

## Introduction

As we turn to Matthew 19.27 today, we have to begin by noting that what we have here is a continuation of the dialogue that began with the question about obtaining eternal life (19.16). There was interaction with a rich young man who had great possessions and interest in the exposition of the Scriptures. He listened to the rabbis and he listened to Jesus expound on the commandments. It turns out that what he wanted was another possession beyond the temporal and material; he wanted eternal security. He tried to obtain it by doing religious good works, but with heart attachment to his money first. He could not give of his money and this fact showed that he broke all the commandments because he broke the pillar commandments of love for his neighbor and God. His priorities centered on the things of earth and not on the things of God.

From the dialogue with the rich man, there are many lessons for the disciples and through them for us in the church today. The grip of money on our hearts reveals the very real danger of selfishness, autonomy, and man-centeredness that can captivate even very religious people.

The disciples get the message that brought sorrow to the rich man. They know that we must “sell all that we have and give it away to the poor” in order to be perfect and obtain eternal life. We must, in practical fact, detach ourselves from all things and attach ourselves to Christ to be saved. However, it is impossible, with man, but it is possible, with God.

At this point in the narrative, Peter speaks in reply with a question. **Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (19.27).** The answer Jesus gives to him leads to a “first-last, last-first” proverb that is repeated like bookends (19.30; 20.16). Between the bookends, we have the parable of the workers who come to work at different times of the day. Thus, Matthew 19.27-20.16 is a unit and its bookends give us this title: “The Great Reversal, When Last is First.” There are two things to cover, Peter’s question (with our Lord’s answer) and The Lord’s parable (with His application as the basis for our applications).

### 1A. Peter’s Question

We have to notice the preceding dialogue to hear Peter like this: “different from the rich man, we have left all to follow you, but in light of your demand of perfection, where do we stand regarding eternal life? What then will we have? What is in store for us?”

At first glance, we might think that Peter is thinking purely about rewards in the future kingdom, and, perhaps, we might think that he not only has a mercenary spirit, but that he also has self-righteousness like the rich man. That is a possible way to take the passage, but it is better to understand it in a different way. The key is the openness of God’s sovereign action. That is, we must hear Peter’s question in light of the fact that he got the point of perfection that leads to impossibility that puts everything about man’s salvation in the hands of God with whom all is possible. Therefore, Peter says, “We are in a different category than the rich man, we know our sins, we know the impossibility of contributing anything to our salvation, we know it is possible for us to obtain eternal life by your sovereign action, *and we know that we cannot presume upon you, upon what is possible for you.* What then is in store for us?” There is uncertainty in his question and he seeks assurance (cf. Calvinists seeking assurance).

Graciously and kindly, the Lord gives Peter His assurances in three steps: He focuses on the apostles, then He focuses on everyone, including the apostles, and then he focuses on a contrast. Let us now consider each step.

#### 1) The focus on the apostles

**Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (19.28).**

Opening His answer with “truly I say to you,” Jesus solemnly gave some assuring words to the apostles regarding the coming glory and their place in it. The new world (or regeneration

of all things) refers to what is still to come when Jesus will sit on His throne of glory. However, it may be difficult to get our arms around the idea of the apostles sitting on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Many commentators make the point that “judging” means more than a judicial function; it means to govern or rule, to judge in that sense. Thus, there is prominence, leadership, and rule in contrast to the status of poor and uneducated fishermen. Something of the greatness in the kingdom is in view again (as in Mat 18.1-4).

However, what are we to make of this rule over the twelve tribes? There is big argument that we could discuss, but that need not detain us except for a few remarks. That is, though some people take the teaching here literally, a number of facts suggest that the sitting on twelve thrones is not referring to a millennial kingdom with Israel in the Holy Land. a) First, broadly speaking, if that were the case, we would have the problem of distinguishing between Israel and the church in the future. However, God has only one people not two in some kind of ranking. b) Second, Judas is not included. Then there are eleven apostles, but later there are twelve apostles, and still later, you would think that Paul makes thirteen apostles. The twelve apostles have, as twelve, a metaphorical meaning. Thus, the rule of the twelve tribes is metaphorical as well. c) Third, consider where they rule on thrones over the tribes of Israel. Surely, it is in the land and over the cities of Israel. From Matthew 10, we know that the cities of the land become the cities of the Gentile earth as the place of gospel proclamation until the Son of man comes. d) Fourth, this context equates eternal life with the glorious future of kingdom consummation (cf. vs. 16, 24-27). Emphasis is surely on the consummation of the kingdom, on eternal life in that context, or on the eternal state. Thus, the new world is the new earth and new heaven not the millennium.

