

The Last Will Be First And The First Last

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[0 : 00] On the 20th of July 1969, something very special happened. I don't know if anyone here actually remembers the event I'm talking about, but it was the time that the first person walked on the moon.

And I wasn't alive at that stage, but maybe some of you were and remember that well. And I'm sure most of you know who that first person was.

It was Neil Armstrong. But I think what's less commonly known is that in total, only 12 people have ever walked on the surface of the moon.

And the last person was on Apollo 17 in December 1972. Does anyone know his name? I didn't think so.

His name was Harrison Schmidt. Most of us have never heard of him, maybe none of us. And we know the first person, but most of us have no interest or very little in the last person.

[1 : 04] There's something about being first, isn't there? No one's interested in who's last, and that's partly our ranking system in life. We strive for that first place.

Anything else is of little interest, especially last. But this parable we've just read starts and ends by telling us what God's kingdom is actually like.

And I think it's the opposite of how we would rank things. So this passage is a bit like a sandwich. So you've got two slices of bread, either perhaps that first piece.

And the first verse, which we read in chapter 19 verse 30, is perhaps that first piece of bread on the sandwich. And the last verse, verse 16 of chapter 20, they both echo each other.

They both have that same, basically the same verse almost. So the last will be first and the first will be last. But actually I think it's more like a club sandwich, because you've also got this slice of bread in the middle, which is in verse 8.

[2 : 08] And when it says, when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, call the workers and pay them their wages. Beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.

So this first shall be last motif is clearly a principle that we're to take away with us, something that's important that Jesus wants us to learn from this parable.

But what does he actually mean by that? I don't think it's here to confuse us. I love playing board games like Monopoly, but I have to confess I am hugely competitive, so I'm probably really annoying to play with.

And that carries on into my daily life. I often find myself comparing myself with other people, just to the point of being envious at times, and it can get me very down.

Perhaps that rings bells with other people here, I don't know. Or maybe you're prone to grumble, instead of having a grateful heart. Often when things in life are not going as you would hope they would go, you find yourself starting to grumble.

[3 : 18] Well let's unpack this parable and see what the Lord is trying to teach us about dealing with these things. And we'll see how Jesus will, it's actually going to be turning our worldview upside down this morning.

So looking at the passage, we'll just work our way through it. First thing to notice is that the only group of workers here who have a contract with the landowner is that first group, the group that he approaches early in the morning.

It's actually about 6am, and they agree to a work for a full day, so that would have been 12 hours back in those days. So we have it relatively easy these days.

So for 12 hours work, he offers to pay them one denarius, which basically was a standard day's pay for a foot soldier or a laborer back in those days.

So this is a fair deal. This is an honest day's work for an honest day's wage. Everyone's clear about the conditions of the contract. Everyone's happy.

[4 : 21] Then at 9am, the landowner goes back, hires some more guys. These guys aren't however on contract. They're hired on trust.

And this is important. He doesn't tell them what they're going to earn. He just says he'll pay them whatever's right. And then that's repeated again at midday and at 3pm.

And then at the 11th hour, which would have been 5pm. So that's literally one hour before everyone else is due to clock off. He goes and hires some more with the same proviso.

Trust me, I'll pay you what's right. So then the whistle goes at 6pm. Workdays over, it's time to get paid.

And this is where it all starts to go a bit pear shaped. Because it's interesting that the landowner insists on paying those who are hired last first. That sort of middle bit of the club sandwich that we were talking about.

[5 : 23] Why does he do that? Isn't he sort of asking for trouble? Isn't he just frustrating those hard workers who've been there all day by doing that?

Then grace can be frustrating. It can be odious, as Luther put it. So the guys who showed up only an hour before home time, they go forward.

And compared to the people who've been working all day long in the Middle Eastern midday sun, they look pretty clean and nice. And probably don't smell too bad. Probably hardly broke a sweat even.

And still a bit fresh, energetic. All right, the owner says, I agreed to pay you what's fair. So here's a denarius for you and for you and for you.

Well, seeing this, you can only imagine what must have been going through the minds of the guys who were hired first in the morning. They must have wondered how much these guys who were hired last would have got for just an hour's work.

[6 : 23] So when they see them getting a denarius, you can see ching ching, denarius signs coming up in their eyes. They're just thinking, well, one hour's work is one denarius, so 12 hours work.

Ooh. Guaranteed we're going home rich tonight, lads. Maybe they're even starting to think, how am I going to spend this money? Well, you know what happens next.

The 3 p.m. gang go up and get their denarius, the midday gang go and get theirs, the 9 a.m. gang get theirs. And then finally the first group who were under contract go up and they get the same amount, one denarius.

What? Wait a minute, that's not fair. You can just imagine it. We've slaved away all day in the burning sun and you're telling me that these sweat-free upstarts are going to get the same pay as us.

And you know what we read here in this parable goes against everything that we know about employer motivation, fair compensation.

[7 : 32] I think children have an amazing way of expressing things that adults think but don't say. And if I was to get the Sunday school back in here and give one child a really difficult task, give another one a fairly difficult task and another one just had to stand there doing nothing basically, and then at the end I was to say, well done and give everyone a suite.

