

## The Last shall be First

Matthew 20:16

Much of life is guided by perceived standards and expectations. We are quite familiar with these standards, being exposed to them as long as we can remember. In order to be accepted and successful, one is taught to believe they must abide by these long held standards.

Unfortunately, many of the standards and expectations are self-centered and self-serving. While I am well aware that we must put forth ample effort if we plan to achieve success, we must be cautious about allowing the standards and expectations of a fallen world to dictate our lives. The world teaches us to look out for ourselves first and foremost, always making sure our interests are met before we consider meeting the needs of another. The world desires to receive instead of giving, striving to gain all they can as they journey through life. The world teaches us to reach for the stars, seeking to rise to the top in our given field, through whatever means necessary. Again, there is nothing wrong with ambition and hard work, but we must learn to view life from a biblical perspective rather than allowing the standards of the world to motivate our lives.

The Bible is filled with what we refer to as paradoxes. Webster defines a paradox as “*a tenet contrary to received opinion.*” Dictionary.com defines a paradox as “*a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd, but in reality expresses a possible truth.*” Much of the Bible’s teaching is contrary to the beliefs and opinions of modern culture. A few of the paradoxes we discover are – loss actually produces gain; weakness can in fact provide great strength; giving is the best approach to receiving; and being last will actually make one first. Over the next few weeks I want to examine a few paradoxes in the Bible. We will soon discover that God’s economy is much different than that of man’s. As we move through this series, *Paradoxes in the Christian Life*, I hope we will learn to view life from a spiritual perspective. I want to consider the [principles](#) revealed in the text as we discuss: [The Last shall be First](#).

**I. The Setting (16)** – **So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.** As we discuss this paradox spoken by Jesus, we need to understand the context in which He spoke. He had just shared a parable about a man who owned a vineyard, hiring servants to go work within the vineyard. Early in the morning the man agreed to hire servants to labor in the vineyard for a penny a day. Going out at the third hour, 9:00 am, he found men standing idle and hired them to labor in the vineyard as well. This process continued throughout the day. The man hired servants again at noon, 3:00 pm, and finally at 5:00 pm. When the day’s work had ended at 6:00 pm, the man paid every laborer the wages they all had agreed upon; each man received a penny, a Roman denarius for their labor. This was a good wage for the laborers, the same salary paid to Roman soldiers. As the workers began to come in from the field and receive their wages, some of the laborers began to murmur against the owner of the vineyard. Although he had kept his word,

paying the salary they all had agreed upon, some were upset that those who labored only an hour received the same salary as those who had labored all day. The owner defended his actions, reminding them they each had agreed to work in the vineyard that day for an agreed amount. He had not done those who entered the field early wrong because he paid what they had agreed upon for a day's labor.

- Through this parable Jesus taught a profound truth. Many in that culture were focused solely on financial gain. They were upset that those who had labored for a much shorter time had received the same wages. Although no one had been taken advantage of, the thought of someone receiving the same wage for less work caused hard feelings. They were not concerned with the benefit others had received; they were focused solely on perceived unfairness.
- As I begin to make application, I want to emphasize the main focus of Jesus' teaching – He is referring primarily to salvation. Those who are saved later in life are no less saved than those who came to faith in Christ at an early age. The benefit of salvation is the same for all – forgiveness of sin and eternal life through Christ, regardless of the point in life we are saved. We can make application for our daily Christian walk as well. We are called to serve the Lord faithfully, regardless of the actions of others. We must keep an eternal perspective as we journey through life. Our walk with the Lord and the blessing we receive from Him is not contingent upon the actions or blessing of another. We should rejoice in the blessings we have received and share in the rejoicing of others as the Lord blesses them!

**II. The Standard** ([Vv.13-15](#)) – Jesus conveyed through the parable that the owner of the vineyard had done no wrong. Each worker had agreed to labor that day for one day's wages. Nothing was said about how many hours of work were required to receive full benefit. The wages paid belonged to the owner, and he had every right to disperse the wages as it pleased him.

