

CHAPTER 97

Illustration of the Workers in the Vineyard

MATTHEW 20:1-16

• THE “LAST” WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD BECOME “FIRST”

Jesus has just told his listeners in Perea that “many who are first will be last and the last first.” (Matthew 19:30) He underscores this statement with an illustration about workers in a vineyard:

“The Kingdom of the heavens is like the master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After he had agreed with the workers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. Going out also about the third hour, he saw others standing unemployed in the marketplace; and to those he said, ‘You too go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is fair.’ So off they went. Again he went out about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did likewise. Finally, about the 11th hour, he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day unemployed?’ They replied, ‘Because nobody has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into the vineyard.’”—Matthew 20:1-7.

Jesus’ listeners likely think of Jehovah God when they hear mention of “the Kingdom of the heavens” and “the master of a house.” The Scriptures present Jehovah as the owner of a vineyard, which represented the nation of Israel. (Psalm 80:8, 9; Isaiah 5:3, 4) Those in the Law covenant are likened to workers in the vineyard. Jesus, though, is not illustrating the past. He is describing a situation existing in his time.

The religious leaders, like the Pharisees who recently tried to test him on the subject of divorce, are supposedly laboring continually in God’s service. They are like full-time workers who expect full pay, the wage being a denarius for a day’s work.

The priests and others in this group consider the common Jews as serving God to a lesser extent, like part-time laborers in God’s vineyard. In Jesus’ illustration, these are the men who are employed “about the third hour” (9:00 a.m.) or later in the workday—at the sixth, ninth, and finally the eleventh hour (5:00 p.m.).

The men and women who follow Jesus are viewed as “accursed people.” (John 7:49) For most of their lives, they have been fishermen or other laborers. Then, in the fall of 29 C.E., “the master of the vineyard” sent Jesus to call these lowly people to labor for God as Christ’s disciples. They are “the last” whom Jesus mentions, the 11th-hour vineyard workers.

Finishing his illustration, Jesus describes what occurs at the close of the workday: “When evening came, the master of the vineyard said to his man in charge, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last and ending with the first.’ When the 11th-hour men came, they each received a denarius. So when the first came, they assumed that they would receive more, but they too were paid at

the rate of a denarius. On receiving it, they began to complain against the master of the house and said, ‘These last men put in one hour’s work; still you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day and the burning heat!’ But he said in reply to one of them, ‘Fellow, I do you no wrong. You agreed with me for a denarius, did you not? Take what is yours and go. I want to give to this last one the same as to you. Do I not have the right to do what I want with my own things? Or is your eye envious because I am good?’ In this way, the last ones will be first, and the first ones last.”—Matthew 20:8-16.

The disciples may wonder about that final part of Jesus’ illustration. How will the Jewish religious leaders, who imagine themselves “first,” become “last”? And how will Jesus’ disciples become “first”?

Jesus’ disciples, whom the Pharisees and others view as “last,” are in line to be “first,” to receive full pay. With Jesus’ death, earthly Jerusalem is to be cast off, whereupon God will choose a new nation, “the Israel of God.” (Galatians 6:16; Matthew 23:38) John the Baptist pointed to such ones when he spoke about a coming baptism with holy spirit. Those who have been “last” are to be the first to receive that baptism and to be given the privilege of being witnesses of Jesus “to the most distant part of the earth.” (Acts 1:5, 8; Matthew 3:11) To the extent that the disciples grasp the dramatic change Jesus is pointing to, they may foresee facing extreme displeasure from the religious leaders, who become “last.”

(end of chapter 97)

To better understand the illustration of the first and the last, you must first understand how deeply ingrained the hierarchical society was that the apostles lived in at the time.

The following Watchtower article excerpt covers it well:

[w10 8/15 p. 3] Ideas concerning what is appropriate or unacceptable and what is praiseworthy or reprehensible differ from place to place. They also change over the course of time. Therefore, when reading Scriptural accounts of events that took place in the distant past, we need to consider popular opinion and values in Bible times rather than impose our own standards on what we read.

For example, take two concepts repeatedly mentioned in the Christian Greek Scriptures—honor and shame. In order to gain a better understanding of the passages that speak of honor and shame, we should reflect on how they were perceived by the people living back then.

Values of the First Century

“Greeks, Romans, and Judeans all considered honor and shame to be pivotal values in their cultures,” says one scholar. “Men lived and died in quest of honor, reputation, fame, approval, and respect.” Such values made them susceptible to the opinions of others.

Status, position, and honor were everything in a society characterized by an acute awareness of rank, ranging from nobility to slavery. Honor was a person’s value not only in his own eyes but in the eyes of others as well. To honor a person meant to acknowledge publicly that he behaved in a way expected of him. Rendering honor also meant being outwardly impressed by a person’s wealth, office, or nobility

and therefore according him due attention. Honor could be won by performing virtuous deeds or by excelling over others. In contrast, shame, or dishonor, accompanied public humiliation or ridicule. More than a personal feeling or a response of one's conscience, it was the result of condemnation by society.

