

76. First will be last, the last first

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It is not uncommon for believers to think, as they visit a church to look for what that particular church can do for them. I am not saying that it is a completely wrong concept. But their first question should be, "Is this a Bible teaching church for me and my family?" Followed by, "Is this the church the Lord wants us to attend regularly?" If the answer to both questions is, "Yes," then, the following question should be, "What does the Lord want us to do here to serve Him and His body, the church."

The main reason for individual church growth in America comes from migration – moving from one church to another, not necessarily adding new believers to its congregation. Consequently, big churches with many programs get more people, because people look for what they can take from a church instead of giving and serving.

The majority of American Christian churches are run by less than 10% volunteers to do all the works that is required for a church to exist. Our church is very blessed to have many wonderful volunteers to serve this body of Christ. They are involved in many ministries.

A. FIRST WILL BE LAST AND THE LAST FIRST

Matthew 19:30-20:7 But many who are first will be last, and the last first. 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.'

Early in the morning is literally "at dawn." This was usually about 6 in the morning. The third hour was about 9 am; the sixth hour was about 12 noon; the eleventh hour was about 5 in the late afternoon.

Matthew 20:8-16 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."

This parable has nothing to do with salvation. The denarius (a day's wages at that time) does not represent salvation, because nobody can work for his salvation. Nor

is the parable talking about rewards, because we are not all going to receive the same reward. Entrance to the Heavenly Kingdom is by grace alone, faith alone, and Christ alone. But your position in heaven is determined by your works on earth.

1 Corinthians 3:8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

The parable is emphasizing a right attitude in service. It is important to note that there were actually two kinds of workers hired that day: those who wanted an agreement for a denarius a day, and those who had no contract and agreed to take whatever the owner thought was right. The first laborers that he hired are the only ones who knew they would receive a denarius per day, nothing more.

The lesson for Christ's disciples is obvious. We should not serve Him because we want to receive an expected reward. We should not insist on knowing what we will get. God is infinitely generous and gracious and will always give us better than we deserve.

We are going to skip v17 through 19 of this chapter since we already studied that portion in Luke chapter 18.

B. THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM OF JESUS

Matthew 20:20-23 Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. 21 And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." 22 But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." 23 So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father."

These two guys James and John, who were known as the Sons of Thunder because they wanted to bring down fire from heaven to those who didn't believe Jesus, wanted to bring an additional firepower to their competition for the greatest positions in the Kingdom of Jesus. So they brought their lobbyist, their mama Salome. She came and knelt down and asked Jesus for her sons' future positions in His kingdom. Like her sons, she couldn't think any further than the worldly rewards.

Jesus asked James and John if they were willing to take the same route as He would. The word 'Cup' represents Jesus' death and 'Baptism' for His suffering before the death.

Little did mama Salome realize that the path to the throne was a very difficult one. As it would turn out, both James and John took the cup and were baptized in suffering, but they each experienced it in different ways. James was the first apostle to be martyred according to Acts 12. According to tradition, the apostle John was never martyred, though he survived an attempt to kill him by immersion in a pot of boiling oil, deep fried in the Southern style, and later he was exiled to the Isle of Patmos.

These three people, mama Salome, James, and John wanted their will, not God's will. But Salome was one of the women who stood under the cross at Golgotha. While she was witnessing the death of Jesus on the cross with two thieves – one on the right

and the other left, I am sure that she was remembering this very conversation with Jesus.

When Jesus cried out to the Father in heaven, "*Father, forgive them. For they do not know what they do,*" I am sure she also remembered the words from the lips of Jesus, "*You do not know what you ask.*"

When we become power hungry:

- 1) **We become secretive and selfish.** – They brought their mama as the lobbyist.
- 2) **We lose our discernment.** – Jesus told her that she doesn't know what she was asking.
- 3) **We create dissension.** – A competition arises among brothers and sisters in the Lord. We find it in v24.

This doesn't apply only in Christian circles, but also anywhere in society.

Matthew 20:24 And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers.

The result of this request was "indignation" on the part of the other disciples. They were not upset because the brothers were out of line, but because the Sons of Thunder beat them to the punch.

This disagreement among the disciples gave Jesus the opportunity to teach a practical lesson on leadership.

Matthew 20:25-28 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

As the disciples were hearing the first two sentences, they were thinking, "Being a lord over the people and exercising authority over them... Alright, I like that." Then, all of sudden, Jesus said, "*Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave.*" That is not exactly what they had in mind. They wanted to be big dogs, *numero unos*, *nummer ett* in Swedish, not servants at the bottom of the rung.

But they couldn't argue with Jesus, because He was the One who was making servant examples through His actions.

What is a servant? Let's look at it from the biblical perspectives:

- 1) **The servant is someone who makes other people's lives easy.**
- 2) **The servant is someone who provides freedom to others.**
- 3) **The servant is someone who has a mindset of "Other-Centered" instead of "self-centered."**
- 4) **The servant is someone who truly is blessed by the Lord because of his or her service to Him and His church.**

That means if you are not serving, you are missing out on tremendous blessings God has stored for you.

Real ministry is done for the benefit of those ministered to, not for the benefit of the person who ministers. Many people are in the ministry for what they can receive – either materially or emotionally – from their people, instead of for what they can give.

There are two things I use to measure the maturity of the individual Christian:

1) What percentage of individual income they give to the Kingdom of God

Giving to the Kingdom of God is our expression of faith in God. Giving 10% which is tithing is a good start.

2) Serving in the Kingdom of God

We all should know that we cannot work our way into heaven. Then why do we work for the Kingdom of God? Because God cannot get His work done without us? By no means. He doesn't need our puny work, rather He allows us to be a part of His master plan. Our service for the Kingdom of God is our expression of love for Him. Because we love God and we want to serve Him and His people.

Without an apology, I can comfortably say this: I've never seen any mature Christian who does not give his or her money to God's work and does not serve in His Kingdom.

Deuteronomy 10:12-13 "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?"

Did you notice these five imperative words? Fear, walk, love, serve, and keep. We cannot ignore any one of these and think that we are doing everything right in following the Lord.

1) The fear of the Lord comes from our reverence to His majesty and presence, but not in fear of destruction by Him.

2) The whole Scripture tells us that the life of faith is compared to a 'walk' with the Lord.

3) The central element in these five imperative words is love for the Lord. How is it possible to have fear of the Lord and the love for the Lord at the same time? It can be explained simply by having the love for Him first. When we love the Lord with all of our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies, we fear that we might bring disgrace to His name due to our carnal characters and behaviors.

4) The servanthood of God's people is a natural side product of our effort to please Him. True servanthood in the Lord is not burdensome, rather a pure joy, privilege, honor, and delight. Anyone who does not serve the Lord is the one who robs one's own blessings.

5) Keeping the commandments of the Lord is not a bunch of "Dos and Don'ts" to the true followers of God. They want to do it, because they love Him, want to bring honor to Him, and to please Him.

Some of you may say, "Hey preacher, I cannot serve much because of my physical limitations." Yes, I hear you, but that didn't stop our sister Diana Mertens from serving the Lord and this church people. She handles our email prayer chain diligently and faithfully. When you send an email prayer request, she is the one who forwards it to the people who are in the prayer chain so that we can pray for you.

Ask the Lord where He wants you to serve, He will show you.

C. APPLICATIONS

1) Our service should be for the glory of God, not for the rewards.

When we work for our God, we should not calculate who is getting what kind of reward in heaven. We need to just serve Him, because we love Him.

2) Jesus wants us to be the greatest in the Kingdom through servanthood.

He had never rebuked His disciples for wanting to be the greatest in the Kingdom. As a matter of fact, He showed them a "how-to." Being a servant of all.

3) Remove the concept from your heart that you need to be served in the church.

If you are thinking that you need to be served, you are not following the instruction of Jesus. Instead of looking for a way of not serving the Lord and others, look for ways to serve them. See how many blessings you will receive from the Lord.