

## Who Are the First and the Last?

Matthew 20:1-16

Septuagesima, February 17, 2019

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

The Lord tells the parable of the laborers in the vineyard and then sums the whole thing up by saying, "And so the first shall be last and the last first." What does He mean by this remark and what does it have to do with the parable?

I realize that the readings selected for Sunday morning Divine Service are of such a length that a congregation can take them in and meditate upon them. They are not too short. If they were, then the congregation would not have enough to go on in order to hear the Word of God effectively. They are not too long. If they were, the congregation's attention might drift. They are just the right size. On this Sunday, however, I do wish that the reading was just a little bit longer. If it were, you might have realized that our Lord also says, "Some who are first will be last and some who are last will be first," before He tells the parable. So at both the beginning and the end of the parable the Lord points out that the first will be last and the last first.

About whom is He speaking?

In order to understand that you need to know that just before our Lord tells this parable there is an incident that takes place. That incident provokes a conversation between the Lord and His disciples. That conversation provokes the Lord to tell this parable.

What is the incident that provoked the conversation that provoked the parable? A rich man came up to our Lord and said, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?" Our Lord tells the rich man, "Why do you ask Me about what is good? There is One who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." The Lord has just rebuked the rich man for the first time. The rich man talks about eternal life like he believes in God. If he believes in God, then he believes in the One who is good. If the rich man believed in the One who is good, then he should already know what good is because the One who is good has already told him. Why does he need to ask Jesus about what is good? Could it be that the rich man is trying to earn his way into eternal life and wants a stamp of approval from the Lord regarding what he thinks is an exemplary life?

Apparently so because the rich man asks Jesus, "Which ones?" That is to say, "Which commandments?" The Lord answers, "You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. Honor your

father and your mother. Love your neighbor as yourself." Still wanting that stamp of approval from the Lord the rich man says, "All these I have kept since I was a youth. What do I still lack?" The rich man apparently wants Jesus to say, "Nothing. You're good." But Jesus does not say that. Instead the Lord says, "One thing you still lack. Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and then come and follow Me."

The rich man went away sad because he had great wealth. Then the Lord declares to His disciples a judgment. "It is difficult for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. In fact it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

This is the incident that provokes the conversation.

Peter says to his Lord, "Lord, who can be saved?"

Peter has the sound of surprise to him. After all if rich people cannot be saved, what hope is there for the rest of us? Apparently the disciples had always assumed that the wealth of rich people was the blessing of God. If the wealth of rich people was the blessing of God, then that must mean that rich people had God's favor. If rich people had God's favor, then surely they were saved. And now the Lord tells us that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? If not even the rich people who have God's blessing are going to make it, what hope is there for the rest of us? "Lord, who can be saved?"

The Lord answers, "With man this is impossible, but not with God. With God all things are possible."

Peter says, "Lord, we have left everything and followed You."

Then the Lord pronounces another judgment. He says, "I tell you the truth. Anyone who has left homes and father and mother and brothers and sisters and land and business for My sake and for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven will by no means lose His reward."

In the two judgments of the Lord whom has He put first and whom has He put last? When a person compares the rich man and the judgment that he received to the disciples and the judgment that they received the disciples are first and the rich man is last and now the Lord delivers His final judgment, but some who are last will be first and the first last and then He tells His parable.

So the workers in the vineyard who go out into the vineyard at the beginning of the day are the disciples, the apostles. They labor all day in the vineyard and endure the scorching heat. The workers who go out in the eleventh hour and work only one hour are the rich people like the rich young man who went away sad.

At the end of the day all of them receive the same reward. No matter how long they worked they all receive the same reward.

So it is possible for the rich man to return to Jesus. Jesus has not written him off into damnation. With man this is impossible because man would pay everyone fairly and would not dream of the master of a house who is generous with what is his. But with God all things are possible even the master of a house who does what he likes with his own money and is generous.

Do you ever wonder why Jesus told the rich man to sell all that he had? This is an important question especially when you consider that Jesus met other rich people and did not ask them to sell all that they had. Why does our Lord single this man out and tell him to sell everything that he has?

The answer is found in the commandments that the Lord tells the rich man to keep. He tells the rich man that if he wants to enter life he should keep the commandments and when the rich man asks him which commandments he should keep the Lord answers with, "You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. Honor your father and your mother. Love your neighbor as yourself." Why does the Lord tell him those commandments? Or to ask it another way, why doesn't the Lord tell the rich man to have no other gods. Why doesn't He tell the rich man to avoid taking the Lord's name in vain? Why doesn't He tell the rich man to keep the Sabbath Day? Aren't those commandments about loving God? Aren't those commandments therefore more important than the commandments about murder, adultery, theft, and falsehood or even honoring your father and mother?

The Lord is not neglecting His commandments. He is going easy on the rich man. He is setting before the rich man the commandments that are to be kept that are lesser to see if the rich man will repent of his sins before them. When the rich man does not repent of his sins in the face of the law, but rather insists that he has kept all of those commandments the Lord lets him have it on the first commandment only the Lord does not stand there and tell the rich man, "You shall have no other gods." The Lord knows that if He did that the rich man would simply stand there and insist that he had kept that commandment too. No. The Lord is smarter than that. The Lord tells him to sell all that he has and give it to the poor. In this way the Lord points out to the rich man the idol that he has. And since the rich man will not part with his wealth, he reveals that wealth is his god and he is worshipping it. He will not give it up to follow the one true God who was incarnate before him.

The rich man could have avoided all of this if he had simply admitted that he was evil from the outset and begged Jesus for mercy. The Lord would have let him keep his wealth as he did Abraham or David.

And so the parable is for those who have given up everything for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. The parable is for Peter and the other disciples who had left homes and families and businesses to follow Jesus. The parable is a warning to them not to despise the rich because they are rich. The Lord knows that people who are self-righteous can be rich like the rich man that He had just met and self-righteous people can be poor like his disciples who might be tempted to think that they were more righteous than the rich young man that the Lord just sent away empty.

You disciples might work all day in the Lord's vineyard and a rich man might only work an hour or two in the Lord's vineyard, but at the end of the day they will get paid the same. The reason is simple. The last will be first and the first last.

And the very next thing that your Lord says after He says that is to remind His disciples that they were going to Jerusalem where the Son of Man would be crucified and on the third day raised from the dead. And in both His crucifixion and resurrection the first are last and the last first.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.