- We now live in a society motivated by entitlement – most believe that everyone owes them something. We are raising a generation that seems content to put forth very little effort and yet expect to be compensated, simply because they feel entitled to have what others have labored to possess. The type of culture breeds jealousy and contempt. Unfortunately this attitude of entitlement has even made its way into our spiritual lives. Many are jealous of the way God works in the lives of others. They, like those within the parable, feel as if they too should be compensated based on their efforts and perceived worth. They argue that they have somehow been treated unfairly if God chooses to use or bless others in the Kingdom work.
- Like the vineyard owner, Jesus has the ability to use those He chooses within the harvest, and He also has the right to bless those according to His divine will. We may not like to admit it, but our lives are directed by His sovereignty. He provides the breath we breathe and the life we

enjoy. We have our being because of His good grace. Who are we to argue about the blessings the Lord chooses to provide or withhold? Being saved by His grace is much more than any deserve. We have no right to be jealous or accuse the Lord of treating us unfairly. He provided the means of our redemption and He chooses the boundaries of our service to Him! We all should be thankful for the grace we have received and rejoice that He has chosen to use us in any capacity. He doesn't need us to accomplish His purposes, but through His grace He provides opportunities to serve at His leisure.

**III. The Standing (16a)** – *So the last shall be first, and the first last.* Now we come to the paradox Jesus conveyed – the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. This is not the first time Jesus had made this statement. He spoke these words in response to Peter's question regarding the disciples' compensation for the sacrifices they had made to follow Him. The world had looked upon these men with disdain and mockery. The disciples were considered foolish to walk away from a steady means of employment to follow Jesus. They had sacrificed their livelihood to follow Jesus and He would reward them accordingly.

- In the parable preceding our text, those who went to work earlier in the day were angered that the others received the same wages. While these may have labored longer in the field, they were no more appreciated than those who began working in the afternoon. When the day's work had ended, each had made a contribution to the harvest; and each would receive payment for their labor.
- I have no doubt we will be quite surprised when we stand before the Lord one faithful day. Many whom we thought would receive great reward will likely receive little, while those we assumed had accomplished little of value for the kingdom will receive great reward. Our years of service in the vineyard do not automatically guarantee great blessing. I am confident the Lord will honor all who have been faithful to Him. He will reward every good deed done in His name. He declared that one could not offer a cold drink of water in His name without reward. However, we are expected to use the gifts we have received in service to the Lord. No doubt there will be some, who were saved for only a short time, which will receive a greater reward than others who were saved for years. We will not be rewarded based on the actions of others; our reward will be based on our work for the Lord and commitment to Him! I pray we will labor for the Lord out of genuine love and commitment to Him, realizing His hand of blessing in every area of our lives. [Matthew 23:12](#) – *And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.* [James 4:6](#) – *But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.*

**IV. The Significance** (16b) – **for many be called, but few chosen.** Finally we discover the great significance in the words of Christ. Many received an invitation, but few were actually chosen. This reveals that all who were invited did not respond to the call. Some heard but failed to respond. This has a two-fold application. It speaks of:

**A. Salvation** – The parable of the man in the vineyard seeking workers is a beautiful illustration of the Lord's saving grace. He returned many times throughout the day seeking workers for the field. All who responded received the same wages. Those who followed the call of the Master received salvation. No doubt some were invited to labor in the vineyard with the promise of wages being paid, and yet they chose not to be employed by the owner of the vineyard.

- Many are called today; the Lord continues to deal with the hearts of those who stand in need of salvation. He offers eternal life and forgiveness of sin, but those who receive the invitation must be willing to respond. They must come to Him by faith, repenting of sin, and receiving the gracious gift of salvation. We find this same phrase used in the parable dealing with invitation of guests to the wedding, even from the highways and hedges. **Matt.22:12-14 – And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.** <sup>[13]</sup> **Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** <sup>[14]</sup> **For many are called, but few are chosen.**

**B. Service** – We must also consider this from the aspect of service unto the Lord following salvation. The Lord desires all to be laborers in the harvest. The call to serve is extended continually. Some hear the call and respond, while others hear the call and fail to serve. There is no greater blessing in life than to be of service to the Lord. Are we heeding the call to serve at the leisure of our Lord? The laborer doesn't have the privilege of choosing a particular area of service, but he is promised blessing for obedience. Are you serving in the harvest? There is a work for all to do, but we must be willing to submit to the call to serve.

**Conclusion:** Truly this reveals a paradox within our Christian lives. The world expects those who finish first to be declared the winner, but Jesus sees the heart and attitude of service more than mere busyness. I want to be used of the Lord in a way that brings honor to Him, serving according to His desires.

The Lord is calling those who are willing to follow Him. The invitation has been given, and I am confident the Spirit has spoken. Do you need to respond to the invitation for salvation or submission in service? If so, now is the time to heed the call. Come as the Lord leads!