

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 19:30-20:16
“First Last, Last First”

Prepared by Charles H. Jensen, Pastor, Cornerstone Fellowship
101 Kylies Road, Coatesville, PA 19329
610-384-1375
charleshjensen@aol.com

Matthew 19:30-20:16

(The reader will note that the last verse of chapter 19 has been associated with Matthew 20:1-16. That is because the chapter and verse numbers found in the Bible are not original to the text and are somewhat arbitrary in assignment. Matthew 19:30 and 20:16 are twin verses. They form “word brackets” around the parable of the vineyard workers. Matthew 19:30 is misplaced when it is associated with Matthew 19 and makes no sense as the concluding remark of that chapter. However, when associated with chapter 20 as the opening verse, it declares the main point of the parable.)

Verse 19:30

“But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”

- This parable follows the encounter of Jesus with the children (Matthew 19:13-15) and the rich man who came to Jesus asking what he must do to be saved (Matthew 19:16-29). It is, therefore, intended to summarize the truths that these passages teach.
- In Matthew 19:13-15 babies were being brought to Jesus that he might bless them. The disciples tried to prevent this from happening. Apparently, they did not think that children were important enough to claim the Master’s attention. But Jesus told them to let the children come to him for to such belonged the kingdom of Heaven. In this instance, those who were considered unimportant, “last,” were given first place.
- In Matthew 19:16-29 the man who had kept the law found that it was impossible for him to enter heaven because he was trusting his goodness and his wealth rather than Jesus to take him there. Therefore, the one who should have been first because he kept the law was given last place, it was impossible for him to enter heaven.
- Thus, this verse declares the main point of the story that follows.

Verse 20:1

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.”

- Note that this is a parable. It is a comparison, a story told to illustrate a truth. Notice the word, “LIKE.” This story is trying to tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like. It is not literally. It is an illustration comparing Heaven to this landowner.
- The “landowner” needs men to work in his vineyard. So, early in the morning, he goes to the place where temporary workers wait to be hired and hires those that he needs for the day.

Verse 2

“He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.”

- A deal is struck between the landowner and the workers. They will work for the entire day in his vineyard. He will pay them a fair wage for the day’s work.
- The deal being struck, the workers go to work in the vineyard.

Verse 3-5a

“About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.”

- At nine o’clock in the morning, the landowner noticed that additional workers were available. So, he hired them too and sent them to join the workers he had hired earlier in the vineyard.
- Note that the deal is not so defined in this case. The landowner will pay these workers a fair wage, but that wage is not specifically discussed.
- None-the-less, these workers do join the others already working in the vineyard.

Verse 5b

“He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing.”

- At noon and at three o’clock in the afternoon the landowner hired additional workers and sent them into the vineyard to join those already working there.

Verse 6-7

“About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’”

- At five o’clock in the afternoon, just one hour before quitting time, the landowner hired yet more workers and sent them into his vineyard.
- There are now five separate sets of workers working in the vineyard: the dawn crew, the 9 o’clock crew, the noon crew, the 3 o’clock crew, and the 5 o’clock crew. All were invited to work in the landowner’s vineyard by the landowner himself. Therefore, all were legitimately hired.

Verse 8

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’”

- It would have been usual practice to settle with temporary workers at the close of each workday. That is what the owner orders done. The foreman is to pay each of the workers.
- However, in this case, to make his point in the parable, Jesus, the teller of the tale, arranges the details so that the five groups of workers are to be paid beginning with the group that worked the shortest day and proceeding to those who worked longest.

Verse 9

“The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each of them received a denarius.”

- Remember that these were those who had worked only about an hour. Yet, out of his graciousness, the owner of the vineyard paid them for the full day. See notes on verse 2.

Verse 10

“So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.”

- Those who had worked all day assumed that since the workers who arrived late were given a denarius, they would receive more.
- A denarius was a fair wage for a day’s work.

- The workers hired early in the day had specifically agreed to work the entire day for a denarius.
- But since others, who had worked less hours had received a denarius, these workers who had worked all day, simply assumed that they would get more. However, they got a denarius, the same pay as those who had come to work in the vineyard later in the day.

Verse 11-12

“When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’”

- The workers hired first felt as if they were being mistreated. They had worked harder and much longer than those hired at the eleventh hour. They should, therefore, be more highly rewarded. The fact is that we agree with their logic and the justice of their case. All that they say here makes sense to us and seems only fair. They should be paid more than those who worked less.

Verse 13-15

“But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’”

- The grumbling is, of course, done in secret not directly to the boss. However, the boss overhearing it addresses one of the complainers.
- The owner of the vineyard points out that he kept the specific terms of the contract that he made with those hired first. They each agreed to work all day for a denarius and they each were paid a denarius. Therefore, they were treated fairly.
- He points out that the money spent was his not theirs and that he was free to do whatever he wished to do with his own money. If he wanted to waste it by overpaying those who came to work later in the day, that was of no concern to the other workers.
- He pointed out that they should not be offended by his generosity.

Verse 16

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

- Once more Jesus states the main point of the parable. But what is the context of the lesson?
- First the story should speak to the disciples who felt that unimportant people, like little children, would be last in the kingdom of Heaven. According to Jesus those who seem unimportant will be first.
- Second, the story should speak to those who feel that some event or circumstance has given them a special place in the eyes of God. In Jesus’ day, the Jews felt this way, that being Jewish made them special in God’s sight. Among the Jews the Pharisees thought that they were extra special in the eyes of God. But according to Jesus those who think they should be first in the kingdom of God will be last.
- All this should cause us to remember:
 1. that the kingdom belongs to the king.
 2. that we enter the kingdom by his grace.
 3. that he values all people not just those who are good or important.
 4. that those of us who found him early should not be offended when others join us late even if they receive the same reward as do we.
 5. that grumbling and complaining about the way God runs things will not change the way God runs things.
 6. that God’s judgments are always right.
 7. that if we think we should be first in the kingdom of heaven, or if we think we are better than someone else, we will be last. But if we think more highly of others in the kingdom than we do ourselves, we will be lifted high in the eyes of the Lord.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *First Last, Last First*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen*. They are used here by permission.)