

☒ LIFE OF JESUS

October 24, 2021 | *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- What do you do to persevere in your faith even in the midst of doubt?
- Read Matthew 20:1–16.
- Ask God to help you see the connection between service and the gospel.

THIS WEEK

☒ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

In the kingdom of heaven, we will see a great reversal of what takes place on earth.

☒ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Follow the example of Jesus in becoming low among others on earth to be delighted over in heaven.

☒ MEDITATE

“So the last will be first, and the first last” (Matthew 20:16).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to learn the key for understanding Matthew 20:1–16.

Q: *Why is it important to look for cues to understand any written material?*

Q: *What does it mean for the first to be last and the last to be first?*

Publishers carefully plan every detail of a book's cover to signal the content of a book by. The front cover contains the title and author's name, but beyond these two givens, everything else is intended to showcase the book's content. The front cover may portray an image of the main character or a consequential scene. It could illustrate an item of key significance for the plot, or the publisher may intend to hint at the tone or mood of the book. The back cover often tells you a little more about the author. You can have a better idea of what to expect if you are familiar with the author's work. The back cover also often has a brief blurb introducing the plot or a character. The outside contains the keys for understanding what is inside.

A similar concept is at work in Matthew 20:1–16. The last verse of Matthew 19 says, “Many who are first will be last, and the last first.” Almost verbatim, Matthew 20:16 states, “So the last will be first, and the first last.” These two lines function like a book cover around the parable Jesus told in Matthew 20:1–15, highlighting the main point of what Jesus had to say.

Whoever is first will be last and the last first. This statement alludes to the great reversal God will orchestrate at the resolution of this age. There are hints of it all throughout Scripture. Joseph was sold by his brothers as a slave, but he became the prime minister of Egypt during a time when the country consolidated its power over the surround lands (Genesis 37–50). Nebuchadnezzar was known as “king of kings and lord of lords,” but he became like an animal in a pasture because of his self-exaltation (Daniel 4). Those who weep on earth will receive their joy in heaven (Revelation 21). This great reversal is perhaps most simply expressed in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:2–12).

Q: *What reversals do you see today that hint at the great reversal coming at the end of history?*

Q: *How can you live to be “last”?*

APPLICATION POINT – The hardest temptation for a Christian is the temptation to live both for right now and for eternity. We believe God will one day intervene in the course of human history and reverse the fortunes of the wicked and the righteous, but it is hard to forgo the joy we think we can have today to hope for the joy we are promised for tomorrow. Although there are signs of this reversal throughout Scripture and even in the world today, sometimes it can be hard to see how God will make right everything that has gone wrong in this creation. In the back of our minds, we always worry the sacrifices we make because of our faith in Jesus Christ will be for nothing. If this all seems familiar to you, allow this lesson to help you dig deeper into the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are waiting for God to act. May He find us faithful when He does.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In Matthew 20:1–16, Jesus offered us a new principle we can use to view our place in the world. Whoever is first on earth will be last, and whoever is last on earth will be first in heaven. This principle helps us see everything God does in a different light.

1. WHY WE SHOULD SACRIFICE

2. WHY GRACE IS BETTER

3. WHY REWARDS ARE GOOD

GOING DEEPER

+This section will draw principles from the concept of “the first will be last and the last first” and from Jesus’s parable of the workers.

1. WHY WE SHOULD SACRIFICE

▣ MATTHEW 19:16–30

🔍: *Why didn’t the rich young man go with Jesus?*

🔍: *How did Jesus’s rejection of the rich young man point to the great reversal?*

The parable of the workers in the vineyard comes on the heels of the story of the rich young man, and this context is critical for understanding why Jesus told the parable of the vineyard workers. The rich young man seemingly had everything in his favor, but Jesus did not accept him because he would not relinquish his material wealth. The young man loved his worldly goods more than he loved Jesus. Jesus's rejection of him was the opposite of what His disciples expected. In Jesus's day, as in our own, people wanted to rub shoulders with people like this rich young man. It improved your social capital and your lifestyle, but Jesus was signaling to everyone willing to see it that things are different within the kingdom of heaven than in the kingdom of this world.

Peter recognized what Jesus was signaling and correlated it to himself and the other disciples. Unlike the rich young man, the disciples had left everything to follow Him. When the kingdom came, they would be received. Jesus affirmed what Peter said and announced that their sacrifices would not go unnoticed when the kingdom of heaven came. Furthermore, Jesus used the disciples as a model to show that anyone who sacrificed the joys of this world to follow Him would be rewarded when the kingdom of heaven arrived. Those who make sacrifices to follow Jesus now make themselves last in the kingdom of man, but God will make them first in the kingdom of heaven. This is the great reversal that all of Scripture anticipates.

