving of wages. If I do this then God should do this. No – may we serve God out of nothing less than sheer humble gratitude and thankfulness. If this master didn't hire them, they would never go to the vineyard. If God doesn't save us, we'll never be saved. It's never the point of how much He owes us. We already have more than we could ever deserve.
 - ii. May we never forget that God is sovereign and just and good. He works according to His will and His will is always just and always good. We are never slighted in God's kingdom. If we compare ourselves with how God works in the lives of others, we will grumble and complain against God as if He is not just. We will forget that He is good. We will never find contentment. Whatever comes our way through the hands of our Sovereign God, whether it be pain or ease, trial or triumph, God is working for our good. These workers went home with

full pay, not empty pockets. Don't compare what God is doing with them to what God is doing with you.

- iii. To envy and covet the blessings of others sheds light on our own hearts. If we compare, we will covet. If we are content, we will praise.
- iv. May we never fault-find or blame-game with God. He does what He does because He is generous, He is gracious, He is good, He is compassionate.
 - 1. You see when the master paid the last workers just as much as the first workers, the wrong response was "He's so unfair" whereas the right response would have been, "Look how generous He is to last place people. He really is a good master."

Conclusion – Be last place people in the kingdom. May we realize that everything God has given was not given because we earned it, but rather because He is gracious. He didn't choose us to go into His vineyard for what we could do for Him. He chose us to go into His vineyard that we might praise Him for His goodness and that He might overwhelm us with His grace! Sometimes it's much, much better to be last!