When Jesus spoke about a person's being assigned "the most prominent place" or "the lowest place" at a feast, it was a matter of honor or shame according to the culture of the day. (Luke 14:8-10) On at least two occasions, Jesus' disciples disputed over "which one of them seemed to be greatest." (Luke 9:46; 22:24) They were manifesting a major concern of the society in which they lived. Meanwhile, proud and competitive Jewish religious leaders saw Jesus' preaching as a challenge to their honor and authority. Their attempts to get the better of him in public debates before crowds, however, invariably resulted in failure.—Luke 13:11-17.

So status was a big part of life at that time. Everything they did revolved around their position in society, from a king down to a slave, with most holding the lower positions. Personal status permeated society and was deeply ingrained in each individual.

With that in mind, let's look at the scriptures where Christ uses the illustration of the first and the last.

(Mark 9:35-37) So he sat down and called the Twelve and said to them: "If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all and minister of all." ³⁶ Then he took a young child and stood him in their midst; and putting his arms around him, he said to them: ³⁷ "Whoever receives one of such young children on the basis of my name receives me also; and whoever receives me receives not me only but also Him who sent me."

The apostles were told to accept the young (lowly) ones whom Christ and Jehovah also accept since he and his Father accept them all equally; old and young, first and last.

The following scriptures help us better understand how a young child fits into Jesus' illustration. They show the opinion people of the time held for children due to their rank or status in society.

(Matthew 18:1-5) In that hour the disciples came near to Jesus and said: "Who really is greatest in the Kingdom of the heavens?" ² So calling a young child to him, he stood him in their midst ³ and said: "Truly I say to you, unless you turn around and become as young children, you will by no means enter into the Kingdom of the heavens. ⁴ Therefore, whoever will humble himself like this young child is the one who is the greatest in the Kingdom of the heavens; ⁵ and whoever receives one such young child on the basis of my name receives me also.

(Matthew 18:10) See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my Father who is in heaven.

(Luke 9:46-50) Then a dispute arose among them about which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a young child, stood him beside him, ⁴⁸ and said to them: "Whoever receives this young child on the basis of my name receives me also; and whoever

receives me also receives the One who sent me. For the one who conducts himself as a lesser one among all of you is the one who is great.”⁴⁹ In response John said: “Instructor, we saw someone expelling demons by using your name, and we tried to prevent him, because he is not following with us.”⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him: “Do not try to prevent him, for whoever is not against you is for you.”

The Greek word *kataphronéō* translated as “*despise*” means literally to “think down” and refers to holding someone in contempt, deeming them unworthy and hence despised (scorned).

The Greek word “*dechomai*” translated as “*receives*” means: accept, welcome, warmly welcome, receive, readily receive. That is to say, welcome them without looking down on them, treating them as equal in rank.

Those of low rank knew what their status was and did not rebel against it, but accepted it and remained humble. Showing humility was an outward acknowledgement of your lower status in society and your respect for the status quo, which everyone was expected to honor. If a high ranking one were to ‘receive’ a low ranked one, he would not be raising the lower one up in rank, but would be viewed as lowering himself down in rank, and he would then be treated thusly. An arrogant “I’m better than you are” attitude was a requirement to remain in a higher status.

No, the attitude the Israelites displayed toward one another in their cultural structure was not very friendly. (Pr 18:23) That is why Christ had to give them a “new commandment.”

(John 13:34, 35) I am giving you a new commandment, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also love one another.³⁵ By this all will know that you are my disciples—if you have love among yourselves.”

A loving attitude for all others would be so unique among the Israelites that it would be an identifying characteristic of Christians and make them stand out as different from everyone else.

Knowing this mental attitude of people at that time also helps us better understand why the apostles reacted the way they did at Matthew 19:13 and Luke 18:15. They thought they were protecting Christ’s status. And since he was their leader, theirs as well.

(Mark 10:23-31) After looking around, Jesus said to his disciples: “How difficult it will be for those with money to enter into the Kingdom of God!”²⁴ But the disciples were surprised at his words. Jesus then responded: “Children, how difficult it is to enter into the Kingdom of God!”²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.”²⁶ They became still more astounded and said to him: “Who possibly can be saved?”²⁷ Looking straight at them, Jesus said: “With men it is impossible but not so with God, for all things are possible with God.”²⁸ Peter began to say to him: “Look! We have left all things and followed you.”²⁹ Jesus said: “Truly I say to you, no one has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news³⁰ who will not get 100 times more now in this period of time—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the coming system of things, everlasting life.³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

To fully understand verse 31 you have to look at the context. In those times the rich were given the first places of prominence and the poor the last, so the terms *"first"* and *"last"* typically referred to rich and poor. Those scriptures are not talking about the rejected religious leaders, they are talking about those that are poor and those that are rich who *"enter into the Kingdom of God"*. For these scriptures to be referring to the rejected religious leaders they would have to survive Armageddon and receive the same reward of *"everlasting life" "in the coming system of things."*

Here is verse 31 with those terms switched:

³¹ But many who are (rich) will be (poor), and the (poor) (rich).

