Section 3 - The First Last, and the Last First  
*Matthew 19:30; 20:1-20; Mark 10:31*

After Jesus spoke about the rewards of self-sacrifice, He proceeded to note that people could risk losing their rewards - partially or totally. The loss of reward would come because they had inappropriate thoughts and feelings. They may have had wrong motives for their self-denying deeds or prideful thoughts about deeds they had already done. “But,” He said warning them, as if His finger was in the air, “many who are first, will be last; and the last, first.” Then, to explain His profound comment, He spoke the parable which is preserved only in the 20th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel.

The explanation in some respects is more difficult than the thing that needs to be explained. It has led to many different interpretations. And yet the main point of this parable seems to be very clear. Some people believe it is designed to teach that everyone will receive the same share in the eternal kingdom. This is not only irrelevant to the logic of the parable; it is not true. Neither is the purpose of the parable to proclaim the great evangelistic truth that salvation is by grace and not by works (even though it would be very appropriate for a minister, on any occasion, to speak about that essential truth). It seems to us that the great outstanding truth that is set forth in this parable is this: The divine Lord, whom everyone serves, estimates the value of the work we perform. He takes into account, not only the quantity, but the quality, of the work that we do.

It is obvious that this is the correct view when we take a comprehensive survey of all of Jesus’ teachings on the important subject of *work and wages* in the divine kingdom. It appears that the relationship between the two things is fixed by righteous law and not by whimsical thinking. So, if the one who is first in work is last in wages, in any situation, it is for very good reasons.

There are a total of three parables in the Gospels on this subject. Each one of them sets forth a distinct teaching. If our interpretation of the parable before us now is correct, the combined parables present an exhaustive view of the topic we are studying. They are: (1) the Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14-30); (2) the Parable of the Money (Lk. 19:12-28); and the one before us that is called (3) the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.
If you want to understand how these parables are different, yet complementary, it is necessary for you to remember the principles by which the value of the work is to be measured. Three things have to be taken into account in order to form a fair evaluation of each person’s works: (1) the quantity of the work done; (2) the ability of the worker; and (3) the motive. Forget the motive for a moment. When the ability is equal, the quantity determines the relative reward. When the ability varies, then the reward is not determined by the absolute amount of the work performed. Instead, it is the relationship between the amount of work and the ability that ought to measure the value.

**The Parable of the Money**

The parables of the Money and Talents are designed to illustrate these two propositions. In the parable of the Money, everyone has the same ability - each servant receives a mina (a mina is equal to about 100 days’ wages; Lk. 19:13). However, the quantity of the work performed varies. The first servant who has one mina increases his to ten. Another who has the same amount to start with gains only five. By the rule we mentioned above, the second man should not be rewarded the same as the first. He has not done what he could have done. Therefore, two distinctions are made in the parable. One is in the rewards that are given to the two servants, and the other is in the manner in which they are addressed by their employer. The first gets ten cities to govern. He also receives these words of commendation: “Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, be in authority over ten cities” (Lk. 19:17). On the other hand, the second one only gets five cities. What is even more noticeable is the fact that he gets no praise. His master, in a matter-of-fact way, says to him, “And you are to be over five cities” (vs. 19). He had done something; and compared with other lazy people, it was significant. But he does not receive the pronouncement that he is a good and faithful servant. The praise is withheld simply because it was not deserved. For he had not done what he could have. He had only done half of what was possible, when measured by the first servant’s work.

