

*The first shall be last and  
the last shall be first*

This passage of scripture has always puzzled me. I have found it puzzling for two reasons - when Jesus used it and why Jesus used it. This scripture was used by Jesus on His final journey to Jerusalem where He would be crucified. Jesus uses this phrase both at the conclusion of a teaching and at the conclusion of a parable.

We see it first used in Matthew 19:30. Jesus uses this phrase to emphasize a very important aspect of God and His Kingdom to all believers. However, to fully grasp what Jesus is telling us, we must first take a look at the full context in which this phrase, *"But many who are first will be last, and the last first"* was used. To do this we must first look at how this whole time of teaching came about. Let us first look at Matthew 19:1.

We see that this time of teaching began when Jesus departed from Galilee, and came into the coasts of Judaea beyond Jordan. He was actually on His way to Jerusalem that final time where and when He would be crucified. Many had followed Him and He had healed many people as well. Of course, the Pharisees had followed after Him and had questioned Him to try to trap Jesus, as was their usual behavior.

Then we see that the people had brought their children for Him to bless. This was the usual thing for people to do when they had thought a truly religious and blessed man came by. His disciples tried to stop them from coming to Him but as we see, Jesus suffered them to let the children come to Him and He blessed them by stating, *"... Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 19:14)

Jesus was about to leave and continue on to Jerusalem when He was approached by a person who had called Him, *"Good Master."* This was a very uncommon approach to Jesus. The term *"Good Master"* was a term used to show a very high respect for an individual. Jesus responded by expressing this to the man as He said, *"Why call thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God."* After declaring this statement in which Jesus was inferring that, yes, He was the Son of God, He answered the man clearly as He stated, *"... but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments."*

To that answer by Jesus, the man asked, *"...which one?"* Jesus responded by giving the man from the Ten Commandments, *"Thou shall do no murder, Thou shall not commit adultery, Thou shall not steal, Thou shall not bear false witness, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself."* We know that these are only some of the Ten Commandments. Jesus did not express to the man the first four. Hmm... I wonder why???

We see that the man answered that he had kept and had done all of those commandments. Then the man asked, *"What yet do I lack?"* This was a very important question. Was the man truly asking that question because something within him knew that there was something He was missing? Or... did he ask the question expecting a response by Jesus stating that he was ready to enter the Kingdom?

However, Jesus' response was anything but what the man may have been expecting. Jesus' response was, *"...If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shall have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me."* We see that this response by Jesus really affected the man. For in the next verse, after hearing Jesus' response, *"...he went away sorrowful..."* We are given the reason that the man went away sorrowful – *"...for he had great possessions."*

Jesus then tells His disciples in Matthew 19:23-24, *"...Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."* We know that Jesus' answer had taken His disciples by surprise as we read in Matthew 19:25, *"When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, who then can be saved?"*

What did Jesus mean by His response to the man walking away? Why were the disciples “amazed” at Jesus’ reason for why the man left in despondency? Why did Jesus’ response cause them to ask a most vital question, “*Who then can be saved?*” Why did Jesus’ answer take them all by surprise?

The first thing we must grasp is what the thinking was by the Jewish people at that time and in many ways is the same today. We must realize that the Jewish way of thinking was that if a man was rich and had much, it meant that the individual was in right standing with God and because of that reason God was blessing the person with much money and many things. That was the thinking of the day at that time. It was most likely the thinking of the man when he asked Jesus the question.

Remember Jesus response to the man. He actually responded to the man’s inquiry with the second part of the Ten Commandments in which the man had responded that he had accomplished them. However, we see that Jesus particularly left out the first part of the Ten Commandments. If we remember the first section of the Ten Commandments, we know that they were all about loving God.

Actually, Jesus tells us that the first 4 of the Ten Commandments could be summarized as He states in Matthew 22:37, 38, “*...Thou shall love the Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment.*” Notice that Jesus tells us in this scripture that this is the first and great commandment.

We see that when Jesus responded to the man that He purposely left out this “*first and great commandment.*” The question is why did Jesus do this with the man? The answer is that Jesus wanted to truly see if the man, who seemed to do everything right, would truly answer correctly. He wanted to reveal the man’s true heart.

The truly correct answer for every believer both at that time and even in this day and forever is that you are to truly love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and body. Notice that Jesus reminds us or rather He tells us that this is truly the first and greatest commandment of all. This is the heart of a true believer.

We must heed what Jesus tells and teaches us even today as believers. Yes, this is truly the FIRST commandment – to love the Lord your God with all that is within you. There are a few things that I see as we read these scriptures. The first one is that the Father, Himself must be my Lord and my God. I know that Jesus is to be our Lord but why does Jesus say this specifically concerning the Father?

I believe that an individual can understand and grasp the fact that there is a true and Living God. However, that God may not be the individual’s personal Lord. The word “Lord” means to be the absolute, supreme and final authority within an individual’s life. This is a vital aspect in our relationship with the Father and with Jesus.

We have a tendency to neglect the fact that Jesus, Himself refers to the Father as His “Lord” – the absolute, supreme and final authority to Him as walked this earth. This is vital for every true believer to grasp and take hold of. Yes, today, we are to make Jesus our Lord and Savior but we have a tendency to neglect the fact that the Father is also our “Lord” as well as our God. After all Jesus tells us this. We must remember that the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are – One!!

This is vital for each of us to remember and actually believe. We see in this story in Matthew 19. The man seemed to do what the commandments told him to do. However, as we are seeing that this man was actually only doing half of the commandments. He left off the most important aspect of the Ten Commandments which was to truly love God - first.

