

The Last Will Be First and the First Last

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Recorded on November 8, 2025

As I'm sure many of you are very aware, during Christ's ministry He very often taught lessons in parables. In fact, He even tells us in Matthew 13 that the reason He taught in parables was purposefully so that He could conceal the meaning of what He was trying to convey from those who were not being called for salvation at this time, while teaching a lesson to those that are. Well, in Matthew 20 He gives us the parable of the workers in the vineyard. And He ends that parable making a statement that's oftentimes even puzzling for those of us in the Church of God. It can be kind of a head scratcher and make people wonder what exactly does He mean by this?

And the statement I'm referring to is He ends that parable by saying, "the last will be first and the first last". And again, oftentimes we kind of scratch our heads and wonder what exactly is He conveying with that? Well, in Matthew 19 -- the chapter just prior to that parable -- He makes a very similar statement. And this isn't in a parable. This is in a discussion He's having with the Apostles. But He concludes that discussion by saying "there are many who are first who will be last and last first". Again, a very similar statement, but oftentimes also kind of a head scratcher for people wondering what exactly is the meaning that He's conveying for us?

Well, what we're going to do today in the sermon is take an in-depth look at both of these statements. Because what we're going to see is to understand exactly the meaning He's trying to convey here, we need to thoroughly understand the context of what's being discussed just prior to Christ making these statements so that we can interpret them in their proper context. So, if you'd like a title for the sermon today, it's:

The Last Will Be First and the First Last

Because as I mentioned, we're going to dig into both of these statements to see exactly what Christ was referring to here. So, to start off with, turn over to Matthew 20. We're first going to take a look just briefly at these two statements before we start digging more into the context of both of them.

In Matthew 20 here, as I mentioned, He gives us the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Now later we'll read through this entire parable and discuss the details more in depth. But just to give you kind of a brief summary, it's a parable about a landowner who owns a vineyard, and he hires various people throughout the course of the day to go work in his vineyard. He offers them all the same rate of pay if they will come and work for him for the day. At the very end of the day, he's settling up with everyone to give them the wages he promised them. And the people who started at the very earliest part of the day are getting upset over the fact that those who were hired at the last part of the day are getting the same pay that they are and they're complaining about this. Well,

at the end of this, Christ concludes with a statement here in Matthew 20 in verse 16. And this is again oftentimes a head scratcher for people. I'll just read this verbatim.

Matt 20:16 *"So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."* (NKJV)

We're going to see here later this comment about "few chosen" is important to understand to really unpack what He's saying here about "first" and "last" in this case. But let's also notice here in Matthew 19 in verse 30 He makes a very similar statement. Now as I mentioned, this one is not in the context of a parable. This is just more of a discussion He's having with the Apostles. But again, He makes a very similar statement here. And I'll just read this again verbatim from Matthew 19 and verse 30.

Matt 19:30 *"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."* (NKJV)

You see, in this case it's the "many". He says it in Matthew 20 as a definitive statement. In this case, it's "many who are first". So, we have to see what is that all about? Well again, we need to unpack the context of both of these statements to really understand what Christ is trying to say here. So, we'll start here with His statement in Matthew 19. Just jump up now to verse 16. Because we need to read the entire discussion that leads up to this and have a thorough understanding of the meaning He's getting at here, so we can thoroughly unpack this. So, to start here in Matthew 19 in verse 16.

Matt 19:16 *"Now behold, one came and said to Him, 'Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?' 17) So He said to him, 'Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.' 18) He said to Him, 'Which ones?' Jesus said, 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 19) 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 20) The young man said to Him, 'All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?' 21) Jesus said to him, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.' 22) But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."* (NKJV)

So, the way this guy responded, that was kind of a deal breaker for him. Because Christ said, "Okay, give up your wealth." And he's like, "I'm not willing to do that." That was the response the guy had. I mean, just to be humorous about it. It's kind of like the old joke where someone says, "Well, you done quit preaching and gone to meddlin'." You've gone a little too far. But see, this teaches an important lesson for us as we're going to see throughout this sermon. Christ is very, very clear throughout the Gospels that we have to be willing to give up everything to follow God. We have to be willing to put God first. Even if that means giving up our wealth or our life or relationships we have or just anything that we're asked to give up. We have to be willing to put God first. And that's the problem with this guy.

But as we're going to see here as Christ goes on explaining, He makes the point that when it comes to physical riches in this life, that is particularly a stumbling block for physical carnal human beings. That can just trip us up more than a lot of other issues that we might put before God. We can all have those issues where we stumble and put something that we carnally value above God. But He says riches in particular are a stumbling block for physical human beings. Let's continue on in verse 23 and see that.

"23) Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24) And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.'" (NKJV)

Now again, this will become important later as we more thoroughly unpack this. But notice that what He's referring to here is not whether the rich man gets an exalted position in the Kingdom or a low position in the Kingdom. He's talking about whether you can make it or not. He's saying that not being able to put God above his riches, that's a deal breaker and that results in not being in the Kingdom. That's what He's saying. And continue in verse 25.

"25) When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?' 26) But Jesus looked at them and said to them, 'With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.' 27) Then Peter answered and said to Him, 'See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?' 28) So Jesus said to them, 'Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29) And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.'" (NKJV)

Notice He's making a contrast here between this rich guy who was very wealthy and kind of had the upper crust position -- physically speaking in this life -- who was not willing to give it up to follow Christ, versus the Apostles. Most of these guys were fishermen. They weren't wealthy millionaires. They were just guys trying to make a living. But they were willing to walk away from what career they had to follow Him. And see, He's making a contrast between them. Then He follows it up here in verse 30.

"30) But many who are first will be last, and the last first." (NKJV)

Now again, before we get into specifically unpacking verse 30 there, I'd like to spend a little time fully going through the context here of the lessons that Christ was laying out for them. First of all, having wealth in physical possessions in this physical life, that can just particularly be a stumbling block and be the ruin of physical human beings. Because oftentimes we tend to look at physical riches and we sometimes fantasize, "Oh, if I could just win the lottery. If I could just have a large windfall of money. That

would just solve all my problems.” Well, in reality what the Bible tells us is it's very often the exact opposite. That oftentimes creates more problems than it solves. And it can be particularly a major stumbling block for physical human beings. This is the point that Christ is making here. But just to spend a little time kind of fleshing this out more, turn over to 1 Timothy 6. And we'll see here where Paul makes some interesting points on this. We'll start here in 1 Timothy 6 in verse 6.

1 Tim 6:6 *“Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7) For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. 8) And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.”* (NKJV)

He's making the point that we need to learn to be content with whatever situation we find ourselves in. In fact, we'll see later where Paul gives us that exact advice in his letter to the Philippians. But continue in verse 9.

“9) But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. 10) For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” (NKJV)

He said that is particularly a stumbling block for people and it's this very lesson why we have a common saying in our world today. When we're looking at corruption not only in government, but just in basically any industry and in any setting, the common saying we have is “follow the money”. Because we know that typically is going to show us where the problem is and where the root of the corruption is. Because there's people always scheming to try to get their hands on the money, and that can just wreak havoc in the problems that that can cause.

Because as I mentioned previously, oftentimes as physical humans, we'll talk about or even fantasize and say, “Man, if I could just win the lottery. If I could just get a windfall of money. Well, that would just solve all my problems. And my day-to-day struggles, that would just solve all the issues I have. And just imagine all the good I could accomplish if I had all that extra money.” And that's what we think of in our minds, but very often that is the exact opposite of what actually happens.

Just to share an example with you, several years ago I saw a documentary. I forget now where exactly I saw it. It was probably either on TV or maybe it was on YouTube somewhere, but it was titled “The Curse of the Lottery”. It followed the lives of several people who had been lottery winners. People who'd just been everyday average individuals just working paycheck to paycheck to get through their life, and they happened to win the lottery. And all of a sudden, they now are receiving millions of dollars. More money than they had ever dreamed of.

Like lots of people, these folks thought, “Well now with this windfall of money, well this will just solve all my problems. Now I just won't have any troubles, and life will be

wonderful.” Well, they followed up with these individuals after a couple of years to see how did life turn out for them? And for the majority of people, it was an absolute curse on their lives. It just absolutely destroyed them. In many cases, they followed up with the people, and after several years, they were more poor and in debt than they were when they first won the lottery. Because they got all this money and they didn't know how to handle it. They just went on a wild spending spree, and they lost it all. In other cases, they wound up just having lots of strife and fighting amongst their family and all their friends. Because now everybody wants to buddy up with them to try to get their hands on the money. And it just created discord and fighting within their relationships.

The people got involved in drugs and other types of problems. In some cases, it ruined the person who received all this money's life so much they wound up committing suicide. Or they got murdered by other people that were trying to scheme to get the money themselves. And in a few cases, they interviewed the people several years later and they literally stated, “If I could go back in time, the one thing I would change about my life is I wouldn't even go buy that lottery ticket. Because it just ruined my life and I was happier and my life was better before I had all this money.”

You see, what the example of these people teaches us is something that we read in Proverbs. We're really better off not being in either situation. And what I mean by that is, not being so poor that we're struggling just to get food every day and to meet our basic necessities. It's always great not to have that kind of stress. But we're also better off not being real rich either. Because they both come with their own sets of problems. And to see that, turn over to Proverbs 30. We'll see here where it tells us this exact lesson. That we're really better off not being lottery winners. We're better off kind of just being in the middle there. We're not so poor that we're just stressed out every day trying to survive, but we're not just rolling in money either. Because they both come with their inherent problems. And just notice here in Proverbs 30 in verse 7.