**The Parable of the Talents**

In the parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14-30), the conditions are different. The amount of work that is done varies just as in the parable of the Money. But the ability varies in the same proportion, so that the ratio (between the amount of work and the ability to perform the work) between the two is the same in the case of both servants who put their talents to use. One receives five and gains five. The other receives two and gains two. According to our rule, these two should receive the same reward. And this is the way they are presented in the parable. The same reward is assigned to each of them, and both are commended with the very same terms. The Master’s words in both cases are: “Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master” (Mt. 25:21, 23).
This is the way the situation plays out when we only take into consideration two elements: (1) the ability to work, and (2) the amount of work done. Or, we can combine both of these into one point - the element of zeal. But something more than zeal has to be considered, at least in the kingdom of God. In this world, people are often commended for their diligence irrespective of their motives. It is not always necessary to be zealous in order to receive the praises of the masses. If someone does something big and extravagant, people will praise him without asking whether it had meaning for him, whether it involved self-sacrifice, or whether it was only a respectable act done without any passion or devotion. But in God’s sight, many large things are very little, and many small things are very great. The reason is that He sees the heart and the hidden springs that produce the actions. He judges the stream by the source - the spring. Quantity is nothing to Him unless there is zeal. And even zeal is nothing to Him, unless it is purged from all pride and self-seeking. It must be a pure spring of good desires. The smoke of all fleshly passions must be cleared. There must be a pure flame of heaven-born devotion. A worthless motive corrupts it all. This parable, spoken by Jesus in Perea, was designed to emphasize this truth and to insist on the necessity of having right motives and emotions in the work we do and in the sacrifices we make. It teaches that a small quantity of work that is done with the right motive has a greater value than a large amount of work that is done with the wrong motive, no matter how much enthusiasm is present when it is performed. An hour’s work that is done by people whose hearts are right is of greater value than twelve hours’ work that is done by people who have been outside in the heat of the day, but who are full of pride about their work. When we use the literary form of a precept, the lesson of the parable is this: “Do not work for pay and wrongly calculate the wages you think you deserve. Do not work as the Pharisees who arrogantly demand wages they think they deserve. Work humbly. Think of yourselves as unprofitable servants, at best. Work generously, without doing it for selfish advantage. Work trustfully, as people who have confidence in the generosity of the great Employer. Regard Him as someone from whom you do not need to protect yourselves by signing a contract.”

In this interpretation, we assume that the motive of the first and the last one to enter the vineyard was just as we have indicated. The assumption is justified because of the way in which both parties are described. The motives of the last ones can be inferred because they did not try to make a deal. And the motives of the first ones are evident from the words they spoke at the end of the day: “These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day” (Mt. 20:12). This is the language of envy, jealousy, and pride. Their attitudes line up with their conduct at the beginning of the day’s work. They entered the vineyard for pay, made a deal, and agreed to work for a certain amount of wages.

The first and the last, then, represent two classes of those who claim to be the servants of God. The first are shrewd and full of pride. The last are humble, generous, and full of trust. They
neglect themselves for others. The first are like Jacob - they work hard, are conscientious, and are able to say for themselves, “This was my situation: ‘the heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes’” (Gen. 31:40). Yet always thinking about their own interest, even in their religion, they make deals for themselves. They trust very little to the free grace and unchained generosity of the great Lord. The last are like Abraham, not because they serve the master at a late hour, but because of the greatness of their faith. They enter the vineyard without making a deal, like Abraham left his father’s house, not knowing where he was going. He only knew that God had said, “Go to the land I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). The first are the Simon Peters - righteous, respectable, and exemplary. But they are also hard, dull, and cold. The last are the women with the alabaster boxes who, for a long time, have been lazy, aimless, vicious, and have wasted their lives. But finally, they shed bitter tears of sorrow because of their past, begin to live life in the right way, and try to redeem the time that was lost by passionately devoting themselves to serving their Lord and Savior. Finally, the first are the elder brothers who stay at home in their father’s house and never violate any of his commandments, yet have no mercy on those who do. The last are the prodigals who leave their father’s house and waste their inheritance on riotous living. But finally they come to their senses and say, “I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men’” (Lk. 15:18-19).

The two classes of people who differ in character are dealt with in the parable precisely as they ought to be. The last are made first, and the first are made last. The last are paid first. This signifies the pleasure which the master has in rewarding them. They are also paid at a much higher rate. Since they are paid at the same rate for one hour’s work that the others receive for twelve, they are paid at the rate of 18 cents per diem (a denarius was worth 18 cents in silver, equivalent to one day’s wage). In fact, they are treated just like the prodigal. His father made a feast for him. The first are treated as the elder brother whose service was acknowledged, but who complained that his father had never given him a young goat to celebrate with his friends. Those who think of themselves as being unworthy to be anything other than hired servants - they even think they are unworthy in that capacity - are dealt with as sons. And those who think of themselves as deserving rewards are treated coldly and distantly - as hired servants.

