

Jesus Receives the Last

Matthew 20:1-16

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Introduction...

In the last couple of weeks, we have been looking at the people Jesus receives...

- His disciples had been quite surprised by His choices!
 1. In Matthew 19:13-15, they had tried to protect Him from the interruption of parents who were bringing their little children to Jesus to be blessed...
 - But instead of thanking His disciples, Jesus sharply countered them—
 - and told them:
 - “Let the little children come to Me and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

TRANS> This was not what they expected...

- But I think their surprise was even greater when Jesus *did not* accept the man who came to Him in the next section...
 2. In Matthew 19:16-30, we have the account of a rich young ruler who came to Jesus—openly and unashamedly!
 - He was a moral man, a devout man, and a prominent man, having already achieved greatness in his youth...
 - And here he was, humbly asking Jesus what he might do to obtain eternal life!
 - In the disciples’ eyes, this was a choice catch!
 - What a marvellous thing that such a man should come to Jesus!
 - But instead of a warm welcome, Jesus sends the man way in sorrow...
 - calling him to sell all that he has, give to the poor, and come and follow Him.
 - When the man leaves, Jesus goes on to comment on how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven...
 - that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven!
 - We are told that the disciples were shocked out of their senses by this!
 - If a man like this can’t be saved, who can?
 - They were right on track with that question...

- Jesus answers that what is impossible with man is possible with God...
- Salvation is not about man's greatness or man's work or man's abilities—
 - It is about God's grace.
 - God is the one who must do the saving...
 - This man, but with all his abilities, could not save himself.

TRANS> So you see how Jesus' disciples were surprised—

- First by Jesus' acceptance of children into His kingdom...
- Secondly by Jesus' rejection of this rich young ruler...

Jesus is teaching His disciples to think in a whole new way.

- Always, they had looked at the great ones of this world as those who would be great in the kingdom of God...
 - But before them is the lowly Jesus who is soon to be crucified...
 - and He showing them that there will not be many wise or many mighty or many noble in the kingdom of God...
 - It is not about what man does or is able to do...
 - about what God's grace does...
 - Jesus summarises this teaching with the statement in verse 30...
 - "Many who are first will be last, and the last first."
 - You will notice that He doesn't say,
 - "**all** who are first will be last,"
 - but "**many** who are first will be last."
- It seems that this saying has a very broad application...
 - It refers to those who are **first in honour**—
 - the rich and the mighty and the accomplished in this world will often be the last in His kingdom.
 - It refers to those who are **first in gifts**—
 - those who are endowed with intelligence and extraordinary abilities...many of them will be last in the kingdom of God.
 - It refers to those who are **first in time**—
 - those who have been in God's kingdom longer than others—as nations or as individuals—will often be last.

- Hasn't it often been repeated in the history of the church that the kingdom of God is taken away from a nation where it has long flourished and given to a new nation that brings forth the fruit of it?
- Jesus is saying that there will be many surprises about His way of judging!
 - That it will often be the case in His kingdom that those who expect the greatest rewards (and who are expected by others to have the greatest rewards) will be disappointed...
 - those like this wealthy young ruler who made such a good impression wherever he went and assumed he would make the same kind of impression on Jesus...
 - and further that those who are expecting the least will be surprised with the greatness of their reward.
 - They will expect others to go before them.
- To illustrate this saying further—to drive it home to his disciples...
 - Jesus tells the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.
 - This is the passage we will be looking at today...in Matthew 20:1-16.
 - You can be sure that this parable is told to illuminate this saying that
 - “many who are first will be last and the last first,”
 - because Jesus repeats these words again at the end of the parable.

I. This parable, like Jesus actions in receiving the children and rejecting the rich young ruler, has an element of surprise in it!

- something unexpected occurs.
- . Here you have this landowner who goes out to hire workers for his vineyard...
 0. This is not the surprise... it was a common occurrence—
 - . Men who did not have a regular position would gather in the village, perhaps with spade in hand, waiting to be hired for the day.
 - During the busy seasons of harvest or planting,
 - there was often work for them,
 - but they were often hired for less than a fair wage because securing a job for the day was often the only way they had of providing for themselves and their families.
 - . But this landowner in the parable offers to pay them at the full wage for a days work—a denarius was the standard wage.

