

One of the parables that Jesus tells (which I love, by the way), is actually an industrial relations nightmare. If there's one thing that I've learned by working in a couple of mid-sized work places, one thing that staff hate, more than anything, is the thought that somebody else might be getting more than they deserve... because then they think they're getting less than **they** deserve...

Let me tell you this parable in modern-day terms for you.

An employer has a fair bit of work to get done, so at 6 o'clock in the morning, he arrives at the local muster point for job seekers. Those who really want to work, are there waiting. He says, "Come and do a day's work for me, and I'll pay you \$300 for the day." – a fair wage, but not exorbitant... And so they happily go off to work for the day.

At 9 o'clock in the morning, he goes to the muster point again, and there's more people looking for a job. Maybe they were tired because they've got a baby in the house???? "Righto. Come and work for me for the day and I'll give you what's fair." And they head off.

At 12 o'clock he does the same thing. More people looking for work (Obviously not too keen or they would've been there earlier). Come and work for me for the day and I'll give you what's fair.

Again at 3 o'clock in the afternoon – he gathers up some more workers (A bit late to be looking for work, but anyway)...

And then finally at 5 in the afternoon, he finds some more. "Why have you done nothing all day?" "Because nobody has given us a job". "Well you go and work for me too."

When it got dark, about 6 o'clock at night, he said to the foreman, pay the workers. Pay the last to start work first, and finish by paying the early starters.

When the workers that started at 5 in the afternoon came for their pay, they received \$300, for only an hour's work. And the wage stayed the same. Those who started at 3, and 12, and 9, all got their \$300.

When it came time for those who had put in a full 12 hour day, to get paid, they were shocked, because they only got \$300 too. And they said to their boss, "That's not fair. They've only been working an hour, and they got the same pay that we got, and we've been slaving away through the heat of the day... They sat at home in the air cooler, with their feet up in the air watching telly, turn up for an hour's work in the cool of the afternoon and they get the same pay as us.... That's not fair..."

And the boss said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree on \$300? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'

You can understand why the workers felt it was unfair, hey??? But it wasn't unfair – the boss had simply been generous to those who didn't deserve it....

A principle in the world, is fairness in equity... but that's not a principle of the Kingdom of Heaven...

The principle of the Kingdom of Heaven, is grace and generosity. It's extravagant generosity – generosity from the master to the undeserving...

And the punch line is “**So the last will be first, and the first last.**”

Unfortunately, whoever made the decision on where to put chapter dividers in our bible, have done us a bit of a disservice here. You see, chapter 20 continues on from chapter 19.

Jesus has been talking about the rich vs the poor, and last time I preached, I told you how, in their world view, they thought it was the rich who were blessed by God, but Jesus turns all that on its head, and says to these disciples who have left everything to follow Him,

Matthew 19: ²⁸, “**Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, 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 children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.** ³⁰ **But many who are first will be last, and the last first.**”

You give up everything – you’re going to gain everything.

And then He goes on to tell the story of this generous boss:
For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard

And He tells the story, and He finishes it off by saying, “The last will be first and the first last.”

So, what’s He talking about?... it’s an engaging story, but what’s He talking about? The last will be first and the first last, what’s He talking about????

1. Well firstly, He’s talking about the Jewish / Gentile thing, and I mentioned that a few weeks ago.

The gospels each have their own specific flavour, and Matthew is a thoroughly Jewish Gospel. The Jews are the chosen people of God – they have been the long-term God-followers. But when Jesus Christ came into their midst, He was largely rejected by them.

But Christ didn’t only come to save the Jews. Jesus came **to give his life as a ransom for many**. – Jews and Gentiles, and we find this coming through in the Gospel of Matthew, over and over again.

And in this regard, we who are gentiles, are late-comers. We are those who probably turned up at 3 o’clock in the afternoon, or 5 o’clock in the afternoon. Because of the genetics that we carry, and the history that we carry, is not

Jewish – we are not the chosen people., - we do not have a birth-right to be called children of God... But in Jesus Christ, who gave His life as a ransom for many, the last become first, and we who were cut off from God, become His children.

Never forget, that as Gentiles, **we** are late-comers to God. But in the absolutely extraordinary, immense grace of God, He calls us as His children too – He chooses the unchosen. He cleanses the unclean. He purifies the profane.... God is extravagant in His grace, as He wills..... Now maybe the Jews thought that was unfair, but God is sovereign and gives His grace as He wills.

2. The second thing we can learn from this parable, is the very nature of grace and salvation itself.

One day, I explained to somebody, about salvation – our need of salvation – the grace of God – how if we all got what we deserved, well we'd get death, because that's what we deserve, but how by the grace of God, in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven and receive life.

And when I'd finished explaining it, I could see the offence, beginning to brew and stew inside of them – it was written on their face...