The second half of the Ten Commandments can only truly be accomplished if an individual truly loves their LORD their GOD with all of their heart, their soul – all that is within them. As we all know, this is the first commandment. This is the beginning of our relationship with God. This is where it all starts.

This was nothing new to Jesus or to the Father but it seemed to be something new to the people – even the disciples. Remember that we had mentioned that the Jewish way of thinking was that if a man was wealthy and had “riches” then it meant that he was okay with God and that God loved the individual. We know that God loves us all yet we are all well aware of the fact that we are not all “okay” with God.

Jesus continues to respond as He declares in Mathew 19:24, *“And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”* Now, I know that there are many aspects that can be spoken of concerning this scripture. We will not go into these at this time. However, the most important thing that we must note is that Jesus was making a statement concerning how truly difficult it was for any person who **trusted in their riches for their salvation** to receive true salvation. We know that true salvation can only come by a true faith and belief in Jesus and everything that He did.

However, as we stated previously, this was not the thought at that time. We see in Matthew 19:25, *“When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?”* Wow!!! What a question. Here they were, all the disciples, on their way to Jerusalem, all of them thinking that they were going to enter the Kingdom of God because of Jesus. Yet... here they were. All of them were surprised, almost stunned, at Jesus’ remarks. As we can see they were concerned even about themselves.

Jesus responds to their inquiry in Matthew 19:26, *“But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.”* What did Jesus mean by this statement? Obviously it went right over the disciples head. Jesus will let us know what this means as we continue. However, next we hear Peter respond trying to “justify” himself and the other disciples as he states, *“Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?”*

This may seem like a weird question by Peter. However, it was a significant question to ask. After all, here they were following Jesus. They thought that He was about to bring forth a new kingdom and defeat Rome – all in their natural understanding and all concerning the things of this world. However, Jesus was talking about something different. Jesus was speaking about the Kingdom of God which was not of this earth. As we can see – the disciples were still not yet on the same page as Jesus.

Jesus responded to Peter’s question by stating in Mathew 19:28 and 29, *“Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.”*

Jesus states that anyone who truly follows after Him will be blessed upon this earth but. Most importantly, the true believers would receive and “inherit everlasting life.” We must remember that this phrase was still foreign to His disciples as well as to anyone who heard it. The receiving “a hundred fold” was something they could all grasp on to. It was the “inherit everlasting life” that was foreign to them.

This seems difficult for us to grasp today but the concept of “eternal, everlasting life” was a new idea, a new concept for them to truly grasp even though it was something that was in their scriptures. Jesus always referred to this thought throughout His teachings. He always said that His Kingdom was not of this world. Rather, His Kingdom was the Kingdom of God which was not of this earth. Jesus then makes the statement, *“But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.”*

Do we think that the disciples truly understood what Jesus was saying by stating this? I don't think they did. That is why Jesus follows up with another parable found in Matthew 20:1-16, the Parable of the laborers.

Without going into great detail, this parable concerns men who were chosen to go out and do the work in the field. They were to start early in the morning and they were told the wage they would make – a penny for the day. Throughout the day the owner of the field kept hiring more men but at different hours. The last group the man hired only worked one hour.

When it came time to pay all the laborers we see that the man paid the last group of men that he hired first. He gave them a penny. He gave the next group the same wage – one penny. When it came to paying the first group of people that He hired early in the morning, the man paid them – one penny. Those first laborers got very upset.

The man responded in Matthew 20 13-15, *"...I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take what is yours and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is your eye evil, because I am good?"*

Jesus tells them the moral of the parable in Matthew 20:16, *"So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen."* It is the same response that He told His disciples just previous to this parable. However, he adds, *"...for many be called, but few chosen."*

Jesus was telling His disciples both, in His teaching and in the parable, by using the same conclusion in both situations that it was not the works that an individual does. It would not be how much the individual would do. No, Salvation is a free gift to anyone who wants it and receives it as the gift of God that is now available to all who would believe in Jesus. In other words the individual desires to allow the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit to lead them and guide them, not only in this life but also in the Kingdom to come.

When He states that, *"many are called, but few are chosen,"* Jesus is stating that everyone is called by Him to come in and partake of the Kingdom of God. However, few will truly accept the invitation. If the individual does truly accept the invitation to come into the Kingdom and become a child of God it is only by and through the love, grace, mercy and peace of the true and Living God. It is only by, in and through God that an individual is truly saved and is able to become His child and enter the Kingdom.

It is not what we do or how much we do for the Kingdom of God but rather it should be and must be why we do what we do. It is to be totally unto Him – for His purposes and to bring forth more of His Kingdom upon this earth. In other words, a person's salvation, your salvation, is really all about the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It is all about God and His glory. It is not about you or me or anyone else but God.

In these days when the focus of much of the Body of Christ has been turned towards themselves, the true remnant, the true Body of Christ, will emerge. It will emerge as being a group of no-names who simply desire to love and see God, the Father, the Son, Jesus and the Holy Spirit magnified, glorified and lifted above all else. In the Kingdom, it does not matter who is first or who is last. It just matters that you are there!!!

It really is all about Him – the one and only true Living God. Yes, *"the first shall be last and last first"* – but who cares. It doesn't matter nor should it matter. Whatever our reward may be, we will ultimately throw it at the feet of Jesus because it was all about Him and unto Him. We are all *"the one new man in Christ."* The only thing that truly matters is that each of us is a member of the family of God in and through Jesus - the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Let everything that hath breath, Praise the Lord!!!