- They gladly agree to go and begin their work...
0. Now the Jews divided the day into twelve hours from sun up to sun down.
 - . A day's labour was not eight hours (as with us) but twelve,
 - and those twelve hours were not measured by a clock, but by the rising and setting of the sun.
 - . This landowner is said to have gone out again at the third hour of the day—that would be at roughly 9:00 AM—to hire more workers....
 - This time he promises only to give them what is right.
 - They gladly go along.
 - . He does the same at the sixth hour which was at noon, the day being half over...
 - and again at the ninth hour which only left three hours of work...
 - and finally at the eleventh hour which only left one hour of work.

TRANS> Even this last action is not totally unheard of—if a man wanted to finish a job, he might go and see if there were any men available...

- . But the surprise comes when he goes to pay them...
 0. It was standard procedure to pay such men as these at the end of the day—in fact, God's law required it—these men were dependent on it for their living...
 - So there is nothing unusual about the fact that the landowner paid them at this time...
 0. But what is surprising for anyone who reads this story is the amount he pays the workers who came in at the eleventh hour!
 - They had only worked for one hour, but he pays them an entire standard day's wage!
 - You can imagine that some of the other workers may be getting excited!
 - Is he going to pay them a denarius an hour too?
 0. But there is another surprise...
 - He pays them all exactly the same wage—regardless of how long they worked!
 - It seems obvious that this landowner is not only interested in their work, but is out to meet the needs of these men...
 - After all, the ones who had not been hired until late needed a living just as much as the others.

- But this was not the normal way of doing business!
- It is a surprising action!

TRANS> But now there is something that is not so extra-ordinary...

- . The men who were hired first have something to say about this manner of proceeding!
 0. If you have been around people, you know that this is not surprising...
 - Take a room full of four year olds—give one of them a box of cookies and give nothing to the others and see what happens!
 0. Here they had worked the entire day, enduring the oppressive heat of the Palestinian sun, labouring hard for twelve full hours...
 - How is it that this landowner has made the other workers equal to them?
 - They have borne more for Him...
 - Notice that they do not ask why the owner has not made them equal to these men,
 - but they say, “Why have you made them equal to us?”
 0. It is not at all surprising to hear such a complaint!
 - . Just try something like this in our society and see what happens...
 - Hire three people to work for you...the exact same work...
 - One is a young man who lives at home with his parents...
 - One is an older man who lives on his own...
 - One is a man with a wife and five children to support...
 - Pay the young man a fair wage for his work, but no more...
 - Pay the older man the same...
 - And then pay the man with the family five times as much.
 - What is going to happen?
 - The young man and the old man are going to complain!
 - “That’s not fair—why should he get more? Equal pay for equal work!”

TRANS> There is a very real sense in which we understand the frustration of the first workers quite well...

- We are surprised by his actions just as they were—and just as Jesus’ disciples were...

- It seems unfair...
- a. But the landowner shuts them up...
 - He says to one of them...
 - v. 13: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with Me to work for a denarius?"
 - He has given them a fair wage, and a wage that was agreed upon beforehand...
 - If he wants to be gracious to the last workers, what is that to first workers?
 - He says,
 - "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?"
- b. The parable being ended, Jesus then repeats the principle he is illustrating to His disciples...
 - That in His kingdom, the last will be first and the first will be last...
 - This is surely the same principle that Paul refers to with the Corinthians when he says,
 - 1 Cor 1:26-29: For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.
 - God often deliberately calls the weak and the foolish into His kingdom in order to make it clear that it is not by human merit that we are saved,
 - but by divine grace.
 - We are not to reject those who seem to be the last because God often makes them the first!

II. Our Lord wanted to drive this home because it was such a problem in His day.

- A. As a good minister, He did not speak about the things that everybody already agreed with,
- but he challenges the people of His day at the point where they are wrong...
 - Living prophets are always despised by their contemporaries...

- You can take the writings of a dead prophet and leave out those things that don't sit right...
 - but a living prophet comes in and keeps focusing on those very points that you don't want to hear because those are the things you need to hear.
 - When God's word lives, it confronts us where we need to be confronted most.
 - It is so important to have a humble, teachable spirit.

TRANS> But what is the problem with Jesus' hearers that I am referring too?

B. The problem was the attitude of those who felt that they had long conformed to God's covenant toward those who had not...

1. You know the problem I am talking about...

- a. The scribes and the Pharisees were often upset with Jesus because He hung out with tax collectors and sinners...
 - These tax collectors and sinners were persons that did not even pretend to keep God's covenant...
 - They were openly defiant of God.
- b. Jesus makes it clear that He spent time with them—not as approving their behaviour, but seek and save what was lost—
 - His goal was to lead them to repentance...
 - And He was quite often successful...
 - You know about Matthew, a former tax collector, and Zacchaeus who restored all the money he had unjustly taken.