And they said to me, Are you telling me, that someone can be a murderer and a rapist – an abuser of children, and on their death-bed, turn to God, and they're forgiven and get to heaven... while a sweet little old lady, who doesn't believe in God, but has volunteered in the community and done good deeds all her life, goes to hell??? Are you telling me that that's what it means???

And well, when they put that to me like that, I knew, “ I’d explained it well, because that’s exactly what it means.” And the offence just overtook them: “That’s not fair, and if that’s what Christianity is about, I don’t want to have anything to do with it...”

Friends, fairness **doesn’t** have anything to do with it. If I got what was fair, I’d be condemned to hell. But by the magnificent grace of God, I’m saved from death to life... Now, I was fortunate to be saved early in my life. In the parable, I might have been at work at daybreak – 6am (and you might be too). But the gift of salvation is that I am saved...

I have no right to get upset if someone who is late in life, comes to faith in the Lord. I am no more deserving than someone who has been an absolute rotter all their life, and then in their 80’s repented and received the Lord Jesus Christ as their saviour...

It’s got nothing to do with what I or they deserve, and **everything** to do with the amazing grace and forgiveness of God.

Good people don’t get to heaven. **Saved** people get to heaven. The first will be last and the last will be first. And often those who feel they’re ‘a good person’ will never come to Christ, because they’re full of self-righteousness, and don’t depend on God.... While those who know they are evil, know they need a saviour, and so they fall on their knees in repentance...

And so the last shall be first and the first last – the very nature of grace and salvation.

3. The third thing we learn today, is about taking on the nature of a servant.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate Lord and Master. And yet He took on the nature of a servant. You aren't saved by serving, but you are saved to serve.

And when the disciples argued about who would be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus must've felt like saying "Oh, when are they going to get it?????"

He said, **"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.**

Alright, He's talking about Roman rule. The Romans ruled with an iron fist – they had power, and they used it. There was a hierarchy of power. The pinnacle of course, was the emperor, who was seen as a God... But their rulers exercised great authority over them. Those who are high up the tree, have power, and pull others down, under submission to them, by using it. – That's how it was with the Gentiles – And that's how it is in the world today...

In the world, the powerful might lord it over the weak – the rich might lord it over the poor – the educated might lord it over the uneducated.... But in the church, ²⁶ **It shall not be so among you.** If you want to be great in God's eyes, be a

servant. If you want to be first in the Kingdom of Heaven, be a slave...

Let me tell you, one of the greatest destroyers of churches, is the self-seeking of power, by its members.

I might be a leader in this church, but if I'm not a servant leader, I'm not a Godly leader. I'm not here to lord it over you – I'm here to serve God, and to be a slave to you as you are a slave to me.

A church full of slaves, is a healthy church – it's a happy church – it's a Godly church.

But a church filled with those who seek power – a church filled with those who wield power – and it doesn't have to be filled – it only takes one – ... A church like becomes dysfunctional – it's an expression of the Kingdom of men – and not the Kingdom of God.

You've heard the saying "Too many chiefs and not enough Indians"????

Well some churches are like that, where some **do** want to lord it over others...

But in the Christian church, "You shall not be like that", because chiefs **are** Indians.

In the Christian church, The greatest, is the servant – the slave – the poor – the uneducated – the unappreciated...

The one who cleans the toilet, is as important as the one who preaches the sermon.

And in fact, they could be very well, the one and the same person...

Jesus Christ came to serve. We too, are to serve.

But let me clarify this: Some of us are happy to serve, but not quite so happy to be servants... Do you know what I mean? We're happy to do stuff – as long as it's stuff that I enjoy... One is about doing, and the other is about being... Christ wants us to **be** servants who serve... A servant puts others first.

The last will be first, and the first last.

I love worshipping with you guys in this church, because I think today I've been preaching to the proverbial choir.

You can tell me if I'm wrong, but I don't feel anybody here tries to lord it over anybody else...

But it's always good for us to be reminded, of the extravagant grace of God, and to remember, that we are recipients of it. It's good to be reminded that not one of us is greater than the other. It's good to be reminded how much God loves us, and how therefore we should love...

I also get the feeling that some of us feel like we're not important – we feel insignificant... And that's OK. The world would tell you "Don't feel like that – Don't undervalue yourself"... But you know what? Christ says, "Count yourself as nothing" – be a servant... If you want to be great, be the servant that you are... Those who run the show aren't

the great – Those who serve God, and serve others – they’ve got the right idea.

So if you feel you’re insignificant – I’m here to tell you that’s OK. I’m here to tell you, “Don’t seek to be great”... Because you already are.

Everything you do on this earth, is for an audience of one... You don’t do it to be noticed by men. You don’t do it for self-gratification... Be a servant for the one who sees and knows everything – the Lord Jesus Christ, who was Himself a servant, but is now exalted to the highest place...

Questions: