

The Last Shall Be First & The First Last

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 January 2025

Preacher: Mr Richard Killer

[0 : 00] Good evening and a warm welcome to the service this evening. I bring you greetings from North Harris Free Church. Let's begin this time of worship with a call to worship from Psalm 136.

O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endureth forever. O give thanks unto the God of gods, for his mercy endureth forever. O give thanks to the Lord of Lords, for his mercy endureth forever.

We're going to begin our time of worship this evening by singing from Psalm 147, Psalm 147, verses 1 through to 11. Psalm 147.

[illegible]

Thank you.

[2 : 25] Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. He is great, who he could guide upon the mountain shore.

[4 : 24] He could not be, just where he be, the raven shall not die.

His pleasure not in heart to stay, nor in the earth's legs that are blind.

But then all the roads that you have here, the Lord will bless your name.

In the woods that you have here, the Lord will bless your name.

Let's pray, shall we? Amen. Our gracious and loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for this opportunity to be here together this evening.

- [5 : 51] Even though it's cold and windy outside, it's good to be able to gather together in this warmth and to have fellowship together and to focus our thoughts and our minds on the Eternal One.
- Lord, you are an amazing God. You are above us in every way. Almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing.
- And Lord, you are a God who is pure and perfect and holy. And Lord, when we think of your attributes, we are reminded just how weak and how sinful we are.
- We are broken individuals in a broken world. And we're reminded time and time again that we fall over and over again.
- We fall short of your glory, Lord. And we come with repentant hearts this evening to ask for your forgiveness. Please hear our prayers, we pray.
- [6 : 52] Lord, we ask that you would bless this world that we live in. We see so much strife and trouble around the world. We see fires in California and wars in the East of Europe and in the Middle East.
- And Lord, there are so many things going on that we don't even know about. Brothers and sisters in Christ who are struggling in countries where they're persecuted for their faith.
- They couldn't possibly imagine coming out safely to praise you in a public place like this. And Lord, we have much to be thankful for. But we do remember those folks around the world right now who are struggling and suffering.
- And Lord, that through these difficulties and these hardships, that they would be reminded of you and their need for you. Lord, we pray for our nation.
- We pray for the First Minister and the Prime Minister and the King. And Lord, for all those in positions of authority over us. We are aware that many things go through Parliament and decisions are made that are contrary to your word, that disappoint us and upset us, Lord.
- [8 : 07] And there are decisions and rules of law put into practice that, Lord, we realise that maybe 50, 100 years ago, they wouldn't have even been imagined that such things would become law in this country.
- And Lord, we're very mindful that this country has as a whole turned its back on you. And Lord, we plead for your mercy on us as a nation. Lord, we pray too for this community here.
- We pray that, Lord, the witness of this church would be very much, continue to be strong in this community.
- We pray for each and every one who's gathered here tonight and their families, Lord, that they would be light and salt in this place. That, Lord, they would very much point all those in their circle, friends, family members, colleagues, that, Lord, point each and every one to the Lord Jesus, that you would give opportunity and that you would give boldness.
- We pray for those in the community here, Lord, who are mourning and grieving. Lord, we pray that in that time of pain and sorrow that they would know your peace and your comfort, your arms surrounding them.
- [9 : 30] We pray for those, Lord, who struggle with illness, whether that's physical or mental. Lord, these things can be such a bind. They can really make life very, very hard.
- And, Lord, in the midst of these difficulties, that, Lord, people would turn to you and see the great physician and know that, Lord, they're in your hands.

We pray for healing, Lord, for those who need to be healed. And for those, Lord, who are very much struggling with this day-to-day living, with costs of living and with finances, perhaps anxious where the next paycheck will come from, or not knowing how to put food on the table, Lord, we pray that, Lord, you would warm our hearts to those around us who are in that kind of position and that, Lord, we would be able to provide help to them, just as the Lord Jesus would want us to.

