

**‘Many that first shall be last’. Workers in Vineyard. Matthew 19. 27- 20. 21.
Bangalore, India. 31 January 2007.**

I want to use this evening’s meeting as an opportunity for us to each reassess *our motives* for serving the Lord. And as I understand it, this parable and the context in which it was spoken can help us to do that.

First, we need to note the structure of the passage. As you can see, the parable is sandwiched/wedged between two similar versions of the same saying – ‘many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first’, 19. 30 – with the second in reverse order – ‘the last shall be first, and the first last’, 20. 16. In effect these are the bookends of the parable.

The parable starts with the word ‘for’, and is immediately followed by the word ‘so’. These words tell us that the purpose of parable is to explain, illustrate, amplify the saying. And any interpretation of the parable must harmonise with the saying - and vice versa. The first saying itself begins the word ‘but’, 19. 30 - that is, in some way the saying stands in contrast to what is said in verses 28-29. The whole section is anchored therefore in Peter’s question of verse 27 – to which verses 28-29 form one answer; and 19. 30—20. 16 another. But Peter’s question in turn arises out of the incident recorded in 19. 16-26. And there we must stop or we will be back to Monday morning’s passage.

In verses 19 to 26, an exceptional – outwardly blameless – rich young man had approached Jesus with a question about eternal life. He knew that more was required than mere external conformity to the law – ‘what lack I yet?’, v. 20. The Lord knew his heart – that riches held the supreme place there. And so the Lord put His finger on the idol in his life.

The young man was told to forsake his wealth – ‘go and sell what you have, and give to the poor’ – and follow Jesus, v. 21. His brow clouded over and he went away sorrowful – the price was too high for him. The Lord illustrated how difficult it is for the rich to enter God’s kingdom by reference to the impossibility of the largest familiar animal (camel – not seen many elephants!) entering through the smallest familiar hole (eye of a needle). ‘It is easier.’ The disciples were astounded/amazed – were not riches a sign of God’s blessing and favour? ‘Who then can be saved?’, they asked. Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With men this is impossible (this cannot be), but with God all things are possible (all things can be)’.

It was at this point, as we read, Peter spoke up – on behalf of the 12 – and claimed that they had complied with all the necessary conditions. Note that word ‘answered’, v. 27. ‘We have forsaken all, and followed you!’: ‘we’ = emphatic in each of the synoptic Gospels.

19.27. But what was in disciples minds? We clearly need to relate Peter’s question to popular understanding of Messiahship and disciples’ expectation of the kingdom. Their eyes were closed to all else except a physical, temporal, earthly kingdom. The Lord had promised that those who forsook all and followed Him would ‘have treasure in heaven’, 19. 21. Their eyes lit up – that certainly whetted their appetite. They had fulfilled all the conditions – and were now impatient to obtain more details of their reward – and so ask that the Lord put some flesh on the bones!

As we have noted and as so often, Peter was only the spokesman – hence the double ‘we’ of v. 27 – and so we read that the Lord addressed ‘them’ as ‘you’ (plural), v. 28. And we must grant that the sacrifices which they had made were far from negligible – we are told that Matthew rose up from his custom-booth and left behind him his big house – big enough to accommodate ‘many’ tax-collectors and outcasts for a large farewell meal, 9. 9-10; Peter and Andrew left their fishing nets, 4. 20. James and John left their boat, their father and the hired servants, 4. 22; Mark 1. 20. And of each it is said that they had ‘followed’ Him.

Vv. 28-29. It is lovely that He first answered them in the spirit in which they had asked – giving a straight answer of the sort which they wanted. Spoke in verse 28 of those who followed; and in verse 29 of those who left – reverse order of verse 27. The twelve would have thrones and ‘everyone’ receive a hundredfold. (Some MSS say only ‘manifold’; but Mark 10. 30 = hundredfold.) The thrones would be theirs at the time of Israel’s and earth’s regeneration. When Messiah’s kingdom finally came, they would have special places of authority and responsibility.

V. 29 moves back from the future to the present. The Lord follows – in pairs – the order in which His servants would leave their families (for ‘wife’ see Luke 18. 29) – brother and sister, father and mother, wife and children. All are sandwiched between ‘houses and lands’ – possessions – because of man in v. 22. That is, God would compensate by increased spiritual relationships and possessions. God will be no-one’s debtor – it is impossible for any of us to out-give God!