Prov 30:7 *“Two things I request of You (Deprive me not before I die):
8) Remove falsehood and lies far from me; Give me neither poverty nor riches—
Feed me with the food allotted to me; 9) Lest I be full and deny You, And say,
“Who is the LORD?” Or lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my
God.” (NKJV)*

So, he's pointing out that both of them have their inherent problems. You can get rich and full of yourself and think you don't need God anymore, and that just leads to destruction. And the stress of just struggling to survive through day-to-day life, well that can lead you into problems as well. The ideal position, that's having enough of what you need that you can get by and you're not stressed out all the time, but you're not rolling in riches either. That ultimately is the better position to be.

In fact, Paul tells us the secret to all of this in the book of Philippians. If you turn over to Philippians 4, we'll see here's some very wise advice that Paul shares. Before we read this, I think it's also important to understand the context of the book of Philippians. Now, we won't take the time to read the first couple chapters of the book, but if you read

through that what you'll discover is that when Paul is writing this book, he's literally a prisoner. He's literally in chains as he is writing this book. Now, the reason I mention that is it gives a tremendous amount of credibility to what Paul has to say. Because I'm sure we've all experienced in our lives -- and we may have even done it in our lives -- where you start giving lots of advice. You think, "Well, if I was in that situation, boy, here's what I would do. And I'd do this and I'd do that." I mean, we talk all big. I'm sure we've all probably fallen guilty of that. Or we've certainly seen other individuals do that.

And then later in life, you wind up in that situation, and you find out it's a little more difficult than what you thought. And then you wind up not actually doing what you boasted that you would do. Or you see other people who talked so big about what they would do if they were in those shoes and then they wind up in those shoes, and you find out they don't perform near as well as they thought they would. Because it's really easy for us to get in our soapbox and give lots of advice about what we think we would do in a situation. Well, it's a lot more difficult to actually be in that situation and then to have to put our money where our mouth is as the expression goes. In other words, to actually live what we're claiming we would do.

Well, that's what Paul was doing here. This is a man who's a prisoner, who's in chains while he's saying this. So, when he talks about being content in the situations you find yourself in, the guy knows what he's talking about. He has credibility. And this is in Philippians 4 in verse 10.

Phil 4:10 *"But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. 11) Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12) I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13) I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* (NKJV)

Now I won't go through the list that Paul gives us in Corinthians, but it's quite impressive when you look at what Paul actually went through in his life. What I'm referring to is the chapter where he goes through how many times he was shipwrecked and he was imprisoned and he was beaten with rods and with whips and he was thrown in prison, and he was stoned. I mean, this is a guy who had a very, very rough life. So, when he says, "I've learned to abound and I've learned to suffer need", he knows what he's talking about. As the kind of common saying these days goes, he had "been there, done that, and got the t-shirt". He had actually lived what he was saying.

So, Paul knew exactly what he was talking about. And he's teaching us a very valuable lesson that the important thing that we all need to learn for our own mental health and well-being is learning to be happy and content in whatever situation we find ourselves in. Because oftentimes we tend to look at happiness as, "Well, after I get that next promotion. After I get this money. Or after I move to this other location. Or after I get a bigger house or I get a bigger car, or I get that relationship or whatever it is. Well, then

I'll finally be happy." Well, if we're always chasing that, then we are looking at happiness as a destination. As long as you look at it like that, it's a destination where you never actually arrive. We have to realize that happiness is a state of mind. It's learning to be content and grateful for whatever situation we find ourselves in.

But another big lesson to what Christ was illustrating here in this example of the rich man who was not willing to give up his riches. It's understanding that Christ makes it very clear throughout His ministry, that it's an absolute deal breaker for Him and the Father if we're not willing to put Them first. And I mean literally to the point of giving up anything else in our lives that They ask us to give up. Because see, oftentimes we tend to look at this -- kind of as I like to put it -- molding God in our image rather than being molded in His. And what I mean by that is sometimes we look at it from the standpoint of trying to define Godly love by what feels good to our emotions. By asking the question, does it feel good? Rather than does it do good?

And oftentimes we'll look at this and say, well, God wouldn't keep someone out of the Kingdom just because they wouldn't give up their riches. Just because they would put one thing above Him. Well, if they were faithful in every other area but they weren't willing to give this up, He wouldn't keep them out of the Kingdom. They would just have a lower position. That's not what He said. He said it's difficult for a rich man to get into the Kingdom of God. So, He's making the point that if we're not willing to put God first, that's literally a deal breaker. And that's very important for us to understand because Christ literally makes this point multiple times during His ministry on earth.

So, to see this, turn over to Luke 14. We'll start reading here in verse 25. This is a section of scripture we oftentimes include in baptismal counseling. And I think very appropriately so. I know I particularly remember the minister who baptized me going over this in great detail, and I'm very glad that he did. Because again, it's very important to understand this. We must be willing to put God first. And starting in verse 25.