So we commit these things to you, Lord. We pray on for this church. We pray that, Lord, in your perfect time and your perfect will, you would provide a new minister for the church here, that, Lord, it would be the right person for this community and, Lord, the direction you want this place to go.

We pray, Lord, for each and everyone who's gathered here, Lord. We pray that in our own lives we would reflect the Lord Jesus. Please help us to be mindful of our sin and to be repentant for the things that we do wrong, but also to look forward and ahead to the hope that we have of glory and of heaven and of no more pain and suffering.

[11 : 08] We praise you, Lord, for this time. We praise you for the hope that we have in you. And, Lord, as we consider your word shortly, we pray that you would very much open our minds and our hearts to be able to take what you have to tell us in mind, we pray.

We commit this time to you now in Jesus' name. Amen. The next psalm that we'll be singing is Psalm 103.

Psalm 103. And we'll sing verses 1 through to 5. Psalm 103. Psalm 103. Psalm 103.

Psalm 103.

Oh,■■■■?

[13 : 11] He will be relieved.

He will be relieved.

He will be relieved.

So Matthew 19, verse 30. And they went their way.

Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle?

[15 : 30] They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He said unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive.

So when even was come, the lord of the harvest said unto his steward, Call the labourers and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.

And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more, and that they likewise received every man a penny.

And when they had received it, they murmured against the good man of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.

But he answered one of them and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong. Didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way.

[16 : 31] 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 thy eye evil? Because I am good.

So, the last shall be first, and the first last. For many will be called, but few chosen. Amen.

May the Lord bless that reading to us this evening. Just very briefly pray before we sing the next psalm.

We pray that your Holy Spirit would open the eyes of our hearts, that we would be honest with ourselves, and that we would, Lord, seek your clear blessing and guidance for the future, that we would know not only the encouragement from Scripture, but also the challenge, something to take with us for the rest of the week, we pray.

[17 : 41] Please, Lord, in spite of my own weakness and my own sinfulness, we pray that, Lord, these things would not be a disruption or a block or an obstacle to us, but that, Lord, you would speak to us regardless of the speaker himself, we pray.

We commit these things to you that each one of us may, Lord, this evening, be blessed through this message, we ask. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Thy kingdom shall forever stand, As the grace of the Lord, O gracious Lord, The dark of
night, The fortress of the Lord, The eyes of all this great, The night of night, CHOIR
SINGS

[20 : 45] That's Matthew Chapter 20. I don't know if you remember but maybe five or ten years ago there was a sort of celebration, an anniversary of 500 years since the Protestant Reformation.

Probably the equivalent of today posting something on social media and it going viral. And he was moved to do that by the practice of indulgences.

But what Luther grasped 500 years ago after reading the Bible was that it's not about merit, it's all about grace. We can't buy ourselves into God's favour.

Number 62 that he posted was, The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and the grace of God.

Why is it odious? What did Luther mean by saying that God's grace naturally disgusts us because it makes the first to be last?

[23 : 18] I don't know if anyone here remembers that. But it was the fact that a man walked on the moon for the first time. And I'm sure most of us here would know who that first person was that walked on the moon.

That's Neil Armstrong. But what's less commonly known is that in total, only 12 people have ever walked on the moon. And the last person was an Apollo 17 in December 1972.

And I'm sure, well, I very much doubt anyone here knows that person's name. His name was Harrison Schmidt. But maybe like me, we've never heard of him before.

You see, we know the first person, but most of us have little or no interest in the last. There's something about being first, isn't there? No one's interested in who's last because that's our ranking system.

We strive for that first place. Anything else is of little interest, especially last. But this parable that we read starts and ends by saying that the kingdom of God is like that.

[24 : 32] It's the opposite of how we would rank things. So this passage is a bit like a sandwich. If you look at the verses in front of you, you've got two slices of bread on either side.

The first verse, which is chapter 19, verse 30, and the last verse, which is chapter 20, verse 16, they actually both echo each other. Just read it.