You can guarantee that it wouldn't be long before you'd be hearing howling and crying and that's not fair. And you know, they'd be right, wouldn't they? It isn't fair.

And maybe like me, you've read this parable before and it kind of raises your heckles, in fact that those lazy good for nothings who show up late are paid the same.

I mean, this is scandalous stuff. You almost want to sort of contact the great pickers union and complain because you feel for the ones who've worked the hardest.

Now if the landowner in this parable represents God and he does, what's God trying to say about himself? That he's unfair?

[8 : 44] That God doesn't give them what's rightly theirs? Where's the justice in that? I mean, you've heard the idioms, the early bird gets the worm, there's no such thing as a free lunch, first come first served, no pain no gain.

I mean, that's surely fair. What God is telling us in this parable is that the kingdom of God is unfair. I mean, surely God should be encouraging justice and what's fair and square to get what you

deserve and to deserve what you get.

And at least that would be understandable. It's quantifiable, it's predictable. And perhaps that's what you think, reading this parable about God's kingdom, actually I think I would prefer to get what I deserve.

Really? Do we really want to enter into a contract with God stating that we should get what we deserve? Think about that. I mean, seriously, we really don't want to go there.

Do you honestly want your just reward, your just wage? Romans 6.23 is very clear about this, it says the wages of sin is death. And if we're going to be technical about it, each one of us here is a sinner.

[10 : 01] And we all deserve death. So anything beyond that is sheer grace and mercy. So if we want to play out this, give me what's mine, what I deserve thing, then you and I, we're doomed.

I think Jesus gives us this parable about grace to tell us that grace can't be calculated the same way as a day's wages. And we might find that really, really frustrating, or as Luther put it, odious. Unless you're the 11th hour worker, that is. And I think this is what's key to understanding this passage. The key we have to ask ourselves this morning is, who do I most identify with in this parable?

A man was driving in the countryside one day, and he saw an old man sitting on a fence, watching the cars go by. Stopping to pass the time of day, the traveller said, I could never stand being out here.

You just live here, see nothing. I'm sure you don't travel like I do. I'm on the go all the time. The old man on the fence looked down at the stranger and drawled, I can't see much difference in what I'm doing and what you're doing.

[11 : 26] I sit on the fence and watch the cars go by, and you sit in your car and watch the fences go by. It's just the way you look at things. It's a question of perspective.

Depends on where you're looking from. And perhaps we're looking at this parable the wrong way around. We're not identifying with the correct group. If you're like me, you probably hear this parable from the mindset of the one that was hired first, the hard worker.

But what if, despite our hard work and effort, we're not the ones that were first in the queue to be hired like we so confidently think we are? What if we're actually meant to identify with those who were hired last?

If you take a moment to think about this, if that were the case, then it wouldn't be fair either, would it? It would be generosity beyond our wildest dreams, indiscriminate grace.

But this is our God. Verse 15 tells us, I am generous, full of grace, paying us more than we're worth, not because of who we are, but because of who he is.

[12 : 41] This parable is all about God. And this parable should change our perspective on who we are and what God has done for us. Because God is turning our thinking upside down, or rather perhaps we should say he's turning it the right way up.

We keep thinking we're the first to be hired in this vineyard instead of the last. But God is telling us that there's great reward in his kingdom for those who follow him.

Adoption as his child, eternal, abundant life. But none of it, none of it at all on the basis of what we've done.

So this is the challenge that Jesus is issuing us all here this morning. Are you a first? A firsty, if you like, or are you a lasty? Which group do you belong to?

And it's a tricky question. But I think there's two signs from our attitudes that will give away the answer to this. And they're both found in this passage.

[13 : 45] I think firstly, those who think of themselves as last respond to what life throws at them with gratitude. If you think of yourself as the last person to be hired from this parable, then you approach everything that life throws at you with gratitude.

On the other hand, like the workers in this parable, if you think of yourself as first, then you respond to what life throws at you with grumbling.

Thinking you deserve more than you get. I want you to try and imagine something. You know these like reality TV shows? And if you imagine that unbeknown to you, a film crew turns up at your home, installs cameras in all of your rooms, and films you privately while you have no idea what the cameras are rolling.

And what if your daily life was secretly recorded for this show, and as people are in their living rooms, watching your action packed life and illicit glory, there was also on the screen a scoreboard. And on the left hand side, you had a score for the number of times that you grumbled. On the right hand side, you had a score for the number of times that you were grateful. What would your numbers look like?

[15 : 11] Would they be balanced? Or if you're, I suspect, like the majority of us, you probably find that there's more on the grumble side than on the actual grateful side.

Some people say things like a leopard never changes its spots. You'll never change. If you're a grumbler now, you'll always be a grumbler.

And you wait until you get old. But the Bible tells a very different story, doesn't it? People can change with God's help. But grumbling is so easy to do.

So easy to find ourselves slipping into that. Rather than being grateful we're grumbling, and that's a sign to each one of us that we've slipped from thinking of ourselves as first rather than last.

