

**“So the last will be first, and the first last.”
Matthew 20:1-16// *The Difficult Sayings
of Jesus, #7***

Happy **Memorial Day** Weekend everybody! Welcome to the Summit. My name is Todd and I’m the Brier Creek Campus Pastor.

- This weekend allows us to remember those who have given their lives for this country, we are grateful for that.
- It kicks off summer, and we officially enter the time of year where I don’t feel bad about eating hot dogs again.

If you’ve been with us the last several weeks, then you know we have been looking at the *Difficult Sayings of Jesus*.

These sayings will either make you angry or cause you to worship. These are sayings that really confront us with the real Jesus. Everyone loves the long haired, sandal wearing, Whole Foods shopping Jesus who talked about peace & love but this series confronts us with those sayings that people rejected Jesus for when He was on earth, and the ones that we believe people still reject Him.

So, today I have **the pleasure of concluding the series** with the saying, “*So the last will be first, and the first last.*”

Kind of makes this the first in the series, huh? This is one of those sayings that get thrown around ALL THE TIME. You’ll hear a lady last in line at Wal-Mart claiming she is gaining some favor with God because she is last in line. Students get picked last when picking teams and we try to make them feel good so – the last will be first. I hear the Wolfpack have this saying plastered all over their locker rooms.

At first blush, this saying really doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t make logical sense when we look at it from man’s perspective. It is what is known as a literary terms as “Chiasmus” (X from Greek).

But while we all know the saying, almost one of us know that it’s the conclusion to one of Jesus’ parables. The parable helps us understand what makes this so difficult and it points to why Jesus Came and how we follow him.

Let’s look at it together, **open your Bibles to Matthew, 20:1-16.**

Matthew 20:1-16, [1] *For the kingdom of heaven is like...*

- Jesus is about to tell us what His Kingdom is like. This is used often in scripture. When you see this in your Bibles, mark it, what follows is going to give us a clear picture of who Jesus is, why He came, and what He expects of us.

[1] For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. [2] After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, (a day laborers wage) he sent them into his vineyard. [3] And going out about the 3rd hour (some of you get confused with military time, get ready for Hebrew time, 9am, a work day in this time would have typically been 12 hours) he saw others standing idle in the market place, [4] and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' [5] So they went. Going out again about the 6th hour (noon) and the 9th (3pm) hour, he did the same. [6] And about the eleventh hour (5pm) he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' [7] They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.'

- By the way, can you imagine the desperation and depression these guys in the story would have felt? Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us b/c of the Roman rule and oppression, the Jews did not use any sort of banking system and for day laborers such as this, if they didn't work, they didn't eat or have anything. All looks lost for these workers But Jesus says...

'You go into the vineyard too.' [8] And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. [10] Now when those

hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. [11] And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, [12] saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' [13] But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?' [14] Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. [15] Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? [16] So the last will be first, and the first last."

Be honest, how does this story make you feel? Right now. I got to tell you, this story gave me a knot in the pit of my stomach. My first thought was "this is the every kid gets a trophy parable". Many other sayings of Jesus in this series might have been difficult to understand but this one, no, I get it... It's exactly because I get this saying that I don't like it! , The guys that sweated all day long, did all the work, get the same amount as the guys who hardly worked at all, spent most of the day standing around.

If you're reading the Bible correctly, you will probably become angry at some point. But because the bible is God's revelation to us, we should seek to want what God wants... which is what He has revealed to us in Scripture.

So, after my American, capitalistic self calmed down and reread the passage, I can tell you that I became greatly

encouraged. This story illustrates the mercy of God, and while at first glance I may not understand it, the deeper I go the more grateful and more love I have for our God. That is my prayer for you today.

Here's why...

The first thing we have to understand is that this is a **parable**. A parable is a story that Jesus uses often with the seemingly normal routines of the time pointing to a specific teaching that He wants people to understand. So you can't break this down as some sort of economic lesson. Jesus wasn't endorsing some sort of socialism or communism. This parable, like all parables of course, doesn't have multiple points to it. It does exactly what Jesus says it does by showing us "this is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like..."

There is great danger in listening to Jesus and totally misunderstanding the nature of God. Jesus was concerned with this for his disciples. And dare I say, Jesus is concerned about that for us today. There are many people I'm afraid that think they're Christians who fall into this same trap of missing the whole point.

Charlie Mitchell, *"Although the concept of the self-made man is inspiring, it finds no place within the Christian worldview."*

They haven't understood the true nature of the Kingdom of God, the way of salvation.

The saying "the last first, and first shall be last" is upside down, not logical. And THAT is what Jesus is trying to tell us. It is the Kingdom of God, not the Kingdom of Todd. It won't make sense to you.