2. But the big problem for the scribes and Pharisees was not so much that Jesus was calling these persons to repentance...

- a. The problem was that the repentance He called them to did not go far enough.
 - You see, the scribes and the Pharisees had, over the years, added all sorts of traditions to God's law...
 - and in their minds, a person did not really repent until he began to observe all these traditions.
 - What was worse, Jesus encouraged this rabble in their half-baked repentance by Himself transgressing the traditions of the fathers...
 - He would eat without properly washing His hands...
 - or allow works of necessity and mercy on the Sabbath.
- b. The real truth was that the repentance of the Scribes and Pharisees did not go far enough...

- They were the ones who could claim that they had kept God's commandments from their youth up!
 - Outward conformity was enough for them...
 - That is why they did not think they were in need of a Saviour.
 - Of course Jesus kept exposing their sin, but instead of humbling themselves and admitting it,
 - they denied it.
- c. And what made the problem even worse for them was the fact that these tax collectors and sinners were finding true repentance...
- They were repenting of their adultery and their murder and the thievery not just outwardly, but from the heart.
 - What infuriated the Pharisees more than anything was that Jesus seemed to accept these sinners more than He accepted them...
 - who kept the traditions and had long kept God's covenant.
 - They were the first!
 - They had been serving God all along!
 - They were entitled to preference!
3. Of course it was this same self-righteous attitude that broke out when God called the Gentiles after Jesus had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven...
- a. Even many of the Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah could not accept the idea that Gentiles could be brought in to the kingdom without circumcision...and all the traditions of the fathers...
- How could they be accepted on the same footing as the Jews?
 - "We are the first, and they are entering into the kingdom of God before us!"
- b. This is what a good portion of the New Testament is taken up with...
- It is all about what true repentance is and what the basis for salvation is...
 - No one is accepted of God because of His keeping of ceremonies...
 - but we are saved when we repent of our sins and turn to Jesus for our righteousness—
 - Jesus, who gave Himself as an offering for our sins!
- c. This spirit of envy was no little problem among the Jews.
- 1) It kept many of them—*many* of them—from salvation.

- They proved themselves to be among those who were called but not chosen...
 - In the better translations, verse 16 has these words added,
 - “For many are called, but few are chosen.”
 - Some Bibles omit them, but they are in the majority of the manuscripts and are in the better manuscripts.

- 2) These words are important because they tell us the depth of the problem.
 - This problem of envy was so great that it was keeping many from finding true repentance themselves!
 - That is why Jesus said, “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

- 3) Let me explain what these words mean...
 - a) The **called** are all those who profess to be God’s people—
 - In Jesus day, it included all the Jews...
 - And in our day it includes all who have the name Christian....
 - You know and I know that there are many who are outwardly called—they are in the church—whom God has not chosen.
 - They are not born again; they do not have true faith...
 - They trust in their works instead of trusting in God’s work in Christ.
 - b) So you see,
 - Jesus is saying that these complaining workers...
 - even though they were received into His kingdom—
 - were not really of the kingdom!
 - They were called, but they were not chosen!

TRANS> He is showing us that there are **many** who are like this!

- Many who are considered first that are in fact not even true sons of the kingdom at all!
 - It was a very serious problem.
 - And because it is so serious...

III. You need to be sure that you can identify this same problem today.

- You need to examine yourself by this parable to make sure the spirit is not in you!

- A. It is easy for us in our day to look at the self-righteous Jews with our own self-righteous sneer!
1. You remember how I pointed out that Jesus was a good minister because He spoke about the sins of His day?
 - He didn't just speak about the things that His generation all agreed about—
 - He spoke about the things they did not agree with—
 - He spoke to their particular sins...
 - a. Well I'll tell you...
 - If you want to have an amen corner in our society, just talk about how wrong Jewish exclusivism and self-righteousness is!
 - You can make a lot of friends if you start speaking about this problem of looking down on others and claiming to be righteous and all that sort of thing...
 - And indeed these things are wretched sins!
 - b. But they are not as commonly **our** sins...
 - Our sins are in the opposite direction!
 - They established self-righteousness by judging people according to their traditions...
 - We live in a society that has made a righteousness out of **not** judging anybody...
 - a society that refuses to judge people by God's law!
 - That is the sin of our society and our age!
 - We call it self righteousness to say that what anyone does is wrong even if God says it's wrong!
 - Our gospel is not that of the Bible that all those who repent of their sins and turn to Jesus will be saved...
 - It is that Jesus accepts everybody just as they are...
 - whether they repent or not!
 - That is a damnable lie!
 - When God's grace comes to a sinner it turns Him from His sin—from sin to Jesus.
2. And so we need to look at this parable from where we are and see what it says to us.
 - a. The question this parable asks us is this...