So the last shall be first and the first last. But actually, I think it's more like a club sandwich because you've actually got this slice of bread in the middle. If you look at verse 8, when even was come, the Lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, call the labourers and give them their hire, beginning from the last and to the first.

So this last shall be first kind of motif is repeated here as well. So it's very similar to the first and the last verses.

And when you get repetition like that in the Bible, there's a reason for it. It's a bit like we would highlight something or underline something. It's clearly a message that we're meant to take away from this parable.

[25 : 45] But what does Jesus mean when he says this in this parable? I love playing board games like Monopoly, but I have to confess, I'm very competitive.

So I'm actually probably not very much fun to play with. But that also carries on through to my daily life. I find it very easy to compare myself with others around me, to the point of sometimes being envious of what they have or what they can do.

Maybe that rings a bell with someone else here as well. Or maybe you're prone to grumble instead of having a grateful heart. Often when things in life are not going as you feel they should, you start to grumble.

As we unpack this parable this evening, we'll see that the Lord is trying to teach us about dealing with these kind of things. And we discover how Jesus is actually turning our worldview upside down.

So, looking at this passage, let's go through it. First of all, notice that the only group of workers here that have a contract with the landowner is the group that he approaches first in the marketplace.

[26 : 59] And that's early in the morning, 6am. And they agree to a full day's work, which back then would have been 12 hours. None of this seven and a half hour stuff. They worked a long time back then.

And it would have been for a penny or a denarius, which was a standard day's pay for a foot soldier or a labourer back in those days.

So, this is a fair deal. It's an honest day's work for an honest day's wage. Everyone's clear about the conditions of the contract. Everyone's happy.

Then at 9am, the landowner goes back and hires some more men. But note, these men are not on contract. They're hired on trust.

He doesn't tell them what they'll earn. He just says he'll pay them whatever is right. That's then repeated at midday, at 3pm, and then at the 11th hour, which would have been 5pm.

- [27 : 59] Literally one hour before everyone else is due to finish. And he hires that last group with the same proviso. Trust me, I'll pay you what's fair, I'll pay you what's right.
- Then the whistle blows at 6pm. The work day's over, it's time to get paid. And this is where things begin to go a bit pear-shaped.
- It's interesting that the landowner insists on paying those who are hired last, first. Did you see that in the passage? That kind of middle bit of the bread in the club sandwich that we talked about earlier.
- Why does the landowner do that? Isn't he just asking for trouble by doing that? It must have really frustrated those hard workers to see the last getting paid first.
- But then, grace can be frustrating. It can be odious, as Luther put it. So the men who showed up only an hour before home time, they come forward.
- [29 : 06] And compared to the men who've been toiling all day long in the Middle Eastern midday heat, they look pretty clean, they probably smell alright, they're still fresh, energetic, never really broke a sweat.
- The owner says, I agreed to pay you what was fair, so, here is a penny for you and for you and for you. Well, seeing that, you can only imagine what must have been going through the minds of the men who were hired first in the morning.
- They must have been thinking, I wonder how much these men who've literally been here for an hour are going to get paid. And so when they see him giving them each a penny or a zancarius, you can imagine that probably the cogs began turning in their brains, thinking, hold on, one hour's work is one denarius, so then 12 hours work must be, and maybe they'd even got to the point of starting to think, well, how am I going to spend my rich pickings tonight?
- Well, you know what happens next, the 3pm gang go forward and get their denarius, midday and the 9am gang is going to get theirs, and finally the last, the first group who are under contract, they go up.
- and they get the exact same amount, one pence. Now, you can picture the scene, you can probably imagine them starting to bubble up with anger.
- [30 : 40] that's not fair. We've slaved all day long in the blazing sun, and you're telling me that these lazy, sweat-free upstarts are going to get paid the same as us.
- Well, that's not fair. And you know, what we read here in this parable goes against everything we know about employer motivation and fair compensation, doesn't it?
- I think children have an amazing way of expressing things that adults are thinking but are kind of afraid to say. I know my daughters are certainly like that sometimes. And if, for example, I was to get Sunday school kids up to the front and split them into three groups, and I was to give the first group really quite a difficult task, the middle group a fairly hard task, and the third group was to give them an absolutely simple no-brainer of a task.
- And then at the end to say, well done to each of them, give them each a sweet. You can be sure it won't be long before the kids that had worked really hard would be saying, that's not fair. And they would be right, wouldn't they?
- It isn't fair. And maybe like me, you've read this parable before and found it hard to understand. In fact, it almost raises your heckles because you think, those lazy good-for-nothings who show up late are paid the same.
- [32 : 08] That's scandalous. You almost want to contact the Great Pickers Union to complain because you feel for those who've worked the hardest. Now this is a parable with a story with a deeper meaning.
- And it's clear here that the landowner represents God. So what is God trying to say about himself? That he is unfair?