Look back in your Bibles, Jesus was constantly doing this, turning things upside down. Look at Matthew 19...

19:1-12, -- Jesus talks with the Pharisees and they are trying to trick him about divorce and remarriage. Jesus reaffirms the fact that marriage is one man, one woman for life, and the Pharisees say, "Ah, ha, what about when God gave Moses divorce? He tells them, b/c your hearts are hard he permitted divorce but those who receive me can do the impossible and fulfill God's design.

The Kingdom of God is upside down

13-15 – Jesus calls children to him, something unheard of by a follower of Jesus. His disciples rebuked the parents for sending their kids to him, liking sending a bunch of kids into the oval office and Jesus turns everything upside down by saying the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to children.

The Kingdom of God is upside down

16 – 22, the story that many call the "Rich Young man". He wants to know how to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus tells him to obey the 10 commandments and he says, "I've

done all those". So Jesus says, "well good, then it won't be hard to sell everything you have and give it to the poor." He goes away surprised, sad, he thought he had it figured out.

The Kingdom of God is upside down

19 -26 – disciples instructed on difficulty for the rich, prestigious getting into heaven, what's impossible for man is possible with God

The Kingdom of God is upside down

Right after this passage –

17-19 – Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish faith, supposed to be a place of exaltation, turned upside down as a place of betrayal and death

The Kingdom of God is upside down

20:20-28 – Sons of Zebedee exchange, James and John's mom, mom saying something dumb, being great means being a servant

The Kingdom of God is upside down

If you and I don't realize this from the beginning, that The Gospel is different from everything we have ever heard before, I'm afraid we don't know it.

Has the Gospel surprised you? Does it still surprise you?

This is the nature of God, His ways are not our ways. Isaiah prophesied this 800 years earlier. Mary was amazed that she would be chose, she says, "How can this be?" Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night and is surprised by this.

Even Jesus' ministry wasn't centered in the center of Jewish culture, Jerusalem, but in the North (Galilee), where people were looked down upon. The last. His birth in a manger, he grew up and came from Nazareth, the people said, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

This is what this verse, "*The last will be first, and the first last*" teaches us – **The Gospel of Jesus Christ is never what we think it must be.**

It turns everything upside down.

Have you been turned upside down by the Gospel?

Here are just a few things we notice for folks who have a wrong view of the Kingdom of God.

1. Wrong view: See Salvation as a Reward

- a. This is the most dangerous view. Many of us, wouldn't answer on a test that we believe this but it is our natural default position.

- b. Paul said, *"Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but what is due" (Romans 4:4)*
- c. We see Peter did this. The rich, young man did this. James and John's mom did this.
- d. Some of us think that if we help old ladies across the street the old man upstairs will like us
- e. This is when we make ourselves Christians because we are doing good things.
 - i. Going to Church – a "first" thinker
 - ii. Giving to the poor – a "first" thinker
 - iii. Helping others – a "first" thinker
 - iv. Voting the right way – a "first" thinker
- f. These things are not wrong in and of themselves but when we bargain with God and come to Him on our terms, we miss the whole point of His Kingdom, we miss his mercy, we miss his reward

2. **Wrong View: An Shallow Perception of God**

- a. These people who worked first, made an agreement with the landowner ahead of times, yet they grumble when they get what they bargained for. They don't recognize the goodness in the landowner.
- b. They murmured, they complain. They judge the things they have based on what others have.
- c. We see this with the Pharisees when they grumble about Jesus because *"This man*

receives sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2)

- d. Pharisees have an irreverent perception of God and a High view of themselves
- e. Are we living to be as "first" person? Feel that God owes you something? What is your attitude toward Him?

3. **Wrong View: No grace for others' failures**

- a. A graceless person is a sign of a godless person
- b. Again, listen to how Paul talks about us, *[9]"Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, [10]nor thieves, nor the greedy nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. [11] And such were some of you. (1 Cor 6:9-11)*
- c. Paul would say, "I am the chief of among sinners."
- d. **AW Tozer said, "A Pharisee is hard on others and easy on himself, but a spiritual man is easy on others and hard on himself."**
- e. These are the folks who see people on the news, down trodden, in trouble with the law, and you have the attitude, "they made their bed, now they should lie in it"

- f. What is your attitude toward people who are living immoral, foul, and filthy lives?
- g. What about the people who believe the exact opposite of you on things? Politics, parenting.. Being in ministry, Christians who aren't spiritually mature are the most difficult people to be around
- h. To be given so much and love so little is one of the greatest sins of all.
- i. Here at Summit we say: sinner first, 2nd sinned against

