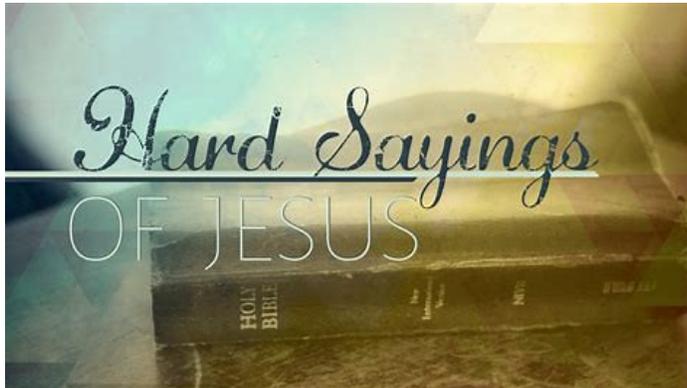


So, The Last Will Be First, And The First Last

Matthew 20:1-16

The Difficult Sayings of Jesus #5

Weekend of May 25-26, 2019



We have been looking at the Difficult Sayings of Jesus. These sayings will either make you angry or cause you to worship. These are sayings that really confront us with the real Jesus. Everyone loves the long haired, sandal wearing, Whole Foods shopping Jesus who talked about peace & love but this series confronts us with those sayings that people rejected Jesus for when He was on earth, and the ones that we believe people still reject Him. We are concluding the series with the saying, "So the last will be first, and the first last."

This is one of those sayings that get thrown around ALL THE TIME. You'll hear a lady last in line at Wal-Mart claiming she is gaining some favor with God because she is last in line. Students get picked last when picking teams and we try to make them feel good so – the last will be first.

At first blush, this saying really doesn't make sense. It doesn't make logical sense when we look at it from man's perspective. It is what is known as a literary terms as "Chiasmus." But while we all know the saying, almost none of us know that it's the conclusion to one of Jesus' parables. The parable helps us understand what makes this so difficult and it points to why Jesus came and how we follow him.

Look at how the passage begins... **"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard..." Matthew 20:1** Jesus is about to tell us what His Kingdom is like.

This is used often in scripture. When you see this in your Bibles, mark it, what follows is going to give us a clear picture of who Jesus is, why He came, and what He expects of us.

After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So, they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'

And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ‘So, the last will be first, and the first last.’ Matthew 20:2-16

Be honest, how does this story make you feel? Right now. I got to tell you, this story gave me a knot in the pit of my stomach. My first thought was “this is the every kid gets a trophy parable”. Many other sayings of Jesus in this series might have been difficult to understand but this one, no, I get it... It’s exactly because I get this saying that I don’t like it! The guys that sweated all day long, did all the work, get the same amount as the guys who hardly worked at all, spent most of the day standing around.

After my American, capitalistic self-calmed down and reread the passage, I can tell you that I became greatly encouraged. This story illustrates the mercy of God, and while at first glance I may not understand it, the deeper I go the more grateful and more love I have for our God.

The first thing we have to understand is that this is a parable. A parable is a story that Jesus uses often with the seemingly normal routines of the time pointing to a specific teaching that He wants people to understand. So, you can’t break this down as some sort of economic lesson. Jesus wasn’t endorsing some sort of socialism or communism. This parable, like all parables of course, doesn’t have multiple points to it. It does exactly what Jesus says it does by showing us “this is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like...”

There is great danger in listening to Jesus and totally misunderstanding the nature of God. Jesus was concerned with this for his disciples. And dare I say, Jesus is concerned about that for us today. There are many people I’m afraid that think they’re Christians who fall into this same trap of missing the whole point.

Author Charlie Mitchell comments, “**Although the concept of the self-made man is inspiring, it finds no place within the Christian worldview.**” They haven’t understood the true nature of the Kingdom of God, the way of salvation. The saying “the last first, and first shall be last” is upside down, not logical. And THAT is what Jesus is trying to tell us. It is the Kingdom of God, not the Kingdom of YOU. It won’t make sense to you.

Look back in your Bibles, Jesus was constantly doing this, turning things upside down. Look at Matthew 19...

In 19:1-12, -- Jesus talks with the Pharisees and they are trying to trick him about divorce and remarriage. Jesus reaffirms the fact that marriage is one man, one woman for life, and the Pharisees say, “Ah, ha, what about when God gave Moses divorce? He tells them, because your hearts are hard he permitted divorce but those who receive me can do the impossible and fulfill God’s design.

The Kingdom of God is upside down

In verses 13-15 – Jesus calls children to him, something unheard of by a follower of Jesus. His disciples rebuked the parents for sending their kids to him, liking sending a bunch of kids into the oval office and Jesus turns everything upside down by saying the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to children.

The Kingdom of God is upside down.

In verses 16 – 22, you have the story that many call the “Rich Young Man”. He wants to know how to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus tells him to obey the 10 commandments and he says, “I’ve done all those”. So, Jesus says, “well good, then it won’t be hard to sell everything you have and give it to the poor.” He goes away surprised, sad, he thought he had it figured out.