That God doesn't give them what's rightly theirs? Where's the justice in that? You've maybe heard the idioms the early bird gets the worm, no pain, no gain, or there's no such thing as a free lunch.

Well, that would be fair. So why is God telling us here that the kingdom of heaven is so unfair?

I mean, surely God should be encouraging what's just and right and fair. And perhaps discovering that the kingdom of heaven is like this makes you think, well actually, I think I prefer fairness and justice to deserve what I get and get what I deserve.

[33 : 21] At least I understand it, it's quantifiable, it's comfortable and predictable. But let's just pause there because do we really want to go there?

Do we really want to say to God that we want to enter a contract with him stating that we should get what we deserve? Think about it.

we seriously do not want to go there. Do you honestly want your just reward for your fair wage, in fact? Because when Romans 6.23 very clearly tells us that the wages of sin is death, and if we're going to be technical about it, we're each one of us here sinners.

And anything more than that is sheer mercy and grace. So if we really want to play out the give me what I deserve thing, then we're all doomed.

You know, I think Jesus tells us this parable about grace to tell us that grace cannot be calculated the same way you might calculate wages. And we might find that very frustrating, or as Luther puts it, odious.

[34 : 37] The fact that Jesus tells us that he gives us what he wants to give us, and that we should trust him that what he gives us is right. Now this story is flat out frustrating, unless you're the eleventh hour worker, that is.

And I think that's what's key to understanding this passage. The key question we have to ask ourselves is, who do I most identify with in this parable?

A man was driving in the country one day, and he saw an old man sitting on a fence watching the cars go by. Stopping to pass the time of day, the traveller said, I could never stand living out here.

You don't see anything. I'm sure you don't travel like I do. I'm on the go all the time. The old man on the fence looked down at the stranger and drooled, I can't see much difference between what I'm doing and what you're doing.

I sit on the fence and watch the cars go by, and you sit in the car and watch the fences go by. It's just the way you look at things. And it is, isn't it? It's a question of perspective.

[35 : 54] It depends where you're looking from. And perhaps we're looking at this parable the wrong way. We're not actually identifying with the correct group. Now if you're like me, you probably heard this parable from the mindset of the ones that were hired first, you know, the hard worker.

But actually, what if despite of our hard work and effort, we're not one of the first in the queue to be hired, like we so confidently think we are? What if actually we're meant to identify with those who are hired last?

If you take a moment to think about this, if that were the case, then that wouldn't be fair either, would it? It would be goodness and generosity beyond our wildest dreams, indiscriminate grace.

Then look at verse 15. This is our God. I am good, full of grace, paying us more than our worth, not because of who we are, but because of who he is.

This parable is all about God and his goodness. And this parable should change our perspective on who we are and what God has done for us.

[37 : 10] Because God is actually turning our thinking upside down, and maybe I should say, he's actually turning it the right way around. God is telling us here that there is great reward in his kingdom for those who follow him.

Adoption as his children, eternal and abundant life, but none of it, none of it at all, on the basis of what we've done. So, this is the challenge that Jesus is issuing us this evening.