Yes, the more wealth a man had, the more respect and honor he was deemed to have, both on earth and in heaven. That is why they were *"greatly astounded"* when Christ informed them otherwise. If it would be *"easier for a camel to get through a needle's eye than for a rich man,"* who they considered to be the very best in their society, *"to enter the Kingdom of God,"* it's no wonder they asked: *"Who really can be saved?"* (Mt 19:23-25)

What will happen to wealth *"in the coming system of things"*? Money and riches will have no meaning in paradise.

What will happen to poverty *"in the coming system of things"*? The poor will have the same reward as everyone else: Houses and brothers and sisters and mother and father and children and fields, and everlasting life. (Mr 10:30)

"In the coming system of things" the rich and the poor will **be** as each other. All will have equal abundance in paradise. (Mt 10:41)

That is why this promise for the future was not given with the middle and upper classes in mind, but was good news told to *"the poor"*. (Mt 11:5; Lu 7:22) The *"good news"* they received was not about everlasting life or the end to sickness, but was about a future where they would be lifted out of poverty and no longer be the lowest people in society.

(Matthew 11:5) The blind are now seeing and the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed and the deaf are hearing, the dead are being raised up and the poor are being told the good news.

(Luke 7:22) In reply he said to them: "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind are now seeing, the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are hearing, the dead are being raised up, and the poor are being told the good news.

The lowest of society didn't even get to sit at the table (Luke 14:12-13), but all will have a place at the table in the new system, making the first and last equal.

(Luke 13:29-30) Furthermore, people will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the Kingdom of God. ³⁰ And look! there are those last who will be first, and there are those first who will be last."

(Matthew 19:21-20:16) Jesus said to him: "If you want to be perfect, go sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come be my follower." ²² When the young man heard this, he went away grieved, for he had many possessions. ²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Truly I say to you that it will be difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of the heavens.... ²⁷ Then Peter said in reply: "Look! We have left all things and followed you; what, then, will there be for us?"..... ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit everlasting life. ³⁰ "But many who are first will be last and the last first. ¹ "For the Kingdom of the heavens is like.... ⁸ "When evening came, the master of the vineyard said to his man in charge, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last and ending with the first.' ⁹ When the 11th-hour men came, they each received a de·nar'i·us. ¹⁰ So when the first came, they assumed that they would receive more, but they too were paid at the rate of a de·nar'i·us. ¹¹ On receiving it, they began to complain against the master of the house ¹² and said, 'These last men put in one hour's work; still you made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day and the burning heat!' ¹³ But he said in reply to one of them, 'Fellow, I do you no wrong. You agreed with me for a de·nar'i·us, did you not? ¹⁴ Take what is yours and go. I want to give to this last one the same as to you. ¹⁵ Do I not have the right to do what I want with my own things? Or is your eye envious because I am good?' ¹⁶ In this way, the last ones will be first, and the first ones last."

Here the last and the first are also treated equally. They both receive the same pay.

The first are rebuked for feeling that the master of the vineyard should pay them more than the last. Jesus tells them that they all get the same. The first are not deprived of the reward, they just get "the same" reward.

These verses show that not all of either group make it through:

(Mark 10:31) But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

(Luke 13:30) And look! there are those last who will be first, and there are those first who will be last."

(Matthew 19:23, 30) ²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Truly I say to you that it will be difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of the heavens..... ³⁰ "But many who are first will be last and the last first.

Jesus promoted equality:

(Matthew 10:24, 25) "A student is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for the student to become as his teacher, and the slave as his master.

my thoughts

Chapter 97 in the *Jesus—The Way, The truth, The Life* book says that "*the religious leaders, like the Pharisees*", are rejected. I fully agree with that. But even though false Christian leaders will definitely be rejected i don't see the illustrations about first and last as being about rejection and replacement. I see the illustrations as encouragement and a promise of things to come for the

lowly ones, because *"in the coming system of things"* all men will be equals with no one lording it over anyone else. First and last, rich and poor, nobility and peasantry, will all be things of the past.

So why did Jesus use an illustration where those that worked long hours are compared to those that worked very little? I think it is a warning for those *"in the coming system of things"* who spent many years working hard in God's service putting up with mean people and the dangers and struggles of this world, and yet those that stepped up at the very end also got to enter into paradise.

"I knocked on that guy's door for 50 years, and when he got old and was faced with death he changed his ways and got into paradise? That's not fair! I deserve more!"

What do *you* think?

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