We go now from the parable to the truth it was designed to illustrate. Our observation is that those who are first in ability, zeal, and length of service are demoted to the last place as it pertains to rewards, and that it is presented as something that is likely to happen often. “Many who are first, will be last” (Mk. 10:31). This statement implies that pride is a sin which is easily committed by men who are in the position of the Twelve, i.e., men who have made sacrifices for the kingdom of God. Observation proves this is a fact. Furthermore, it teaches us that there are certain circumstances in which those who work hard and deny self are especially prone to
fall into the sin of self-righteousness. What are those circumstances? We will make that clear by illustrating the deep and, to most people who see this for the first time, obscure saying of Jesus.

**The Sin of Self-Righteousness**

1. Those who make sacrifices for Christ’s sake are in danger of falling into a self-righteous thinking pattern when they only practice self-denial on rare occasions (rather than sacrificing as a way of life). In such cases, Christians attend to emergencies with their emotions elevated far above the usual level of their moral feelings. Therefore, though they may perform heroically at the time the sacrifice is made, afterwards they return with pride to their routines like an old soldier who recounts his battles. They are like Peter who, with pride because of the fact that he had forsaken all, asks: “What then will there be for us?” (Mt. 19:27). Truly, this is a state of mind that is to be greatly feared. A society in which spiritual pride and satisfaction with self prevails is in a bad state. Anyone who possesses prophetic insight into the moral laws of the universe can predict what will happen. The religious community that thinks of itself first will gradually fall behind in gifts and graces, and some other religious community that it despises will gradually advance onward until the two finally come to the place where they have changed places. And everyone will see it.

2. Those who make sacrifices for the kingdom of God are in greater danger of falling when there is some work of service that is held in higher esteem than another. As an example, take those who endured physical tortures and death during times of persecution. It is well known that there was an *uproar* of admiration for martyrs and confessors as they suffered in the early centuries of the church. Those who suffered martyrdom were almost deified by the enthusiastic masses. The anniversaries of their deaths - they called them their birthdays (*natalitia*) - into the eternal world - were observed with religious solemnity. Their works and sufferings in this world were recounted with great admiration as they were eulogized far too much. Even the confessors who had suffered, but had not died for Christ, were looked up to as a superior order of beings who were set apart from common, untested Christians by a wide chasm. It was believed that they were saints with a halo of glory around their heads; that they had power with God and could bind or loose with even more authority than the regular ecclesiastical authorities. Absolution was eagerly sought from them by those who had fallen into some sin. Admission to their communion was regarded as an open door by which sinners might return to the fellowship of the church. All the confessors had to do was to say to those who erred, “Go in peace,” and even bishops had to receive them. Bishops joined with the common people in this idolatrous worship of the men who suffered for Christ’s sake. They pampered and flattered the confessors, partly because they admired them, but also partly because of policy. These bishops wanted to inspire others to imitate the confessors’ example and to foster the virtue of bravery which was so needed in times of suffering.
These attitudes in the church placed the souls of those who endured hardship for the truth in great danger. Their thinking tempted them to fanaticism, vanity, spiritual pride, and presumption. And by no means were they all temptation-proof. Many took all the praise they received as if they deserved it. They thought of themselves as very important people. The soldiers were flattered by their generals to make them brave. They began to act as if they were the masters. For example, a letter to one of the bishops who had been extravagant in his eulogies states: All the confessors to Cyprian the bishop: Know that we have granted peace to all those of whom you have had an account what they have done: how they have behaved since the commission of their crimes; and we would that these presents should be by you imparted to the rest of the bishops. We wish you to maintain peace with the holy martyrs. So this saying, “Many that are first shall be last,” was fulfilled in these confessors. Though they were first in suffering for the truth and for having a godly reputation, they became last in the judgment of the great Searcher of hearts. They gave their bodies to be scourged, maimed, and burned. Yet it profited them little or nothing.