Luke 14:25 *"Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, 26) 'If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. 27) And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. 28) For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it— 29) lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, 30) saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' 31) Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32) Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. 33) So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple."* (NKJV)

Now notice, again, the contrast He's getting at is whether you'll be in the Kingdom or not. He's not saying that, well, if you don't put Me first, well, you'll just have the low

positions. You'll be the doorkeeper or the janitor in the Kingdom, just to give it a physical analogy. You'll have kind of the lower position versus the exalted position. That's not what He's saying. He says if you're not willing to give up whatever He asks and put Them first -- even if that's giving up your own life -- you won't be there. It's a deal breaker. And that's very important for us to understand because He takes it that seriously. And we need to live our Christian lives with that in mind. He insists on being first, and it's a deal breaker issue for Him. He's not willing to bend on it and we need to realize that in how we live our Christian lives. And Christ makes this point numerous times. So, turn over to Luke 9, and we'll see this again. Luke 9, we'll start reading in verse 23.

Luke 9:23 *"Then He said to them all, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. 24) For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. 25) For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? 26) For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels. 27) But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God.'" (NKJV)*

Jump down to verse 57 here. We'll see once again, Christ makes this exact same point. He keeps hammering the point that if we're not willing to put Him first, if we're not willing to face pain, and to sacrifice, and to put Him and the Father above everything else, even if that means getting killed or losing everything that we have. They take it that seriously. And if we're not willing to do that, that becomes a deal breaker.

Luke 9:57 *"Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, 'Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.' 58) And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.' 59) Then He said to another, 'Follow Me.' But he said, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' 60) Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.' 61) And another also said, 'Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.' 62) But Jesus said to him, 'No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.'" (NKJV)*

Now again, notice the contrast He's making is making it into the Kingdom or not making it into the Kingdom. And these individuals are like, "I want to follow you, but I want to put something else first. I need to do something else first before I prioritize You and You'll be okay with being second, right?" No, He is not okay with being second. You have to put the Kingdom first. You have to put Christ and the Father first. And if you're not willing to do that, that's a big problem. That's a deal breaker. It's not a question of getting a lower position in the Kingdom versus a higher position in the Kingdom. It's a question of being there or not. In other words, it's a question of making it into the resurrection to eternal life or going into the lake of fire. That's the reality of the contrast that we're talking about.

So, now with this in mind, let's go back to Matthew 19. Let's kind of unpack again this first example here. We're going to start back in verse 23. Now we've read through these verses before, but as we get up to verse 30, I want you to kind of see again the contrast here that He's talking about. Because we start off with this example of a rich man, who says, "I'm willing to obey the commandments. I've kept the commandments all my life." And Christ says, "Okay, well give up your riches." And again, just to be humorous about it, this guy's response is essentially, "Well Christ, now you done quit preaching and gone to the meddlin. You're just going a little too far now, because I can't give up my riches. I'm willing to do most anything else, but I got to live in luxury and have my riches." And Christ was like, "No, if you're not willing to give that up too, now we got a problem. And it's a deal breaker problem." So, let's notice that contrast, because again, that's going to be important here. So, let's pick up in verse 23.

Matt 19:23 *"Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24) And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.'" (NKJV)*

Again, notice the contrast is making it in the kingdom versus not making it in the Kingdom. Now, pick up in verse 25.

"25) When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?' 26) But Jesus looked at them and said to them, 'With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.' 27) Then Peter answered and said to Him, 'See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?'" (NKJV)

In other words, we were willing to give up what we had. And now remember, these guys, they weren't rich guys. They weren't millionaires and billionaires living in luxury. Most of them were fishermen. They were just average Joes just trying to make a living and getting by "paycheck to paycheck" as we would call it today. But they were willing to walk away from what they had to follow Christ. And most of them eventually gave up their lives and got brutally murdered. So, they were willing to give up everything to follow Christ. And now Christ responds with what will be the reward for those who are willing to sacrifice everything.

"28) So Jesus said to them, 'Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29) And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.'" (NKJV)

Now let's notice verse 30.

"30) But many who are first will be last, and the last first." (NKJV)

So, how exactly do we interpret verse 30? Well, the first thing we need to understand is the meanings of the words “first” and “last” here. As we’re going to see, there’s kind of a play on words here that Christ is making in teaching the lesson that He is here. But first we kind of need to dig into the meaning of the Greek words here. Because the same Greek word for “first” is used twice here. And in fact, this is not only going to be true here in Matthew 19, but we’re going to see later in the example in Matthew 20 we have the same Greek words involved for both “first” and “last”. So, this is going to apply in both cases.

But here in verse 30 in Matthew 19, the same Greek word for “first” is used twice, and the same Greek word for “last” is used twice. But let me share with you the meanings of both of these words because they can both have literal and figurative meanings. Now, the Greek word here for “first” is transliterated into English as “protos”. It’s Strong’s # 4413, and the meanings for both of these words I’m going to give to you are out of The Complete Word Study Dictionary of the New Testament by Spiros Zodhiates. Protos is defined as:

“Foremost, hence first, the first...Generally...spoken of place, order, time....Figuratively of rank, dignity, meaning first, chief...”

