

## Matthew 20

### **What does it mean for the first to be last and the last, first?**

- The last several chapters have seemed to repeat the theme of the last being first and the first last. It is safe to say that this was a major emphasis in Jesus' ministry.
- In chapter 18 the model of greatness is "a child". In this chapter it is "a slave."
- The child reflects our self image while the slave suggests our activity.

#### **1. It will not be fair as the world sees it. (20:1-16)**

"1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, 'You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. 5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. 6 And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' 7 They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You too go into the vineyard.' 8 And when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.' 9 And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. 10 And when those hired first came, **they thought that they would receive more**; and they also received each one a denarius. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 saying, '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.' 13 But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? **Or is your eye envious because I am generous? 16 Thus the last shall be first, and the first last.'**

- What does it mean for the last to be first? This theme dominates ch.19-20. This story suggests that the blessings of God will not come to those who have "earned" them by working harder than others.
- Grace is unmerited favor. This parable illustrates the point most dramatically.
- One of the great offenses of the gospel is that it does not involve merit. We want those who have hurt us to suffer, if not in this life, in the next. But we do not want the same for ourselves.
- What do your attitudes toward this story reveal about your understanding of the faith? Do you identify with the person who worked all day or just for a short time?

#### **2. It is reflected in Jesus' ministry. (20:17-19)**

17 And as Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them, 18 ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, 19 and will deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up.’

- Jesus’ cross is the high point of his humiliation. It is the cross that we are asked to take up and bear.
- We are challenged to ask ourselves what it might mean to bear our cross?

### **3. It stands in stark contrast to our natural impulse. (20:20-28)**

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him. 21 And He said to her, ‘What do you wish?’ She said to Him, ‘Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left.’ 22 But Jesus answered and said, ‘You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?’ They said to Him, ‘We are able.’ 23 He said to them, ‘My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.’ 24 And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. 26 It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.’

- Luke 9:46-48 and Mark 9:33-37 make it clear that the disciples were arguing as to who was the greatest among them.
- Jesus’ style stands in conscious contrast to that of the world where social power rules.
- The church is challenged to operate as an extension and expression of the Kingdom not the world. It too often does not.
- There is a tendency today to let pragmatic results govern the choice of leadership styles. We hear people say, “We will really come out ahead and be more successful when we put ourselves in the posture of a servant.” Which such statements we are really suggesting that the bottom line is, “how do I best get ahead?” When “getting ahead” in this world is the bottom line, the way of Jesus may not always work best.

### **4. It is reflected in Jesus’ sensitivity. (20:29-33)**

29 And as they were going out from Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. 30 And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, ‘Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!’ 31 And the multitude sternly told them to be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, ‘Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!’ 32 And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, ‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ 33 They said to Him, ‘Lord, we want our eyes to be opened.’ 34 And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.”

- Jesus reaches out to “those who are last” with compassion while the multitude tries to marginalize them.
- Could it be that Matthew is telling this story to suggest that if his readers want their eyes open they had best receive his teaching about the first being last, and last , first?