3. The first are in danger of becoming last when self-denial is reduced to a system. This happens when it is practiced ascetically, not for Christ's sake, but for one's own sake. Nobody will deny that the deprived ascetic is entitled to rank, first because of the amount of self-denial he practiced. But his right to rank, first in genuine spiritual worth, and therefore in the divine kingdom, is more open to debate. Even with respect to the essential matter of getting rid of self, he may be last - not first. The self-denial of the ascetic is, in a very subtle way, no more than intense self-assertion. True Christian self-sacrifice takes place during hardship and losses that are suffered when truth cannot be maintained without sacrifice. This must be done for Christ's sake, not for one's own sake. But the self-sacrifice of the ascetic is not about this kind of sacrifice. He endures it for his own sake, for his own spiritual benefit and credit. He practices self-denial in the same way the miser does. The miser abstains from all luxuries and even denies himself the necessities of life, because he has a passion for hoarding. Like the miser, the ascetic thinks of himself as being rich. But he and the miser are both poor. The miser is poor because he cannot part with his wealth to buy commodities that he could enjoy. The ascetic is poor because his coins - his good works and painful acts of abstinence - are counterfeit and will not be considered genuine in the kingdom of heaven. All his work to save his soul will turn out to be rubbish that will burn up. If he is saved at all, it will be “as by fire” (I Cor. 3:15).

Three Classes of Cases
Recall now, for a moment, the three classes of cases in which the first are in danger of becoming last. We believe that the word many is not an exaggeration. Consider how much of the work that is done by professing Christians belongs to one of these categories: (1) occasional efforts; (2) good works of generosity and philanthropy, which are popular and highly esteemed in the religious world; and (3) good works done, not so much because there is interest in the work, but because the work reflects on the doer's own religious interests. Many are called to work in God's
vineyard, and many are actually at work. But few are chosen; few are *choice* workers. Few work for God in the spirit of the precepts that are taught by Jesus.

Even though there are only a few such workers, there are some. Jesus does not say *all* who are first shall be last, and *all* who are last will be first. His word is *many*. There are numerous exceptions to the rule in both of its parts. Everyone who bears the heat and burden of the day are not mercenary and self-righteous. No. The Lord has always had a noble band of workers in His spiritual vineyard. If these people boasted at all, it might have been because of the length, the difficulty, and the efficiency of their service. But they did not harbor prideful thoughts, nor did they give in to making calculations about how much more they should receive than others. Think about devoted missionaries who go to foreign lands. Think about heroic reformers like Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Latimer. Think about eminent people in our own day who have recently died. Can you imagine these people talking like the early laborers in the vineyard? No way! All through life, their thoughts about themselves and their service were very humble. At the close of life’s day, their day’s work seemed to them to be a very sorry matter, totally undeserving of the great reward of eternal life. Such first ones will not be last.

If there are some who are first that will not be last, then without a doubt, there will be some who are last that will not be first. If it were otherwise - if to be last in the length of service, in zeal, and devotion gave anyone an advantage, it would ruin the interests of the kingdom of God. In fact, it would encourage laziness, and people would stand around all day long in idleness, serving the devil until the eleventh hour. Then they would enter the vineyard in their old age and give the Lord a poor hour’s work when their limbs were stiff and their bodies were feeble and unsteady. No such demoralizing law exists in the divine kingdom. All other things being equal, the sooner a person begins, the longer and the more earnestly a person is able to serve God; the harder he works, the better for him in the hereafter. If those who begin late in the day are graciously treated, it is in spite of their tardiness, not because of it. The fact that they have been idle so long is not to be commended - it is a sin. They should not congratulate themselves. Rather, they ought to feel deep humiliation. If it is wrong for those who greatly served the Lord to glory in their wonderful service, it is surely still more out of line - it is ridiculous - for anyone to take pride in the smallness of his own. If the first does not have a reason for boasting and self-righteousness, the last has even less.