The Kingdom of God is upside down. If you and I don’t realize this from the beginning, that The Gospel is different from everything we have ever heard before, I’m afraid we don’t know it. This is what this verse, “The last will be first, and the first last” teaches us – **The Gospel of Jesus Christ is never what we think it must be. It turns everything upside down. Have you been turned upside down by the Gospel?**

Here are just a few things we notice for folks who have a wrong view of the Kingdom of God...

Wrong view: See Salvation as a Reward

This is the most dangerous view. Many of us, wouldn’t answer on a test that we believe this, but it is our natural default position. This is when we make ourselves Christians because we are doing good things. These things are not wrong in and of themselves but when we bargain with God and come to Him on our terms, we miss the whole point of His Kingdom, we miss his mercy, we miss his reward.

Wrong View: A Shallow Perception of God

These people who worked first, made an agreement with the landowner ahead of times, yet they grumble when they get what they bargained for. They don’t recognize the goodness in the landowner. They murmured, they complain. They judge the things they have based on what others have. We see this with the Pharisees when they grumble about Jesus because **“This man receives sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)**

Pharisees have an irreverent perception of God and a High view of themselves. Do you feel that God owes you something? What is your attitude toward Him?

Wrong View: No grace for others’ failures

A graceless person is a sign of a godless person. Paul would say, “I am the chief of among sinners.” **AW Tozer said, “A Pharisee is hard on others and easy on himself, but a spiritual man is easy on others and hard on himself.”** These are the folks who see people on the news, down trodden, in trouble with the law, and you have the attitude, “they made their bed, now they should lie in it.”

What is your attitude toward people who are living immoral, foul, and filthy lives? What about the people who believe the exact opposite of you on things? Politics, parenting... Being in ministry, Christians who aren’t spiritually mature are the most difficult people to be around. To be given so much and love so little is one of the greatest sins of all.

Wrong View: God is wrong or immoral

I would never think that? Oh really...What was your first thought when you read this parable today? I’ll admit it, I was mad! Rapper Shai Linne points out, you should not pick and choose the characteristics of God that fit your preference, you must accept both. God is a God of love, compassion, and grace; but he is also a God of justice, wrath, and holiness.”

These views miss the whole glory of salvation. These guys in the parable didn’t sing of the generosity of the landowner they sneered at him. They were the self- satisfied, legalistic, why didn’t we get more crowd. If you think you’ve earned it, others don’t deserve it, it’s immoral, you suppose you’ll get a great reward, you’ll be disappointed, you’ll be last.

The marks of those who understand what the Kingdom of God is like understanding God is absolute, ruler, judge, and that everyone is in His generous hands. **Tony Evans** said it this way... **“Justice is getting what you deserve, mercy is not getting what you deserve, and grace is getting what you don’t deserve.”**

What does it look like when your world has been turned upside down by the Kingdom? There are a couple of ideas to consider...

Upside Down View: Surprised By God’s Grace And Mercy

He isn’t asking why are these saved and those aren’t...why don’t I receive more but this person asks, **“Why is their salvation for anyone at all?”** This person doesn’t watch the news and ask, “Why is there War?” This person asks **why is there peace at all?** This person sees their life and doesn’t ask why don’t I have more but **why do I have anything at all?**

This person sees that if God was to damn the whole world, he wouldn’t have a thing to complain about at all. What is amazing, surprising is that God has ever blessed me at all?

Upside Down View: Grateful For His Generosity

Where is the injustice in this parable, really? The guys that made a deal with the landowner got exactly what they were promised. Do we want God to give us exactly what we deserved? He says the payment of sin is death, sin is breaking any part of the law of God. How about the first and greatest commandment? “Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul, with all strength” How have you done on that?

Are we grateful that at the 11th hour, God sought us when we were helpless, alone, and guilty and showed us mercy that we didn’t receive? God is just. He is fair. He punished our sins, all of them. He did this by putting them on His Son. That’s why we say that “He died the death that we deserved.”

It doesn’t matter where I’ve started, because really, we’ve all started last. We all need His grace and mercy and the beautiful thing, the upside-down thing, is that God offers it to us, today. If you don’t know this Gospel, be surprised, be amazed that the God of the universe came and sought you, offers to give you life and all the blessings that anyone else could ever receive.

Friends, it makes sense to me for some to walk away from all this stuff because they don’t believe. What doesn’t make sense is to believe this and it not turn our world upside down. We need to say that the Gospel is not true at all or fall on our faces and worship Him. Worship Him in your lives, worship Him now, and sing that everything you have comes from Him.

But does the Gospel of Jesus make you sing? But as I ran my hell-bound race, indifferent to the cost, you looked upon my helpless state, and led me to the cross. Does the Gospel of Jesus make you grateful? How vast and measureless the flood of mercy unrestrained, the penalty was paid in full, the spotless lamb was slain, salvation, what a priceless gift, we stand in Jesus’ name.

Being able to explain the Gospel is one thing; having it captive your soul is quite another. If we think we’ve earned it, how can we sing? But when it has turned us upside down, it is our first response to sing of the goodness of God.