- 1) Do you look at the people who receive the grace of God with disdain?
 - And for us the people that receive the grace of God are those who come to be born again so that they delight in the law of God from the heart...
 - God's law is written on their heart so that they fully subject themselves to Him...
 - His grace breaks into their lives and gives them a new heart.

- 2) Do you look at those who have God's law written in their hearts so that they agree with His commandments and delight in them with scoffing...
 - Do you call them self-righteous when in fact they are rejoicing that Jesus Christ alone is their righteousness...
 - You say, "Look as those self-righteous holier than thous...
 - observing the Lord's Day,
 - wearing modest apparel,
 - refusing to participate in some friendly gossip,
 - unable to practice good business principles...

TRANS> This is the twist we have put on it...

- b. Of course, there are still Pharisees around today as well...
 - Those who do **add** to the word of God and make a righteousness out of their own works...
 - who look with disdain on those who receive the grace of God instead of receiving their own traditions...
 - persons who drink alcohol in one circle...
 - those who do not observe the exact same set of traditions about the Sabbath...
 - or those who have some major error in their doctrine (that is really not so major)
 - You must make sure you avoid that spirit as well...
 - This is a danger that reformed churches can fall into and we must be careful of it...

- c. And so the point is, we need to be careful that we do not have this spirit of envy toward those who have received the grace of God...
 - Whether it be the grace of the new heart He gives to His own—a heart that delights in the law of God—that offends us...

- or whether it be the grace that has brought full forgiveness to them even though they don't follow all of our traditions.

TRANS> My friends, you need to examine your hearts and be sure that you do not have this spirit of envy in you.

- And let me tell you, I believe we **all** have something of this spirit...
 - Of course I am not saying that we all have it in such a way that it has kept us from entering God's kingdom...
 - We have in varying degrees...
 - But wherever it is, we need to identify it and kill it by God's grace.
 - And indeed, it may be that for some of you in this room this spirit of envy is so strong that it has in fact kept you from truly embracing Jesus Christ...
 - Just as it kept many of the Jews from Christ.
- Whatever your particular case,
 - I want to help each of you identify that spirit this morning that you might look to the Lord Jesus for mercy—to cleanse and to pardon you...

B. Here are some tests by which to examine yourself...

1. First, do you feel that serving God is a burdensome thing to do...
 - a. Clearly the men in the parable felt that way—
 - I suppose workers often do...
 - They sweat under the hot the sun and feel their muscles strain under the labour...
 - If they could, they would much rather be doing something else.
 - But they feel that they must work because they have to make a living.
 - This spirit of discontentment with their work was the root out of which their envy grew toward those who did not have to do as much.
 - They found their work for the landowner burdensome...
 - b. Is that how service to God is to you, my friend?
 - Does it seem a grievous thing that you should have to serve God longer than others or be asked to do more than they?
 - Is His service something you only do because you must?
 - Do you resent those who seem eager to obey God's commandments and to serve Him faithfully?

- Do they disgust you and irritate you?
 - Does it seem that they must be just putting on a show?
- c. Let me tell you what you need...
- You need to fall in love with the Lord Jesus Christ...
 - You need to see how beautiful He is in His example...
 - You need to see how He has no greater delight than to please His Father!
 - I don't mean that He never found God's work to be difficult and that it did not involve heavy burdens...
 - But He delighted to do God's will...
 - Doing God's will is what makes human beings complete...
 - This is what makes them lovely.
- d. If you will look to the Lord Jesus, He will give you the grace to find joy in serving God...
- To see the beauty and fullness in it.
 - He will give you His Spirit so that you will delight in the law of God from the heart.

TRANS> If you feel, as the complainers in the parable seemed to feel, that God's service was a grievous burden—

- then you need to ask Him for a new heart that delights in His law... in serving Him.

2. Related to this, I ask you next, do you feel that God has short changed you?

- a. Do you look around and see what others have and say,
- Why do they have happy marriages and I don't?
 - or Why do they have friends and I don't?
 - or Why do they have money to do what they want, and I don't?
 - or Why do they have good health and I don't?
 - or Why do they have notoriety and I don't?
 - or Why do they have such extraordinary gifts and I don't?

TRANS> I will not deny it—

- It may be true that they have all of those things—a lot more of those things than you do...
- God does not call you to be a Pollyanna...