Do you consider yourself to be first, or do you consider yourself to be last? And it's a tricky question, and I think it's something that changes constantly.

But there's a couple of signs from our attitudes that give away the answer to this. Firstly, those who think of themselves as last, respond to what life throws at them with gratitude.

Those who think of themselves as first, like the workers in the parable, respond to what life throws at them with grumbling. You can see that in the passage, can't you?

[38 : 18] They grumbled to the landowner, thinking they deserved more than they got. I want you to try and imagine something.

What if your daily life was secretly recorded for a reality TV show? You had no idea. Someone put cameras in your house, all over your house, every room, and they recorded a TV show all about you.

And as people all around the nation watched your life in all its glory on their TV sets, also saw that there was a scoreboard on the screen.

And on the screen, on the left-hand side, every time you grumbled about something, the number went up. And every time you were grateful about something, the number on the right-hand side went up. What would your numbers be like?

Would they be kind of balanced and even? Or would you be more grumbly than grateful? I suspect if the majority of us are being honest, there would be more points in the grumbling scale of things.

[39 : 29] Probably a lot more than we'd like to admit. Some people say, well, the leopard never changes its spots. You're never going to change. If you're a grumbler now, you will always be a grumbler.

In fact, wait until you get old. But the Bible tells us a different story. People can change. With God's help. But grumbling is so easy to do, isn't it?

We all do it. And when you find that you're being more grumbling than grateful, it's a sign that you've slipped from thinking of yourself as first rather than last.

And if that's the case, then each one of us need to go back to the cross. We need to remember what we truly deserve is God's wrath and punishment.

And instead what we've received from him is grace and forgiveness. I think the second thing we can see from this parable that gives us our attitude away as whether we consider ourselves first or last is this.

[40 : 36] Those who think of themselves as last are content. Those who think of themselves as first, just like the workers were doing, they actually compare themselves with other people.

Roosevelt once said that comparison is the thief of joy. And it is, isn't it? Let's be honest, we all fall into the trap of comparison at some point or another, and you end up feeling envious.

How come she always gets a nice holiday every year, and I work my socks off, and I still can't get away? Well, why is it that he has such good DIY skills, and I'm so useless at things like that?

But why does servants have it so easy? You can picture it, we do it all the time, and it's been said that comparison is the cancer of the church. The famous 19th century evangelist D.L.

Moody, he once told a fable of an eagle who was comparing himself with another eagle that could fly better than he could, and consequently he became envious.

[41 : 43] And one day the bird saw a sportsman with a bow and an arrow, and said to him, I wish you would bring down that bird up there. The man said, well, I will do, if I could have some feathers for my arrow.

So the envious eagle pulled out one of his wing feathers and gave it to the archer. The arrow was shot, but it didn't quite reach the bird, it just missed it, it was flying a little bit too high. So the eagle pulled out another feather for him to try, and then another, and then another, until he got to the point that he couldn't actually fly himself anymore.

The archer took advantage of the situation, turned round, and killed the helpless bird. DL really made this application. He basically said, if you are envious of others, the one you will hurt the most by your actions will be yourself.

Envy is the result of comparison, and we've got to be so careful not to self-harm by comparing ourselves with others. Not one of us here can honestly truly say, I'm better than someone else.

That is very dangerous territory to get into when you do that. Only God truly knows what's going on inside someone's heart. And no one is beyond God's redemption.

[43 : 04] Anyone can come to him in repentance. Anyone. And they can be graciously forgiven and brought into a relationship with their creator, gain the promise of heaven.

They can receive that denarius of God's grace, because God's grace is generous and is equal, and it puts to death comparison. Now if you've never made that commitment, can I encourage you this evening to seek God while he may be found.

Knock and the door will be opened to you, as it says in scripture, before it's too late. Don't think you can live your life your way and then on your deathbed turn to God, perhaps quoting the thief on the cross as an example.

A very wise Puritan once said on this subject, we have an account of a deathbed repentance in the Bible in order that no man need despair.