So, you see it can have kind of literal meanings of first in time order or spatial order. It can be very literal. It can also have figurative meanings in terms of having dignity or honor, being first or chief. Now, as we’re going to see here, the Greek word for “last” is very much the same way. And it can have very literal meanings or figurative meanings as well. And this word is transliterated into English as “eschatos”. It’s Strong’s # 2078, and again from Zodhiates, it’s defined as:

“The extreme, most remote, spoken of place and time...Of place: Particularly extreme, most remote,...the extremity...Metaphorically implying rank or dignity, the last, lowest, least...Of order or number, the last, utmost...Of time, the last or latest.”

So, you can see both of them can have literal or figurative meanings. Now again, if we just kind of consider the context of what’s being discussed here. Again, we have two major contrasts in the discussion that Christ is laying out here. One, you have this rich guy who’s kind of what today we call a millionaire or billionaire. And he’s not willing to give up his riches. It’s contrasting him with the Apostles. These were just everyday Joes. These guys were just fishermen, just working to make a living. They had meager means. Well, if you look at this from a physical, carnal perspective, we tend to look at “first”, the prominent individuals, well, that’s going to be the millionaire, right? That’s going to be the person that lives in luxury who’s rich and powerful. Well, guys who are just everyday fishermen just living “paycheck to paycheck”, in comparison, physically speaking, we’d kind of consider that “last”.

Well, the other contrast we have here is again, the rich guy is not willing to give up his riches to put Christ and the Father and the Kingdom first. He's like, "No, that's too much." He goes away sad because his riches just mean too much to him. And he says, "That's a deal breaker". He won't make it into the Kingdom. But then Christ says to the Apostles, "Well, you if guys endure to the end, you're going to be in the Kingdom. In fact, you're going to be on thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel."

So, with this in mind, let's just read through verse 30 again. "But many who are first" -- and again, if we think about "first" in this life, that's kind of the rich, the powerful, the wealthy -- "will be last". In other words, the rich guy. He didn't make it into the Kingdom of God. That's what "last" means here. And "the last" -- those who were just everyday workers just struggling to make a living, they'll be -- "first". They'll receive the Kingdom. So, you can see kind of the contrast here.

But also notice, and this will come into play when we unpack chapter 20, verse 16, we're about to read here. Notice here, it's the "many" who are first who will be last and last first, whereas in verse 16 of chapter 20, it's going to be more of a definitive statement. So, before we look at this in detail, just jump down to chapter 20 in verse 16. And again, notice that this is a definitive statement. But we also have another clue here in verse 16 that we also need to unpack so that we can fully understand the statement here. And just to read verse 16.

"16) So the last will be first, and the first last...." (NKJV)

Notice it's more of a definitive statement. The "many" is not mentioned here. But then it says:

"....For many are called, but few chosen." (NKJV)

Now we're going to see, first of all, we need to unpack that statement because that's a very important clue that's going to help us when it comes to interpreting the "first" and "last" statement here in the context of this parable. Now, in my lifetime, I've seen in the Church of God that oftentimes the statement "many are called and few are chosen" kind of results sometimes in a lot of mental gymnastics, as I like to call it. Because as we're going to see here, this particular phrase is used twice in the book of Matthew. Christ says it both times in the context of parables, and it's actually a rather straightforward statement.

Because as we're going to see here, and we'll look at this scripturally here in a minute, we're generally pretty clear on the definition of being "called". As Christians, we often talk about when we were "called". When we first came into the truth. When we were called to baptism and we came into the Church to have our opportunity for salvation. And we commonly refer to the phrase of being "called" in that context and we're going to see that's accurate. The Bible itself uses it in that context many times. But when it comes to "many are called, few are chosen", sometimes the obvious implications of this -- because it's emotionally uncomfortable. We start doing some mental gymnastics.

And we start saying, "Well, maybe that's just saying that only the Firstfruits are called now, and the rest of mankind is called later." Now if you think about the statement, "chosen" is obviously a subset of "called". It's speaking about a significant attrition rate here is what it's talking about. But just to see this, let's turn over to Matthew 22. Because we'll see here a parable that ends with this exact statement. But the example here makes it a little more straightforward and clear to understand exactly what this particular phrase means. As we'll see here, it's important to understand "many are called, few are chosen" so that we can understand the other statement about "first" and "last" in the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Because that's an important clue. But first, we kind of need to nail this one down. So, let's start here in Matthew 22 in verse 1. This is the parable of the wedding feast.

Matt 22:1 *"And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said: 2) 'The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, 3) and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. 4) Again, he sent out other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, 'See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.' ' 5) But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business. 6) And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them. 7) But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. 8) Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 9) Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.' 10) So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11) 'But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. 12) So he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. 13) Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"* (NKJV)

Now again, if you follow throughout the Bible the statements of "weeping and gnashing of teeth", that's a reference to the lake of fire. And then in verse 14.