Thus, judging the twelve tribes is metaphorical for having rule over the earth by the gospel, now and not yet, but with definite emphasis on the (consummation) not yet of the kingdom. It makes better sense of their rule to view it in terms of the gospel and its abiding effect. In Revelation 21, the apostles are twelve foundations for the holy city, which is the new Israel, the twelve gates. The people of God from all generations are under the rule of fulfillment in Christ that the apostles preached. Among all the people of God, the apostles have a unique function. Jesus promises them a foundational role in the spread of the gospel until the Son of Man comes, and *that foundational role lasts forever* as we see in the vision of the city of God, the new Israel in the eternal state. **Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.**<sup>10</sup> **And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God,**<sup>11</sup> **having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.**<sup>12</sup> **It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed-**<sup>13</sup> **on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates.**<sup>14</sup> **And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb** (Rev 21.9-14). Sitting on twelve thrones ruling is symbolical of the unique function of the apostles in the history of redemption. By following Christ, they will have lasting, eternally lasting greatness in the kingdom of heaven with a unique foundational role. That is what the apostles will have by forsaking all and following Christ.

## 2) The focus on everyone

**And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life (19.29).** Jesus presents earthly detachment in conjunction with the motive of heavenly attachment as the way to obtain eternal life. True Christians turn away from giving priority to family or possessions above centering their hearts on God. We must subordinate family to service to Christ and His kingdom. We must subordinate money to the service of Christ and His kingdom. You cannot serve God (not really) while giving priority to money first. However, to those who make the choice of love for God above all earthly things (and who thus show it in their actions regarding family and money), to them Jesus promises an eternal inheritance in the coming kingdom.

## 3) The focus on a contrast

Then Jesus says, **But many who are first will be last, and the last first** (19.30). In trying to think through the proverb, we have to say that if the first are actually last and if the last are actually first, then being first and last is a matter of appearances or something outward. Even self-denial for some is only appearance. They look like they are first in righteousness. They are like the young rich man who looks good, seeks exposition of the Scriptures from Christ, and lives an upstanding life, as to outward appearances. Thus, people may look good to some extent, and they may appear to be followers of Christ, and in that sense they are first, but in reality they will not inherit eternal life; they will be last and perish in their sins. On the other hand, people who seem to be last, who do not look so good, and who in fact are not good, will be first and receive an everlasting inheritance. That is assuring to the apostles and to all disciples.

## 2A. The Lord's Parable

Next, Jesus expands on the meaning of the proverb by giving an argument for it (perhaps, it is an explanation as to why the proverb holds in an expansive way adding more to what He has already said).

"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. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, <sup>4</sup> and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' <sup>5</sup> So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. <sup>6</sup> And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' <sup>7</sup> They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' <sup>8</sup> 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.' <sup>9</sup> And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, <sup>12</sup> 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.' <sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?' <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first last" (Mat 20.1-16).

### 1B. A summary of the parable

A landowner hires people to work in his vineyard with the agreement of a day's wage for a day's work. Then, at different times of the day including the "eleventh" hour (with only one hour left to work), he hired more workers (some at 9.00, some at noon, some mid-afternoon, and some at the end of the day). There is an order from first to last, from first hired to last hired, but at the end of the day when payment time comes, the order is reversed and the last hired are the first paid. Now, worthy of note is the fact that no matter how much or little the people worked, each still received a day's wage for a day's work, even the last (with the least time on the job). Obviously, some did not work the whole day. When time for payment came, the first to work are now last in line. This allows them to observe the fact that the people that worked "only one hour" and did not endure the burden of the day and the scorching heat nonetheless received the day's wage. They thought, therefore, that they would "receive more", but they received the day's wage as well. They complain and the owner tells one of them that he has done him no wrong; the pay accords with their agreement. Then he says, **Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' (20.14-15).**

### 2B. Some peculiarities of the parable

Before we tackle the meaning of the parable, we should highlight some odd things about the parable, things that stand out, get our attention, and guide our thoughts.

There is an order of hiring that includes the odd fact that the landowner hires people at various times of the day, even late in the day.

Then the order of paying is in reverse, the last hired are paid first and the first hired are paid last.

There is no record of any comments of those hired last, expressing their gratitude, surprise, or anything.

The first hired grumble at the master because they expect more having observed what he gave to the last hired.

The landowner is truly kind and generous. He calls the representative complainer, “friend.” More than that, he pays all the workers according to what was agreed (he is truthful, a covenant keeper), and he pays much more than some earn by his choice and in generous freedom.

Finally, the landowner questions the complaining worker, and notably, there are no answers. It is part of the parable and its effect on us as a teaching tool to leave the questions unanswered. What does that do for us as readers? It makes us immediately (and intuitively) answer the questions. No doubt, you have already formulated answers to these questions, perhaps as early as the Scripture reading when the worship service began. So, what is your answer to these questions?

**Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? (20.15).** As readers, and in terms of the story, we have to say something to this effect to the first question: “yes, as a landowner, you have the right (you are allowed) to do what you choose with what belongs to you...okay, but I don’t have to like it.” The second question is harder to answer because it is very personal, “do you, do you oppose my goodness?” If you try to answer in terms of the story, there is no way to answer the question. The man might take this as a rebuke and turn away, or he might repent and turn to the landowner as a friend indeed.

Now we come to a most important point. As readers, we identify with the characters. We get into their shoes. What happens when we cannot figure out how a character would answer a question? One effect is this: we have to answer the question. That is, the question transports itself from the parable into our lives. We have to fill out a context and give a personal answer. We will come back to this fact as we now turn to applications and implications with an eye on 20.16, **So the last will be first, and the first last.**

## Applications

I am sure that each of you can (are, and will) find a slough of applications to this narrative. What I want to do is suggest some that work within the idea of the bookends. Applications have to arise in some way from the two last-first statements (19.30; 20.16). Three key words serve as hooks for these applications: comfort, warning, and worship.

### 1) First, there is comfort in the first-last proverb

For you who follow Christ (apostles and all disciples) by forsaking all in complete self-surrender to Christ, who suffer for it and often come out on the short end of the stick, who strive after Christ’s commandments (the Ten and the Two; the Ten Commandments and the Two Love Commandments), and who know you fall short, way short, of the required perfection, and who know you cannot presume on the possibilities that belong to the Lord, Jesus gives the promise and assurance that you have as your personal inheritance, eternal life. Sinful people, who are last in the eyes of the world, and last in their own eyes, are first in God’s eyes, and they receive the inheritance of eternal life.

### 2) Second, there is warning in the first-last proverb

Just as the last in appearance are actually first in reality before God, likewise, many who are first in appearance are actually last in reality before God. It does not seem to overstate the point that they have the inheritance of eternal death. The warning has to have the Pharisees and people like the rich young man in mind. They look good and appear blameless before the commandments as to their outward form and performance. Surely, the complaining workers are in the same boat as the complaining elder son in the story of the Prodigal. The elder son represents the Pharisees and all who follow the rabbinic tradition and its legalism.

However, the personalized “you” of the final question of the parable casts its shadow over the entire narrative. The parable leaps from the past into our present. The master, God, questions each of us. The warning is that you may be a baptized member of the church, you may look like a saint in outward and surface ways, and you may appear to be first, but you have no inheritance in the kingdom. You have no inheritance because of a heart problem, because you

have not made the choice of love for God above money, family, and all earthly things. This is a call to repentance. It is a call to you to examine yourself, and if need be, to give yourself away to the Lord holding nothing back. It is a warning that summons you to take stock and give all that you are, all you hope to be, and all your possess to Christ and His service.

3) Third, there is worship in the first-last proverb

Let us consider the final questions again as they lead into the proverb: <sup>15</sup> **Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?** <sup>16</sup> **So the last will be first, and the first last** (Mat 20.1-16).

We know that the speaker is God. He questions us. He says, “Do you acknowledge that I have the right to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” He says, “Do you complain and moan about my goodness, or do you acknowledge my generosity?” What do you say? How do you express yourself? How do you speak about God? How do you worship and praise Him?

Now, one loose string still dangles in mid air. What is the point of the last bookend proverb as a conclusion that flows out of the parable? Jesus puts the last-first phrase first (that reversal puts emphasis on this side of the equation).

The last-first group refers to people who do not deserve what they get (they do not earn or merit what they get). What they get is being first-eternal life. They do their work incompletely (they do not keep the law perfectly). No mention is made of their attitudes. Thus, the emphasis falls on the grace of God in giving eternal life to undeserving sinners. This balances the point made to the rich young man, namely, that to be perfect according to God’s standard, God as standard, you must keep all the commandments in the spirit of the two pillar commandments of love. Therefore, despite the fact that man must keep the commandments perfectly to obtain eternal life, and despite the fact that man cannot do so (it is impossible with man), it is possible with God, clearly, *by His grace*.

Accordingly, we cannot remain silent. We must answer the Lord’s question that comes to each of us personally. We must acknowledge His rights as the sovereign God, and His right to choose to save sinners who are last and lost. We must not complain about His goodness, as some do, but praise Him for His sovereign grace. Thus, a song is a fitting doxology for this message if it confesses and acknowledges God’s sovereign choosing and His sovereign grace.

**‘Tis not that I did choose thee for Lord that could not be (with man it is impossible)  
This heart would still refuse thee, hadst thou not chosen me  
Thou from the sin that stained me hast cleansed and set me free (with God it is possible)  
Of old thou hast ordained me, that I should live to thee**