We have only one in order that no man may presume. speaking of putting comparison to death, perhaps some of us who have not made that commitment might worry that if we were to publicly commit our life to the Lord, that perhaps other people might already think we're saved.

[44 : 22] Whereas God actually knows that in our hearts we're not right with him. And we struggle to know how will other people react. Perhaps that image we've been portraying over the years of being Christian that we've tried so hard to portray.

Perhaps that will all become very obvious to everyone and the truth will be out there. You know, the devil rubs his hands in glee when we worry about what others will think of us.

When we allow concern about maybe a tiny bit of local gossip to completely risk us being separated from God forever. Yes, it's possible that some people may find that a bit of juicy gossip.

Did you know so-and-so had become a Christian? But it will only be for a little while until the next juicy bit of gossip comes along. And what truly matters is that your new brothers and sisters in Christ, they will rejoice with you.

So please don't risk eternal death by thinking you're too late or you're too young or you're too old or it's too embarrassing. Please talk it through with a friend who believes. Jesus is my prayer is that January the 12th, 2025 will go down in your life history as being the day that you surrendered your life to Jesus in repentance.

[45 : 41] You let him take the burden of those sins and you truly become free and eternally secure. So just to close this evening, you know what's interesting is that Jesus tells this parable in response to what Peter was doing.

And what was Peter doing? Well, if you look to the end of the previous chapter, so chapter 19 and verse 27, Peter's comparing himself to others. Let me read the passage.

Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all and followed thee. What shall we have therefore? And as Christians I think there are times that we can think like Peter.

We can think, look at all that I've given up. Look at the sacrifice I've made to follow Jesus. And yet this person here, they come to faith and they do very little but they're going to get the same reward.

How is that fair? Well this person, she trusted God on her deathbed and so she'll go to heaven without ever having to serve on earth.

[46 : 53] How is that fair? And again, we're grumbling and we're comparing. We're falling into that trap. Once again, we're slipping into thinking that we're saved by works without realising it.

Yes, okay, we might say we're saved by faith, not works. But actually, subconsciously, many of us can start to think that maybe some of our works may carry some merit.

but instead of being like that, we need to be like Martin Luther 500 years ago and experience the relief and the joy of realising that our being saved has nothing whatsoever to do with what we've done.

Can you imagine what a burden it would be if salvation was a result of our own performance? You would never be sure you'd done enough. it would be awful.

But instead, in God's amazing grace and mercy, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. What a good and generous God we have.

[47 : 58] Let's pray. Loving Father God, thank you for this wonderful parable that we've read this evening.

thank you Father that it exposes our hearts for what they truly are. It shows us that our default position is to want to be first, to think that we deserve something special.

Thank you for exposing that to us this evening and give us the humility to accept how we truly are and to seek repentance.

thank you for the kingdom of heaven and that it isn't like that, that it's all about grace, us receiving what we don't deserve. And Lord, please forgive us for those times that we grumble and we compare ourselves with others.

Lord, teach us contentment in the life that you've given us. Teach us to be grateful for all the good things that we experience. love. And above all, thank you so much for the gift of eternal life that you've freely given to us.

[49 : 13] Lord, these are deep things that we've read about and looked at this evening. Help us to grasp what this parable means for us and that Lord, you're speaking to each one of us individually this evening.

For some of us, that might be the call to stop resisting your grace, to tend to you in repentance and to ask for forgiveness. For others of us, it might be a reminder that we've all received that denarius of grace because you are a good and a gracious God.

Thank you in Jesus' name. Amen. We'll close with Psalm 72 verses 17 to 19.

The same forever shall endure by sight and sound it shall and shall be blessed in heaven and blessed all ancient chamber and call.

The blessed be the Lord adored, the Lord of Israel.

[50 : 53] ! God is the Lord God is Lord of God is Lord of God is of himself.

God the God God is God! is! God is is is God■■■■!

■■!■■!■■!■■!■■!■■!■■ To the only wise God our Saviour be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.