- b. But the question is,
- Does it seem to you that God has not dealt fairly with you?
- 1) Then my friend, the problem is that you don't understand the grace of God...
- He may not have given you as much as others—but that is His divine choice!
 - The thing is, He has given you far more than you deserve if you are sitting here in this assembly today!
 - Listen to me—you deserve to go to Hell forever and ever...
 - You deserve to be there right this very moment!
 - You are a sinner just like I am, and we both deserve to go to Hell.
 - We have dishonoured the living God!
 - We were made in His image to show forth His glory and instead we show forth lies...
 - If you could just get a glimpse of the beauty and the majesty and the glory of God,
 - you would be greatly ashamed of what you are before Him.
 - and you would be terrified of His judgement!
 - not because of His injustice but because of His justice!
 - That's what you would see if you could see things as they really are.
- 2) God has not dealt unfairly with anyone!
- a) Yes, He may have shown more grace to your neighbour than He has to you...
- I did not say that He has dealt the same with every man...
 - I said that He has not dealt unfairly with any man...
- b) And you, grumbling sinner, need to see how kind He has been to you...
- You have food to eat and water to drink...
 - You are not burning in the unquenchable fires of hell right now...
 - You have grown so accustomed to His mercy that is shown to you and those around you that you think this is what you and they deserve!

- Well it's not!

c) God will not always show this mercy to you, unless you come to Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sin...

c. What's that? Have you already come to Jesus?

1) Then indeed, how is it that you find **any** room for grumbling when the Son of God has gone to hell for you...

- Can you dismiss this and say, "But look at how hard I have it..."
- I hardly see how you can claim to believe with such an attitude.

2) You have not been short-changed at all!

- It is that you don't realise what you have!
- Even if you are not a believer, God has dealt with you ten thousand times better than you deserve...
- And if you are a believer, He has dealt with you ten thousand times ten thousand better than you deserve.

C. What then **ought** your attitude toward God be?

1. Your attitude ought to be that of one who is overflowing with gratitude to God for what He has done!

a. He has redeemed you!

- He has brought you into His eternal Kingdom with the promise of everlasting life.
- He has given you His Spirit to turn you from sin to Himself...
- He has pardoned all your sins by transferring them to His Son who died for you

b. Do not live as one who has been short-changed, but as one who has been lavished with grace upon grace!

- You should not live as one who is poor and deprived,
 - but as one who is rich beyond measure.

2. The Apostle Paul had this so right...

a. He always considered that He had not done nearly enough for his Lord...

- He never had a sense that God was obligated to do something more for him...

- Even when he was imprisoned and beaten with rods and lashed with a cruel scourge and rejected by those he had freely loved...again and again...
 - He simply could not feel sorry for himself...
 - He could never think that God owed him something...
 - He was too busy marvelling at the grace of God and looking for fresh ways to show his love for the Lord and to bring others to understand that love...
 - Instead of being envious of those who seemed to be at ease in this world...
 - the apostle Paul pitied them until they could know his saviour...
- b. He could only live like this because he knew what great mercy and grace he had received...
 - He always remembered that he had received way way more than he deserved.
- c. That is true of all of you too my brothers and sisters.
 - 1) I do not call you to act upon some fantasy...
 - I ask you to embrace the truth and to live accordingly.
 - The truth is that you have been lavished with grace upon grace...
 - The truth is that there is no place—*no place at all*—for whining of any kind.
 - 2) If you see God pour out His grace and mercy on your neighbour,
 - You ought not to envy your neighbour...
 - You ought to say,
 - “There is my dear Lord, acting just like Himself—pouring out His grace on another as He continually does upon me.”
 - 3) And your attitude toward your brother should not be,
 - “He should be serving me because he has it so much better than me...”
 - but rather,
 - “Let me see if I can join my Lord in adding yet more blessing to my brother.”
 - “Let me pray that I will be an instrument to bring even more of God’s blessing upon the one He has chosen to bless.”

Conclusion:

O brothers and sisters, we spend so much time wishing that we had this or wishing that we had that...wishing that we had what our brother has...

- If only could begin to take stock of what we do have in our Lord Jesus Christ...
- Then we could learn to do what our Lord told us to do—
 - to rejoice in serving Him...
 - to count it all joy even when we are persecuted for His sake.

If you see yourself as the first—as the one who deserves more from God than others...

- You will be surprised to find yourself as the last...
 - You will be always dissatisfied with what God has done for you...
- But if you see yourself as the last, the one who deserves the least...
 - then you will be continually surprised with amazement at the grace that God continues to lavish upon you.
 - May it ever be the so with you!