‘And will inherit eternal life’ – with these words, the section has come full circle. Remember the young man’s question: what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?, v. 16. And there Luke ends his account – as a story complete in itself, Luke 18.29 – commitment to Christ brings eternal life – about which the young man had enquired but for which he had proved himself unprepared. Mark tells the story of the young man and ends *his*

account with the saying - but without recording the parable, Mark 10.31 – leaving the saying hang in mid-air – and anybody's guess what it meant. Needing Matthew's gospel to explain the saying. [Not unusual in gospels - Matt. 26. 67-68 (buffeted smote palms hands, Prophecy, who smote?) where need Mark 14. 65 to explain that had first covered His face.]

The main point and purpose of the parable was clearly tied up with manner in which the wages were paid at the end of the day, v. 8 – where the words 'last' and 'first' become so important. For there the last literally became the first and vice versa.

20. 1. Vineyards were plentiful in Judea. To be certain of securing the necessary workforce, the lord of the vineyard (as 'householder' of v.1 is called in v. 8) felt obliged to go to the market-place (as we are told in v. 3) early. As it happened, this master needn't have worried or bothered, v. 6 – he could have had a lie on.

6am. **20. 2.** He 'agreed' with the workmen – the word from which we derive our word 'symphony'. He harmonised, was in accord, with them, if you like. That is, they struck a deal, they reached a binding agreement – there was a clear contract with specified terms - 'a denarius for the day'. Everything was conducted in a most business-like manner – there was a stipulated sum and a stipulated period. We need to remind ourselves that a 'penny', a denarius was considerably more than the daily pay of ordinary soldier – 225 for a year, according to the Roman historian, Tacitus.¹ It was therefore a decent – even a generous – wage for an vineyard worker – the equivalent of the Greek 'drachma' which was paid as a daily wage in the Jewish apocalyptic book of Tobit.² This vineyard owner was not out to short-change, to exploit or take advantage of the men who started first.

9am (a far more civilised hour). **20. 3-5a.** The man saw others standing in the market 'idle' – simply inactive, unemployed – not layabouts. But the arrangement made with them is different to that made in verse 2. Here there is no precise contract – only the vineyard owner's undertaking to give them what he deemed 'right/fair' – thereby demanding on the workers' part a certain measure of trust in his fairness and honesty. But for them his rather vague promise was enough.

12 noon and 3pm. **20. 5b.** Again 'whatsoever is right'. Quite likely they each understood him to mean the right proportion of the full day's wage. But none of these man had any legal redress or comeback – or legitimate cause for complaint – if he decided to pay them less – say a tenth of a denarius or even a few mites (128 in one denarius).

5 pm. **20. 6-7.** The 11th hour. Tea-time. 'Are there not twelve hours in the day?', Jesus once asked, John 11. 9. A working day consisted of 12 hours including breaks. So by the eleventh-hour, the day was virtually over. Hence 'Why stand ye here *all the day* idle?', v. 6. Here they go to work in simple reliance on the vineyard-owner – because he makes no mention of any reward – indeed, he makes no promise of any sort, v. 7. They are dependent entirely on the character – on the goodness – of the man for their recompense. They possess no promise or undertaking of anything. They have no legal comeback at all – even if he pays them nothing.

20. 8. The time of recompense brought several shocks – first there was the *order* of the payments, and second there was the *size* of the payments. The owner of the vineyard acted strictly in accord with God's law, 'You shall not oppress an hired servant that is poor and needy ... at his day you shall give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it', Deut. 24. 14-15. His 'steward' was the man who administered his affairs for him – the senior servant responsible for running the household and supervising the other servants.

Surprise number 1 : 'beginning from the last unto the first'. A case of 'last come, first served'! Here lies an essential part of story – creating the two categories 'when *first* came', v. 10, and 'these *last*', v. 12, 'this *last*', v. 14. There can therefore be no doubt of the identity of each.

If the first had been paid first, they would doubtless have disappeared out of the story and its whole moral been lost. And even if they had stayed around, they could only have murmured because the other workers had been paid too much, and the relevance of their complaint to the question which Peter voiced on behalf of the 12 would have been lost, 19. 27.

20. 9-10. But it is at this point that the Lord has the second – and even bigger – surprise in store for His disciples. For the 'last' – the five o'clock workers – received a whole denarius. Why not a 'pandion' – in value 1/12 denarius? Quite understandably the 'first' – the six o'clock in the morning workers – 'expected/supposed' that – when their turn came to be paid – they should have received more. We can almost see them rubbing their hands and tapping their noses as they wait in the queue – we can almost hear them whispering among themselves, 'what shall we have therefore?' – does the question ring any bells? It was, of course, the question which Peter had voiced on behalf of the twelve, 19. 27. That is, they were thinking about what they were to get for their service. Their minds were now occupied with the detail of their reward.

