**“The Last Shall Be First”**

In Matthew 20, Jesus told a parable about a landowner who hired men early in the morning to work in his vineyard and they agreed on one denarius for the day’s work. Then at the third hour, sixth hour, ninth hour and eleventh hour, he sent more men into the vineyard with the promise of paying them “whatever is right”.

At the end of the day, the eleventh-hour guys were paid first and received one denarius for their one hour of work. The fellows who worked all day jumped to the conclusion that they should have more coming to them because they put in a lot more hours but, alas, they received only one denarius. Of course, they expressed their discontent, and to paraphrase the landowner’s reply, “You agreed to work all day for one denarius and that is what I have paid you. If I choose to show kindness to someone else, that is really none of your business.”

Most of us can sympathize with the guys who earned an average of 0.08 denarii per hour when others were paid a full denarius for an hour, but the fact is, this is not a story about economics or finance, this is a story about grace. “So the last shall be first, and the first last” (v. 16).

Every saved person stands justified before God by His grace and the redeeming blood of Jesus, not a system of earned points. God deserves our complete devotion and He expects it, but even sincere devotion doesn’t make us deserving of His mercy. Jesus put it this way: “When you do all the things which are commanded you, say ‘We are unworthy slaves, we have done only that which we ought to have done’” (Luke 17:10). Will we be held accountable for failing to obey Him? Of course. Do we earn salvation by completing a list of tasks? Absolutely not.

Jesus couched the “Last-first; first-last” concept in different terms in Matthew 23:12: “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.” I believe this connection is apparent in three ways.

**Humility Before God**. In Matthew 19:29-30, Jesus says that those who have put God first in their lives and made sacrifices are those who are last but will be made first. In contrast, those who have put their own needs first will be considered last.

**Humility Toward Our Fellows**. In Matthew 20, a controversy arose among Jesus’ disciples about who would be greatest in the kingdom. In keeping with His “Last-first; first-last” teaching, Jesus made it clear that “whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave” (vs 26-27).

**Humility Toward God’s Grace**. The Pharisees considered themselves so superior to the “sinners” in their community that they failed to value their souls (Matthew 21:28-32). However, Jesus told the leaders that, because of the repentance of the sinful, “they will get into the kingdom of God before you.” Arrogance towards others shows that we really don’t understand grace and where we would be without it. Those who consider themselves first will find themselves last.

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