4. Wrong View: God is wrong or immoral

- a. Todd, I would never think that? Oh really...
- b. What was your first thought when you read this parable today? I'll admit it, I was mad!
- c. The Prophet Jeremiah says, *"O great and mighty God, whose name is the Lord of hosts, [19] great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man, rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds." (Jeremiah 32:19)*
- d. Rapper Shai Linne points out, *"You should not pick and choose the characteristics of God that fit your preference, you must accept both. God is a God of love, compassion, and grace; but he is also a God of justice, wrath, and holiness."*
- e. Many atheists and humanist today say this about God, the salvation based on Jesus' death is "immoral", divine child abuse

- f. What about Jeffrey Dahmer? He was a pedophile, rapist, murderer, and cannibal, who admitted to killing and dismembering 16 people. By all accounts, he received Christ's salvation. A man that sought out little boys, sons, little brothers, and did unmentionable things in the Kingdom of Heaven. One college professor said, "If Jeffrey Dahmer is in heaven, I don't want to go there."¹
- g. Whether Dahmer's conversion was authentic or not, that I don't know, but what I do know is God's mercy knows no limits. If Dahmer would be the last person to receive this gift, he would be the first.
- h. Make you angry?

These views miss the whole glory of salvation. These guys in the parable didn't sing of the generosity of the landowner they sneered at him. They were the self-satisfied, legalistic, why didn't we get more crowd. If you think you've earned it, others don't deserve it, it's immoral, you suppose you'll get a great reward, you'll be disappointed, you'll be last. Do you constantly talk about

¹ Ratcliff, Roy. Dark Journey, Deep Grace: Jeffrey Dahmer's Story of Grace. From Christianity today article, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/34.125.html>

fair, unfair, this person's saved, this one isn't, and I can tell you aren't getting it.

Now, here is what some of you are thinking, "I'll try and live last so I can be first." Yeah, I know, I've done it too.

But, those who live to be last are not people who try to be last in order to get first. This goes back to the ridiculous ideas I pointed out earlier of trying to bargain with God. The marks of those who understand what the Kingdom of God is like understanding God is absolute, ruler, judge, and that everyone is in His generous hands.

We need to understand that "*Justice is getting what you deserve, mercy is not getting what you deserve, and grace is getting what you don't deserve.*" (Tony Evans)

Here are two marks by those whose world has been turned upside down:

1. Upside Down View: Surprised by God's grace and mercy

- a. He isn't asking why are these saved and those aren't, why don't I receive more but this person asks, "Why is their salvation for anyone at all?"
- b. This person doesn't watch the news and ask, "Why is there War?" This person asks why is there peace at all.

- c. This person sees their life and doesn't ask why don't I have more but why do I have anything at all.
- d. This person sees that if God was to damn the whole world, he wouldn't have a thing to complain about at all.
- e. What is amazing, surprising is that God has ever blessed me at all?

2. Upside Down View: Grateful for His generosity

- a. Where is the injustice in this parable, really? The guys that made a deal with the landowner got exactly what they were promised.
- b. Do we want God to give us exactly what we deserved? He says the payment of sin is death, sin is breaking any part of the law of God.
- c. How about the first and greatest commandment? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul, with all strength" How have you done on that?
- d. Are we grateful that at the 11th hour, God sought us when we were helpless, alone, and guilty and showed us mercy that we didn't receive.

God is just. He is fair. He punished our sins, all of them. He did this by putting them on His Son. That's why we say that "He died the death that we deserved."

It doesn't matter where I've started, because really, we've all started last. We all need His grace and mercy and the beautiful thing, the upside down thing, is that God offers it to us, today. If you are here today, and you don't know this Gospel, be surprised, be amazed that the God of the universe came and sought you, offers to give you life and all the blessings that anyone else could ever receive.

Summit, it makes sense to me for some to walk away from all this stuff because they don't believe. What doesn't make sense is to believe this and it not turn our world upside down.

We need to say that the Gospel is not true at all or fall on our faces and worship Him. Worship Him in your lives, worship Him now, and sing that everything you have comes from Him.

But does the Gospel of Jesus make you sing? *But as I ran my hell-bound race, indifferent to the cost, You looked upon my helpless state, and led me to the cross*

Does the Gospel of Jesus make you grateful? *How vast and measureless the flood of mercy unrestrained, the penalty was paid in full, the spotless lamb was slain, salvation, what a priceless gift, we stand in Jesus' name.*

Being able to explain the Gospel is one thing; having it captive your soul is quite another.² If we think we've earned it, how can we sing? But when it has turned us upside down, it is our first response.

[Pray]

² J.D. Greear, tweet