And if that's the case, then we need to, like that first hymn we sang, bring ourselves back to the cross. We need to remember what we truly deserve, God's wrath, His punishment.

[16 : 13] And instead what we've received from Him is wonderful grace and forgiveness. The second sign, I think, from this passage, is that those who think of themselves as last are content.

Whereas those who think of themselves as first compare themselves with others, like those workers in the passage. Roosevelt once said apparently that comparison is the thief of joy.

And it is. Let's be honest, we all fall into a trap of comparison at some point or another. Feeling envious. How come she always has a nice holiday every year?

I work my socks off and I can't afford to go away. Why is he so good at the guitar? And I just don't have any skills like that at all. Why does she have it so easy?

She just turns up at church, does nothing and just goes. Whereas I have to be making coffee and tea. It can be anything, can't it? So many different ways that we can grumble.

[17 : 19] So we can compare ourselves. And it's been said that comparison is the cancer of the church. And yet we find ourselves getting drawn in so easily, don't we?

The famous 19th century evangelist, D. L. Moody, once told a fable of an eagle that was comparing himself with another eagle. An eagle that could fly better than he could.

And consequently this eagle became very envious. One day he saw an archer with a bone arrow and he said to him, I wish you would bring down that eagle there.

The man said, yeah, I'll do that, but I'll need some feathers for my arrow. So the envious eagle pulled out one of his wing feathers and gave it to the archer. Shot the arrow, just missed the bird. Not quite high enough. Pulled out another feather, gave it to the archer and again, each time missing, until the poor bird had pulled out so many feathers he couldn't fly.

[18 : 20] The archer took advantage of the situation and turned round and killed that helpless bird. Moody made this application. If you're envious of others, the one you hurt the most is yourself.

Envious is the result of comparison and we've got to be so careful not to self-harm by comparing ourselves with others. No one here can truly think that they're better than someone else.

That is really dangerous territory to get into. Only God knows what's truly inside. And no one, absolutely no one is beyond God's redemption.

Anyone can come to him and be in repentance and can be forgiven. Brought into that relationship with their Creator, gained the promise of heaven, we can all, each one of us, receive that denarius of God's grace.

Because God is gracious and generous. And so that puts to death any comparison. If you've never made that commitment, can I encourage you this morning to seek God while he may be found?

[19 : 29] Knock and my door will, it will be open to you. Before it's too late, don't think you can live your life the way you want and then turn to God on your deathbed. People often quote the thief on the cross and say, I'll just live my life my way and then I'll turn to God in my dying hours.

But a wise Puritan once said on this subject, we only have an account of a deathbed repentance in the Bible in order that no man need despair.

We have only one in order that no man may presume. I read that again. We only have one account of a deathbed repentance in the Bible in order that no man need despair.

But we have only one in order that no man may presume. Speaking of putting comparison to death, maybe some of us are worried that if we would publicly commit our lives to God that perhaps

people, what would other people think of us?

Perhaps they already think we're saved. Wouldn't that be embarrassing? Perhaps other of us know that actually in my heart I'm not right with God.

[20 : 39] I don't have that relationship yet. I'm not there. Even though perhaps over the years you've struggled to portray the impression of being a strong Christian.

You know the devil rubs his hands in glee whenever we worry what other people will think about us. When we allow perhaps a tiny little bit of local gossip to warriors and to separators from God's promise and eternal life.

Yes, okay, maybe some people might joke about it or make comment about it. Only until the next juicy tip bit comes along. And honestly what truly matters is that your new brothers and sisters in Christ they will rejoice with you.

So don't put eternal death, don't risk eternal death by thinking that you're too late, or you're too young, or you're too old. My prayer is that today the 25th of February 2024 will go down in your life history as being the day that you surrendered your life to Jesus.

You let him take the burden of your sins. You turn to him in repentance and you truly become free and eternally secure. You know it's interesting that Jesus tells this parable in response to what Peter was doing.

[21 : 55] So if you look at your Bibles in the previous chapters, so chapter 19 verse 27 he's comparing himself to others. Peter answered him, we've left everything to follow you.

What will there be for us Lord? And from time to time I think we're very tempted to think like Peter. Look at all I've given up, look at all I've sacrificed being a Christian.

And yet this person over here does very very little and they get the same reward. Or this person trusted Jesus on her deathbed and she never has to serve him on this earth.

I mean that doesn't seem fair. And again we're grumbling and we're comparing. Once again we're slipping into the risk of thinking that we're saved by works.

Often without realizing we're doing it. Somehow we think that some of our works must carry a little bit of merit surely.

[22 : 55] But instead of being like that we need to be like Martin Luther was 500 years ago. And experience the joy and the relief of realizing that our being saved has nothing whatsoever to do with what we've done.

And can you imagine what a burden that must have been to think that your salvation is a result of your performance? Wow you'd never think you'd done enough.

You'd never be sure you were there. But instead in God's amazing mercy and grace the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

What a good and generous God we have. Let's pray.