

THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST

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Jesus Christ taught a parable in Matthew 20:1-16 in which a householder hired laborers for a wage of one penny for their labor on that day. Laborers were hired at various points in the day beginning early in the morning, and then at 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., and finally at 5 p.m. At 6 o'clock that evening, all the laborers received the same wage of one penny. The ones who worked all day grumbled at their wage since some who worked only one hour received the same pay. The point of the parable is found in the answer the goodman of the house gave to those who murmured: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? *So the last shall be first, and the first last*: for many be called, but few chosen" (Matt 20:15-16).

The parable of the penny

Jesus gave the principle of the parable of the penny both immediately before and after the parable, that "the last shall be first, and the first last" (Matt 19:30; 20:16). In the context of this parable, Jesus had just taught that it is very difficult and rare for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:23-26), and that those who forsake the things of the world will ultimately receive eternal life (Matt 19:27-29). The Lord concluded that teaching by saying, "But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first" (Matt 19:30; see also Mark 10:29-31). For example, the young man Jesus taught in Matthew 19:16-22 was "first" in this life with his riches. But he went away sorrowful when Jesus taught him to sell what he had and give it to the poor in order to be perfect. That decision made him "last" in terms of eternity. Peter and the other apostles had forsaken everything to follow Christ (Matt 19:27), and Christ will make them the judges of Israel on Judgment Day (Matt 19:28). They were "last" in this life (the "offscouring of all things," 1 Cor 4:9-13), but will be "first" in the next life. The parable in Matthew 20:1-16 teaches that very principle. The ones who were hired first finished last in terms of their hourly earnings, but the ones who were hired last finished first in that regard. Jesus concluded the parable by repeating its main lesson: "So the last shall be first, and the first

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(continued)

last: for many be called, but few chosen” (Matt 20:16). The rich man was first in this life but will be last. He was called but not chosen (since *he* chose not to follow the Lord). Meanwhile, the apostles were last but will be first, and were called *and* chosen (because *they* chose to heed the Lord’s call). In similar fashion, Jesus applied the principle of the first being last and the last first to the Jews and Gentiles (Luke 13:23-30). The Jews had been first, but those who rejected Christ will now be last with God. The Gentiles had been last before, but those who believe in Christ will now be first with God.

Being great in God’s kingdom

The same principle, that the first will be last and the last first, is also applied to the future rewards in heaven for Christians. When Jesus and his apostles came to Capernaum on one occasion, he asked them in the house, “What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest. And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, *If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all*” (Mark 9:33-35). In Mark 10:42-45, Jesus taught his disciples, “Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but *whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: and whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all*. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Philippians 2:3-4 says, “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind *let each esteem other better than themselves*. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.” This kind of humility is characteristic of the love of God. God’s love “seeketh not her own” (1 Cor 13:5). Christians who make themselves last by self-denial and service to others will be first in heaven in terms of their reward.