Matt 22:14 *"For many are called, but few are chosen."* (NKJV)

Now again, it's pretty straightforward what this is getting at. Because notice here, it's talking about the Kingdom of God. This is a parable teaching what "the Kingdom of God is like", and it's like a king who's arranging a wedding for his son. This is not hard to interpret at all. Obviously, the king is God the Father. His Son is Jesus Christ, and He's arranging a wedding for Him. The Bible directly tells us that the New Covenant Church marries Christ. The Father is arranging a marriage for His Son. But notice here throughout the whole focus of this parable, there's all these individuals who were given an invitation. They're invited to be a part of it. They're "called" because that's what

“calling” means but they don't take it seriously. They either reject the invitation outright and make fun of it and attack it or we have the example of the individual who tried to show up but he didn't take it seriously. He's not wearing a wedding garment. As we're about to see, that's symbolically a reference to being clothed in righteousness. He didn't take it seriously in terms of how he lived his life, and he doesn't make it. And see, this is why it's referred to as “many are called, few are chosen”.

And again, just to prove this scripturally, let's first of all notice that the Bible's real clear about this concept of a wedding and this being attached to the Kingdom of God. So, turn over to Ephesians 5. We're specifically going to read here verse 32. This comes after kind of a lengthy discussion where Paul is addressing Biblical gender roles. Basically, the role of a husband and the role of a wife in terms of marriage. And he goes into detail, making it very clear that these roles are different. That men and women are not directly interchangeable. They were designed specifically to fulfill different roles. He defines the role of a husband, and he defines the role of a wife, and how they're distinctly separate. But then he makes another statement that tells us there's another meaning that's involved in this. This is in verse 32.

Eph 5:32 *“This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”* (NKJV)

He's referring to the fact that the New Covenant Church is called to ultimately marry Christ. That's the wedding that's being referred to here. And to see that, just turn over to Revelation 19. We'll see here that this directly prophesies about when this takes place. And just to kind of place this in the timeline of the book of Revelation, in Revelation 11 you have the seventh trumpet being blown, and we know that's when the resurrection of the Firstfruits takes place. Well, that's when the Firstfruits are resurrected to eternal life.

Well, in Revelation 14, you have them pictured as the 144,000 in heaven before the throne of the Father. Well then, it's not until the end of Revelation 19 that you see Christ returning back down to the earth, and there's the battle that takes place before the establishment of the millennium. Well, in between this time, obviously the Firstfruits are up in heaven. Well, one of the things that takes place there is the wedding between them and Christ. And this is directly mentioned here if we start in Revelation 19.

Rev 19:5 *“Then a voice came from the throne, saying, “Praise our God, all you His servants and those who fear Him, both small and great!” 6) And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, “Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! 7) Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” 8) And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. 9) Then he said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’ ” And he said to me, “These are the true sayings of God.””* (NKJV)

So, see, this tells us when Christ gives a parable about the Kingdom of God, and it's like a king arranging a marriage for his son, we can see what He's talking about here. The son is Jesus Christ. The bride who's going to marry Him is the New Covenant Church. This is the Firstfruits resurrected here that are pictured in marrying Christ. That's the relationship that's taking place here.

This also gives us some insight into the parable. As He mentioned at the end of the parable there in Matthew 22, there was a guy who showed up for the wedding and he's not wearing a wedding garment. Well, notice how it talked about the bride being in a wedding garment and that was "the righteous acts of the saints". It's a symbolic picture here. Well, what it's saying is this guy tried to show up for the wedding, but he didn't live his life accordingly. He didn't just flat out reject the invitation, but he thought he could kind of halfway obey. He's kind of like the rich man. He thought, "Well, I'll obey the commandments, but I'm not going to give up my riches. I'm not going all the way. I still want the reward, but I'm not willing to be fully committed." That's what was happening. Again, it's a symbolic picture, but that kind of illustrates the lesson that Christ is laying out here. We have to be fully committed. That's what He's illustrating here.

But let's notice, as I mentioned, the parable there ended with "many are called but few are chosen". In the Church of God, we oftentimes commonly talk about when we were "called", particularly for individuals who are first generation Christians. I myself grew up from childhood being taught the truth from the time I was an infant. But for people who are first generation Christians, they will particularly talk about when they were first "called". What they're talking about is when their eyes first got open and they first started understanding the truth. They realized that the religion they were following before, well, that was wrong. And they started understanding the Bible and then they decided they had to get baptized and totally change their life and start following the truth. We commonly refer to that as when we were "called", because the Bible refers to it with that terminology as well.

Now, the reason I point this out is we oftentimes have no trouble understanding that. But then we look at "many are called, few are chosen", and we realize that that paints kind of an uncomfortable picture because that suggests a significant attrition rate. And that is exactly what it's saying. But oftentimes we'll do mental and gymnastics around that because that's uncomfortable. And then we think, "Well, really that's just saying that only the Firstfruits are called now and everybody else is called later." No, the Bible is real clear on the definition of being "called" and "chosen" is a subset of "called". That's just how the sentence is structured. But let's notice here, the Bible is real clear on the definition of being "called". Turn over to Romans 8 and we'll start reading in verse 28.