But, fair's fair – surely it was only reasonable for them to expect some special, productivity bonus – they had done more work and that through the hardest time of the day. On any score, it seemed that justice was very much on their side. And yet – when their turn came – they – to their horror and anger – received only a denarius. Although it had been the steward who had handed out the wages, clearly the vineyard owner had remained in earshot – and it was against him personally that they 'began to grumble' – complain aloud, vv. 11-12. ('Goodman of house' = 'householder', v.1) The tense indicates continued and prolonged grumbling. They were not amused! Any more than I guess any of us would have been.

20.12. The 'burden' of the day describes oppression and wearisome toil. They had been exposed to the 'heat' both of the sun and the sirocco – the scorching hot and dry wind which blew in from the desert at sunrise – referred to as 'a vehement east wind', Jonah 4. 8, and 'an east wind ... shall come up from the wilderness', Hosea 13. 15. They had toiled through the sirocco and when the sun was at its zenith. It had been no picnic. Remember the words of Jacob to Laban, 'in the day the drought consumed me', Gen. 31. 40. The first to be paid had had to contend with neither the sirocco nor the sun. Their work had been – not only far shorter – only 1/12th of the time – but far less strenuous and demanding because they had benefited from the cool of the evening. And the early morning gang were pretty peeved about the whole thing.

20. 13. 'One of them' – seemingly, like the 12, they had a spokesman. 'Friend' = 'comrade', companion, associate' – only in Matthew and always in the form of address – different to Lazarus, 'Lazarus our friend sleeps', John 11. 11. It wasn't a term of affection or of intimacy. Else only in 'Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment?', 22. 12, and 'Friend, why are you come?', 26. 50 – the Lord Jesus was never insincere.

In reply, the owner appealed to the sum specified in the contract. 'I do you no wrong. You ask for what you deserve and that I have given you - you appeal for justice - by justice shall your mouth be shut'. He simply reminded the complainers of the agreement they had entered into – and which he had fully kept.

20. 14. 'Take that which is yours' – either because they had refused the denarius or had handed it back. I must stress that a denarius was very fair pay for a day's work – the man is certainly not being mean or niggardly. The fact he chose to give proportionately more to others simply demonstrated his liberality and open-handedness. 'To you I am just - to them I will be generous'.

20. 15. 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?' Compare verse 14 : 'That is yours – for you to use as you will'. 'This is mine for me to use as I will'. Note that he used the claim that his money was his own – not as an excuse for greed and self-indulgence – but as justification for his generosity. 'Is your eye evil, because I am good?' Note the play on the words 'evil' and 'good'. The 'evil eye' signifies – not so much envious – as covetous and grudging. We can capture the flavour of the word from : 'He that hastes to be rich has an evil eye', Prov. 28. 22; 'Beware that there is no thought in your wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and your eye be evil against your poor brother, and you give him nothing', Deut. 15. 9; and for the opposite, 'He that has a bountiful eye (lit. a good eye) shall be blessed; for he gives of his bread to the poor', Prov. 22. 9. To have an evil eye is therefore to be covetous, selfish, greedy, mean and stingy.

20. 16. And 'so', Jesus concludes, 'the last will be first, and the first will be last'. And so there you have it! Knowing – from the parable – who are meant by the 'first' and the 'last', we are now in a position to interpret the sayings of 19. 30 and 20. 16. We know that those who began first and who were paid last (ie the first who became last) came off the worst – their reward was relatively smaller than the reward of those who began last but who were paid first (ie the last who became first).

Those who began first were the bargainers of v. 2. Remember the owner 'agreed' with them. They were of a mercenary and calculating frame of mind – hence both their 'agreeing' their wage at the beginning and their complaining about their wage at the end. They were the men who worked because they had a clearly defined contract – who wanted to know what they would get for the service they rendered.

Those who began last were the trustful souls of v. 7. Remember the owner simply 'said' to them. They were the men who were prepared to trust entirely to his goodness – and to leave the question of any reward entirely to him. With the first he showed himself just – with the last he showed himself generous.

And the bargainers ended up last in the queue where what were effectively the greater rewards were handed out first. And so – from the saying – informed by the parable – we are able to detect a gentle but firm rebuke of Peter's question in 19. 27. The twelve wanted to know the fine detail of what they would get as a result of their sacrifice and service for Christ. The Lord was pointing out that this wasn't a particularly good – a healthy – question.