🔗: *In what ways are you making yourself last in the kingdom of man?*

🔗: *Why is the story of the rich young man a warning to our modern world?*

APPLICATION POINT – Being last in the kingdom of man is not necessarily tied to obscurity or a renunciation of wealth and material goods. Being last in the kingdom of man simply means prioritizing the kingdom of heaven over everything this world has to offer. Being last in the kingdom of man means you seek God's will rather than following the course the world sets before you. These are general depictions of what it looks like to be last in the kingdom of man, but you can fill in the specifics of your own life. Take some time to figure out the specifics. On a sheet of paper, write "personal goals," "financial goals," and "career goals." Under each of these headings, list an example of a worldly goal. Try to be as specific as possible, given your situation. Under each worldly goal, edit the worldly goals to prioritize the kingdom of heaven rather than the kingdom of man.

2. WHY GRACE IS BETTER

📖 MATTHEW 20:1-16

Q: *What principle did Jesus reverse in this parable?*

Q: *How did Jesus's life and ministry subvert the principle He was reversing?*

When Jesus turned the rich young man away, the disciples were astonished. They thought earthly stature coincided with heavenly stature. The rich young man was wealthy and important on earth. The disciples believed he would be wealthy and important in heaven, but Jesus refused to accept him as a disciple. He was reversing the disciples' expectations by operating under a different principle. The first will be last and the last will be first. To illustrate this reversal, Jesus told the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

The first workers in this parable agreed to work for a denarius, the typical daily wage. When the first workers noticed that the workers who arrived late in the day also received a denarius, they expected the owner to pay them proportionally more. Their principle was that they should be fairly compensated for their labor. Although they originally agreed to work for a denarius, their expectation of fair compensation changed when they noticed the later workers receiving the same amount. They hoped to receive more, perhaps even twelve times more than those who worked only a single hour. The owner's payment, however, operated on a different principle, the principle of grace. He gave the workers who worked less than a full day more than they deserved. His principle reversed the expectations of the first workers. In the same way, the kingdom of heaven will reverse our expectations. Those who are first on earth will be last in the kingdom of heaven, and those who are last on earth will be first in the kingdom of heaven.

Unlike the disciples' expectation, this principle wonderfully matches the arc we see in Jesus's life and ministry. Jesus gave up the glories of heaven in order to become a servant on earth. In the minds of those around Him, this would have been crazy! Giving up a prestigious position in order to take a lower one is crazy. But Jesus eventually showed the folly of this thinking. After becoming a servant of others on earth, He was highly exalted in heaven. The last on earth became first in heaven.

Q: *How does Jesus's parable encourage you to become a servant on earth?*

Q: *Why are we often hesitant to assume the role of a servant in the church?*

APPLICATION POINT – Every church has needs no one wants to meet. When I attended a mega-church in seminary, that job was the parking team. Rain or shine, the parking team was in the lots assisting people in finding a parking space. Even after the service started, the parking team had to stay behind to help the late arrivals. Then they had to pick up traffic cones and signs. When everyone else was done serving, the parking team was only half finished. No one wanted to be on the parking team. In my current church, that job is the nursery. No one wants to miss Sunday school or service to watch someone else’s kids. Furthermore, if you agree to be on this team, you can count on serving two, if not three Sundays a month because volunteers are scarce. It is the job no one wants to do. The problem in both these churches, and I suspect almost every other church, is that Christians do not believe what Jesus said. If they did, these roles within the church would not be the ones no one wanted but the ones everyone would want. If you believe what Jesus said, consider getting ahead of the others in your church by volunteering for the roles no one else wants. The last on earth will be first in the kingdom of heaven.

❓: *How does the vineyard owner’s response to the workers’ question go against the principle the disciples held concerning the rich young man?*

❓: *Who is the source of every blessing on earth and in heaven?*

The workers who arrived at the vineyard first were offended when the owner paid them the same amount as those who showed up an hour before quitting time. But the owner declared that he was free to do whatever he chose with what was his. His statement is clearly meant to convey God’s freedom to be gracious to whomever He wills. Every blessing, in heaven and on earth, belongs to God. God is free to be gracious with what is His. Notice, however, that the principle the disciples believed concerning the rich man did not allow for this. In their minds, the rich young man would be blessed in heaven because he was blessed on earth. This principle denies God’s free grace. God is not obligated to bless someone in heaven just because they were made much of on earth. Instead, God uses a different principle. Those who made much of themselves on earth can expect little from Him in heaven, where those who sacrificed what they had for the sake of the gospel can expect to be made much of.

❓: *Do your possessions belong to you or to God?*

❓: *Is the purpose of your wealth to make much of yourself or of God?*

APPLICATION – If the principles in this lesson are true, most of us have the wrong idea about wealth. We think the primary purpose of our wealth is to serve us. God says the primary purpose of our wealth should be to serve Him. It is ultimately His anyway. The rich young man could not accept this demand. That is why he left Jesus and continued putting himself first on earth by how he spent his wealth. This lesson challenges you to do the opposite. Using your wealth to make much of God will make you last on earth, but in the kingdom of heaven the first will be last and the last first. Use whatever means you have to make much of God.