Rom 8:28 *"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. 29) For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. 30) Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified."* (NKJV)

See, it's very clear what the definition of "called" is. It is being given your opportunity for salvation. Your eyes being open to the truth and being given the opportunity to enter into the New Covenant. That's the Biblical definition of being "called". And let's notice that this is stated just like this multiple times in the Bible. So, let's turn over to 1 Corinthians 1. We'll start reading here in verse 4. We're just going to notice several references where the Bible makes it very clear what the definition of being "called" is.

1 Cor 1:4 *"I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, 5) that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, 6) even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, 7) so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8) who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9) God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."* (NKJV)

Notice he talked about being "called into the fellowship of Christ". Being called into the Church. Being called for your opportunity to enter into a New Covenant relationship. That's the definition of being "called". So, let's notice this one more time. Turn over to Romans 1 and verse 1.

Rom 1:1 *"Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God"* (NKJV)

Now again, here it's using "called" in the context of Paul's specific calling to be an Apostle, which again was unique. Now there were only a handful of guys that were given that special job. But if we just keep reading here, we'll see how he's going to use this again referring to all the saints, all those called to be Firstfruits. He's going to use the term "called" here in just a minute. Continue in verse 2.

"2) which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, 3) concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, 4) and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. 5) Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, 6) among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; 7) To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (NKJV)

So, you can see it's very clear what the definition of "called" is. So, see when he says, "many are called, few are chosen", there's no confusion about what "called" means. And notice, we're not even including in the equation those not "called". The "chosen" are a subset of those "called". And what this speaks to is quite frankly an uncomfortable attrition rate. But the Bible repeatedly paints this picture. And the reason being is again, this requirement that we have to be willing to give up everything to follow God.

They make a very, very big deal out of this. It is a deal breaker for them if we're not. If we just want to push them to second. Just like the guys when Christ would say, "Come and follow me", and they're like, "Okay, I want to follow you, but I have to do this first. I have to put something else first." No, that's not how it's going to work. You're going to have to put God first. You're going to have to put Him first and the Kingdom first, and you're going to have to be willing to give everything else up. The Bible is very clear in painting this picture.

So just notice over here in Luke 14, Christ gives another parable here. Again, it's a symbolic picture of the marriage supper. It's the exact same picture He's painting. But notice again how it's a deal-breaker if we're not willing to put Him first. He's very specific about this. This is Luke 14, and we'll start reading in verse 15.

Luke 14:15 *"Now when one of those who sat at the table with Him heard these things, he said to Him, 'Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!'" 16) Then He said to him, "A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, 17) and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, 'Come, for all things are now ready.' 18) But they all with one accord began to make excuses...." (NKJV)*

Notice they're putting something else first, and it doesn't really matter what it is. The problem is they're putting something else first. Continuing in verse 18.

"...The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.' 19) And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.' 20) Still another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' 21) So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.' 22) And the servant said, 'Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.' 23) Then the master said to the servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. 24) For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.' " (NKJV)

In other words, they insisted on putting something else first and that was a deal breaker. And see, this is why Christ explained in Matthew 7 that there's an ugly attrition rate when it comes to making it into the Kingdom. We'll see this in Matthew 7 in verse 13.

Matt 7:13 *"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. 14) Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." (NKJV)*

Notice that this directly matches with “many are called, few are chosen”. Now again, I've seen the same mental gymnastics with these verses as I've oftentimes seen with “many are called and few are chosen”. Because people will say, “Well, this is just referring again to the fact that only the few are called today and everyone else is called later.” No one is capable of finding the straight and narrow path without being called. That's just not even a possibility. So obviously, again, we're only talking about those who are “called”, and we're talking about a significant attrition rate. Again, the “chosen” being a subset of the “called”. Those actually “chosen” -- those who make it -- being a much smaller number than those who were “called”. Again, that's not an emotionally satisfying picture, but it is the picture that the Bible repeatedly states.

Now, with all of that in mind, let's turn back over to Matthew 20. Now we can unpack the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Because again, it was important to understand all of that context so that we can unpack the “first” and the “last” statement that's mentioned here in the last verse and understand exactly what is it that Christ is getting at with that statement. So, to read the parable here, let's start in Matthew 20 in verse 1.

Matt 20:1 *“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2) Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3) And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4) and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. 5) Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. 6) And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ 7) They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’ 8) “So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ 9) And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. 10) But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. 11) And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, 12) saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’ 13) But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14) Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15) Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’ 16) So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.” (NKJV)*

Now oftentimes -- I know I've experienced this myself previously in my life. It's kind of a head scratcher. What exactly does He mean that “the last will be first and the first last”? Because you're looking at the parable and you go, “Okay, well, everybody got paid equally”. That's one of the points of the parable. Everyone receives the same amount. You just have this one group of individuals complaining about that versus the others. So

how exactly are we to interpret that? Well, one of the big keys, as I mentioned, is the statement here, “for many are called but few are chosen”. Now we've already seen that that's clearly a reference to an ugly attrition rate. That's basically a reference to the number of people not making it into the Kingdom is what that's getting at. So, we've got to take this into consideration.