This is why the passage begins with the 'but' of 19. 30. Peter's question put the relation between the Lord and His servants on an altogether wrong footing. It exposed a wrong attitude to service for the Master. The saying and the parable were intended to nip this evil in the bud. Those who are prepared to labour for the sake of the work and for

the sake of Him who called them to it – to get on with serving Him for higher motives – will benefit most. For a little done in the spirit of love, devotion and trust is better by far than much done in the spirit of the hireling.

Service for the Lord Jesus is always a privilege – neither James nor Jude (His brothers) staked any claim to special earthly relationship to Jesus – they were content to be known as His servants – ‘James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ 1. 1; ‘Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James’, Jude 1. There is nothing higher. And yet – because sometimes the way is hard, the difficulties great and the obstacles many – God graciously promises us rewards for our encouragement. ‘you know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord’. ‘He is not unrighteous to forget your work and the love you have showed to his name’, Heb. 6. 10; cf. 10. 17.

Peter's fault lay in that he – and the other apostles – focussed on the detail of their reward. The recompense for their service figured too highly in their minds. There was a very serious danger that it ceased to be an encouragement and became a motive. It has been well said that, ‘God calls us to play the game, not keep the score!’³

Paul – in the context of the judgement seat – made it clear that it was the love of Christ which constrained him. That was the wind which filled his sails. And this is exactly what the Lord Jesus taught Peter in John 21.

Ah, but - ‘then’ came Salome and her sons, v. 20.⁴ Evidently the three of them had completely missed the point of the saying and the story – they spoke as if the parable hadn't been told. James and John had been among the favoured group to whom Jesus had promised that they would sit on thrones in the day of His glory, 19. 28. But the brothers were not satisfied with any ‘thrones’; they wanted to ‘sit’ on His right hand and left hand – in the places of special honour.

Something like in the days of King Saul, when according to Josephus, ‘On the next day ... when the king ... came to supper ... there sat by him his son Jonathan on his right hand, and Abner, the captain of his host, on the other hand’, Josephus, Antiquities. 6. 11. 9. I note that, not only was Jonathan Saul's son, but Abner was Saul's cousin, 1 Sam. 9. 1; 14. 50-51. That is, Saul gave the chief places in his kingdom to his immediate family. And David followed suit – and gave positions of prominence to his nephews Joab, Abishai and Amasa, 1 Chron. 2. 16-17.⁵

It is likely that James and John were the Lord's cousins; cf. Salome, the mother of James and John, at the cross, Mark 15. 40, with His mother's sister plus three Marys’, John 19.25. (If James and John were His cousins, it would explain why He committed Mary to John's care – John 19. 27 – she was John's aunt – while John's natural mother stood there too.⁶)

In their eyes, at some time Jesus was to be crowned King at Jerusalem – maybe at the end of this particular journey. And so the sons of Zebedee made their play for the most important seats – aspiring to be the chief administrators in His kingdom. Little did they know then, that – in two weeks time – Jerusalem would hold – as He foretold, ‘gentiles ... crucify him’ – not a royal crown – but a crown of thorns – for the Son of man ... and that those who would then be at His right hand and His left hand would not be sitting on thrones – they would be hanging on two crosses – ‘crucified with Him’, Matt. 27. 38.

Evidently James and John – and their mother – had completely missed the point – not only of the Lord's prediction of His suffering, 20. 17-19 – but of both the saying and the story.

Future reward is never meant to be my motive for serving the Master - still less is the praise of men or my own sense of satisfaction. My Saviour wants me to serve Him because I love Him.⁷ May the Lord Jesus so inspire each of us - in response to His unbounded love for us – to love Him and to express that love in serving Him fervently.⁸

Footnotes

¹ Annales. i. 17; cf Pliny 33. 3.

² Tobit 5. 14. 'The shekel ... is worth four drachmas', Josephus, Ant. iii. 8. 2.

³ Vance Havner, quoted by Warren Wiersbe – 'Be courageous' (Luke 14-24), page 38.

⁴ Compare Peter's 'then', 19. 27.

⁵ David was the youngest of the brothers and probably many years younger than his sisters. So his nephews may well have been near his own age – cf Gaynor.

⁶ Which in turn may explain why Salome was missing from the burial – having stayed with her sister when John returned.

⁷ And I find it sobering to remember that, in Revelation 2, the ground of our Lord's condemnation of the otherwise exemplary church at Ephesus was simply that it had left its first love, Rev. 2. 4 - and that that alone was sufficiently important to Him for Him to threaten the removal of its lampstand.

⁸ **Fuller and tidier notes can be accessed at http://www.preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=2796 and http://www.preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=2825.**