❓: *What hope is there for those who are last in the disciple's way of viewing earth and heaven?*

❓: *What hope is there for those who are last in Jesus's way of viewing earth and heaven?*

The disciples believed wealth and importance on earth were evidence of wealth and importance in heaven. This principle never demands sacrifice from those who have much on earth. It would be crazy to sacrifice anything for the sake of the gospel if it meant diminishing our earthly importance. Furthermore, this principle offers no hope to those who have nothing. There is no joy on earth and no promise of joy in heaven. But Jesus's principle changed everything. Sacrifice is the key to becoming great in the kingdom of heaven. It is those who are able to put others first on earth who will find themselves first in heaven. Jesus offered hope in heaven to those who have none on earth.

❓: *Why is it hard to make yourself last on earth?*

❓: *Why does heaven provide a better hope than earth?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians are not hoping to locate their joy in the things of this world. If you are having difficulty believing the principle at the heart this lesson, it is because you are still hoping to find joy in the things of the world. You must recognize the futility of this way of thinking. Whatever joy you find on earth will

not last. Place your hope for joy in heaven. When you look to heaven for your joy, becoming last on earth will not seem like a big deal.

3. WHY REWARDS ARE GOOD

Q: *How is this parable related to how we experience salvation?*

Q: *Can someone be extra-saved?*

The main point of this parable is the great reversal. The first will be last, and the last will be first. Matthew assures that his readers recognize this by bookending the parable with this phrase. Many people have also noticed how this parable relates to the verdict God will pronounce upon each one of us on the last day. In the parable, each of the workers received equal pay regardless of how long they worked in the vineyard. The Christian who is saved early in life will be declared “not guilty” when God judges us on the last day. In the same way, a person who lives 100 years and only confesses Christ as Savior in the last moments of life will also be declared “not guilty.” The one who was saved early in life is not “extra not guilty” nor is the person saved late in life “just a little not guilty.” Jesus’s blood covers them the same. Everyone who confesses Jesus Christ as Savior is on equal footing in this regard.

Q: *Why should we be thankful that our justification is based completely on God’s grace rather than even partly on our own merits?*

Q: *Do you think you would take your faith more seriously if you had to earn your salvation?*

APPLICATION POINT – The parable of the workers affirms that we can never earn our way into heaven. If we are in Christ, our future does not hang in the balance. Our justification has been secured. We never need to worry whether we have done enough to earn our justification or done something to cancel it. Our justification rests upon

our faith in the resurrected Christ. We are free to pursue God out of love, not to increase our standing before God. Any other way would diminish God's glory and our joy.

Q: *If we all receive the same verdict, what advantage is there to confessing Jesus Christ as Savior early in life?*

Q: *How should we think about rewards in heaven?*

Every believer in Jesus will be declared not guilty when God judges humanity during the final judgment. Some people have seen fit to extend this equal standing into eternity, claiming that everyone's experience in heaven will be exactly the same. The frequent discussions of rewards in heaven in the New Testament should be enough to challenge this sentiment. In some cases, it is easy enough to equate rewards with our justification, but in other instances, the New Testament does seem to imply that some Christians will receive rewards related to their faithfulness on earth (Matthew 6:19–21; 1 Corinthians 3:12–15).

The exact nature of these rewards is never fully explained. I doubt God will be sharing His glory with others in heaven. Perhaps a reward in heaven is something by which we will be able to take in a greater appreciation of God's glory. For example, I can press keys on a piano just as well as anyone, but I cannot make music with one. My capacity for joy in playing the piano is very limited compared to someone who has done the hard work of learning to play. Perhaps that gets at the nature of rewards in heaven. Rewards increase your capacity to take in God's glory. Whatever the case, it seems unlikely we should extend any point concerning our equal standing before God in judgment to correlate to our experience in heaven. The New Testament confirms that some people will attain a greater reward than others.

Q: *How should the hope of great rewards in heaven influence our lives here?*

Q: *Can you be a Christian and not seek great rewards in heaven?*

APPLICATION – All Christians are called to remain faithful to their confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior and grow in their faith by submitting every part of their lives to His lordship. If someone claims to be a Christian but has no desire for these things, there is good reason to question the authenticity of their faith. This growth in the Christian life is also what leads us to rewards in heaven. If you are a Christian, pursuing rewards in heaven really demands nothing beyond what you committed to doing when you confessed Jesus Christ as your Savior. Every true Christian seeks rewards in heaven. This is not an extra step in the Christian faith. Therefore, continue to seek growth in your faith. Break down the limits on how much you will allow your faith to control your life. Seek rewards in heaven by seeking to grow in your faith.

NEXT STEPS

The first will be last and the last first. How are you making yourself last in the kingdom of man? How are you sacrificing your worldly goods for the glory of God and the spread of the gospel? You can do this in an endless number of ways. You can become last in the kingdom of man by becoming a servant to all. You can become last in the kingdom of man by giving sacrificially from your wealth. You can become last in the kingdom of man by seeking to honor others rather than yourself. See how you can put Jesus's principle into action this week.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

-Father, thank you for turning the wisdom of the world upside down.

-God, forgive me for not trusting in the joy to be found in your kingdom.

-Jesus, thank you for the hope I have in heaven's great reversal.

-God, thank you for the free gift of salvation in your Son, Jesus Christ.