Now, let's also take into consideration that these individuals who are hired at the first part of the day, let's notice their behavior and the attitude that they're demonstrating. Because it's one of envy and self-promotion. They're very selfish and inconsiderate of others. It's jealousy. It's envy. It's very much a very carnal attitude that they're showing here. Well, let's turn over quickly to Galatians 5 and notice here what Paul says about this and what he says happens to individuals who have this type of an attitude. Who live their lives displaying these kind of fruits of behavior. This is Galatians 5 in verse 19.

Gal 5:19 “*Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20) idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21) envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*” (NKJV)

So, he's saying people who have a track record of this behavior, and they never repent of it, they don't make it in the Kingdom of God. That is what he's saying. Now if you just think about this, the behavior that these guys have demonstrated, it's jealousy. It's dissensions. It's specifically selfish ambitions. Because we're about to read the definition here of the Greek word that's translated into English as “selfish ambitions”. What I want you to see is the behavior that the guys in the parable are illustrating, that they're demonstrating with their actions. Now to give you the definition of the Greek word here, that is translated into English as “selfish ambitions” there in verse 20. It's transliterated into English as “eritheia”. It's Strong's # 2052. And again, this definition comes from The Complete Word Study Dictionary of the New Testament by Spiros Zodhiates. He defines it as:

“to work for hire....used in a bad sense of those who seek only their own. Contention, strife, rivalry. It represents a motive of self-interest, mercenary interest...”

So, that's exactly the behavior that the guys hired at the first part of the day are demonstrating. Because they make an agreement of what their salary is going to be, and the landowner follows through. He pays them exactly what he promised. He doesn't try to monkey with the agreement at all. He pays them exactly what they agreed to. That's not their beef. Their beef is somebody else is getting the same thing I am, and they shouldn't get it. Only I should. It's all about self-interest and jealousy and strife. That's what they're illustrating here. And as Paul directly tells us, people who illustrate that behavior and don't repent of it, they don't make it into the Kingdom of God. It's not a matter of they just get a lower position. They don't make it. That's how that ends.

So, let's turn back over now to Matthew 20 and we can unpack here the "first" and the "last". Because as we saw earlier when I read the definition of the Greek words for "first" and "last". They're the same here in chapter 20 as they were in chapter 19. It can have literal meanings of first in time order or in spatial order and last being the same. Or again, they can have figurative meanings. We know obviously part of the play on words here is we're talking about the individuals who started working in the first part of the day versus the last part of the day. Well, that's one of the obvious contrasts that we're talking about. But we've also seen from what Paul tells us, people who illustrate the behavior of the guys who were hired at the first part of the day, that kind of behavior doesn't make it into the Kingdom.

So now let's read verse 16, and we can unpack "first" and "last" here. "So, the last", those that actually were hired at the last part of the day who did what they were asked to do and didn't show a bad attitude at all. They were just grateful for what they received. They "will be first". In other words, they'll make it into the Kingdom. They'll have the more honorable position because they showed the fruits of good behavior. "And the first", those hired at the first part of the day, "last". They won't make it into the Kingdom. "For many are called, but few are chosen". As we can see, that's again a statement that speaks to an ugly attrition rate.

Now, there's some other lessons that we can glean from this parable as well. That can be in terms of people like myself who are "called" from childhood and maybe live 60 plus years in a New Covenant relationship pursuing salvation versus maybe people who are much older in life and only had a decade or two to have to overcome in their Christian life. You could have people who were called early in the beginning of the Church, maybe like the original Apostles or others who had to kind of found the Church versus people who were called later and had it easier. There's a number of analogies or applications that you could bring from this. But the whole point of all of this is, again, being grateful for what we receive. As Paul taught us in the book of Philippians, being content with wherever we find ourselves. Fulfilling whatever role that God has given us to the best of our abilities. Leaving it up to Him as to where He wants to place everybody in His body. Because that's His decision. It's not ours.

As we can see from this, if we dig into the context of both Matthew 19 and Matthew 20 and fully understand the context that leads up to these statements about "first" and "last", we can properly understand what Christ is saying here. But the biggest lesson we can get from all of this is that Christ and the Father absolutely insist that we put them and the Kingdom of God absolutely first in our life. And if we don't, that is an absolute deal breaker. That's probably the greatest lesson that we need to take away from the sermon. As we live our lives day-to-day, making sure that we're absolutely putting Them first and realizing that from Their point of view, it is absolutely a deal breaker if we don't put Them first. So, we need to think about that every day in terms of how we live our lives. How we prioritize our time. How we prioritize how we live our lives and making sure that we're putting Them and the Kingdom of God as the absolute first thing in our life and that we're willing to give up everything else to put Them first.