

“The last will be first, and 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: 16 February 2025

Preacher: Ife Ojetayo

[0:00] ...your house this morning, those who are able to make it safely here. We ask, Lord, as we now gather and those who are joining us electronically, We ask, Lord, that you will bind us all together in one spirit.

And as we sit under the preaching of your word, that you will, Lord, open our hearts to receive what you have for us this morning. Help us, Lord, to listen in faith and to respond in faith.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. I'm sure you noticed that the color seems to have changed, the seasonal color, at least, in the sanctuary.

It was changed from epiphany green to lenten purple. And it marks our transition.

This change marks our transition from Christmas to the Easter cycle. In this second cycle of the church year, we turn our minds to consider Christ's work in securing our salvation.

[1:12] We turn our minds to consider His work, His atoning work on the cross for us. We look at His ministry, His suffering, and His sacrifice, His vindication and triumph at Easter, and His ascension and reign as marked by the coming of the Holy Spirit in power at Pentecost.

So you have the story ahead for us, even now, as we begin on this journey. And I'm also sure you've noticed the long first lesson that we had this morning in Genesis 1, read so very well by Noam.

Why start there in the beginning of this Lenten series? Because as we look into our own hearts, and as we look at the world around us, it's good for us to start where God started.

And to remember that our God, the one who made us and who made all that we see, is a good God. He created His world, and it was very good, the Bible tells us.

And so as you look around us, and you look into your own hearts, and you see the fallenness, and the sin, and the brokenness, you may not look at God and say, look what you've done.

[2:32] Because He made it very good. The brokenness, the sin, all that is fallen, the fallenness that we see all around us, is as a result of our own sin, our own rebellion against God, our own desire to be free of God.

And we have borne the fruit of that desire. From our first fathers unto us as well. And so that's important to note, even as we begin this Lenten series.

But what we have now is this sort of this pre-Lenten, because the 40 days of Lent doesn't really begin. But we have this pre-Lenten season with these funny Latin names.

You have it in the top of your bulletin. And these seasons, these next three Sundays, are meant to prepare us for this second cycle of the church calendar year, as we enter.

Ultimately, as we enter this season, it's not really Lent that we're looking forward to. It's a journey. Lent isn't our destination. What's our destination? Easter. We're looking forward to Easter, as we recall Christ's work in accomplishing our redemption through His sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection.

[3:47] But this way of keeping the cycle of the church here has been around for over a thousand years, since the 6th century, and probably earlier.

And it wasn't until the second half of the 20th century, unfortunately, that we've started coming up with innovations to change this wonderful rhythm. But I think that the ancient church knows something we perhaps have forgotten in our day, in our modern age.

We've forgotten that proper preparation is needed for the mind as well as the body. We've forgotten that, contrary to the thinking of our rapid modern age, where everything is rapid and fast, and in a minute.

But we've forgotten that we need these times of properly preparing. We need Josematide to start to focus our hearts and minds on the penitential season of Lent as we look forward to Easter.

We need Josematide to rummage through our belongings, that is, our hearts, as it were, to lighten the load for the journey, to take out what is not needed, to take out the things that so easily draw us away from God, to rid those things out of our lives, to do as St. Paul directs us, to put away childish things, or as we read in Hebrews, to lay aside or throw up every weight and sin that so easily ensnares us, and to put on and cultivate spiritual disciplines that will serve us for our long pilgrimage to the celestial city.

[5 : 35] And so we have, this morning, in our epistle reading, Paul's invitation in 1 Corinthians 9, verse 24-27. You may follow along in your Bible, it's page 1137 of your pew Bible.

We have that account that Paul gives us, reminds us how a Christian should live in the world. And he uses an analogy that would have been familiar to the Corinthians, since the Corinthians host the second most popular games in the world at that point.

It's only second to the Olympic games, the Isthmian games. So he uses the analogy of sports and an athlete. And Paul says, like those great athletes, Paul reminds us, of our own race.

He says in verse 24, do you not know that in a race, all runners run, but only one receives the prize. So you must run that you may obtain it.

Essentially, Paul is reminding us that discipline should be the mark of every Christian's life. Like athletes, who have trained their bodies and minds for the contest or race before them.

[6 : 48] And every athlete knows this. And therefore, what do they do? They exercise self-control. In all things. Have you seen an Olympic athlete? The kind of self-control and discipline that's required.

You only have to observe them. They watch what they eat, what goes into their bodies. First, because they want to be healthy. But also, they don't want to put something in their body that will trigger, disqualify them from competition.

They know, they clock every, their sleep cycle, and then they dedicate their bodies and their minds to the pursuit which they've dedicated themselves.

You see that and you only have to observe premier athletes of any sport, whether it's basketball or football or soccer. Someone on the side said, oh, football.

I should say basketball or football or football. And you see these premier athletes. They're naturally gifted. But what separates the best from the rest?

[7 : 59] It's not just natural giftedness. They all have natural giftedness. But it's, if you examine them, the Michael Jordans of the sports, it's the dugout discipline over their body and their mind that separates them from the rest.

And what are they disciplining themselves for? What are they sacrificing for? Paul tells us they do all of this for a perishable wreath that dries up for a trophy that is consumed by fire.

Now, interestingly enough, as I was preparing this sermon, I read a post by A.J. Brown. He's the leading wide receiver for the Super Bowl winning Philadelphia Eagles.

Just won last week, the Super Bowl. And this is what he said about winning the coveted trophy last week. He said, and I quote, I tried to feel how everyone made it seem to be a champion.

And unfortunately, it was short-lived. Two days to be exact. I've never been a champion at the highest level before.

[9 : 18] But I thought my hard work would be justified by winning it all. It wasn't. Don't get me wrong, he said. It just wasn't what I thought it would be.

I appreciate there is honesty there. But that's a remarkably honest man that would just come to the zenith of his profession. And he said, it just lasted two days.

And the high was gone. It's a perishable wreath that these athletes are pursuing. But Paul reminds us, as we run our race, while the world's athlete undergoes such ardent discipline to obtain a prize that is so fleeting, we are running for an imperishable crown.

And if men would go through such trials to obtain something that is destined to fade away and perish, in comparison, how much more should we commit ourselves to such a worthy and eternal weight of glory stored up for us in the heavens?

How much more should we dedicate ourselves, our minds and our bodies and our souls and our strength to this race towards an imperishable crown?

[10 : 40] I think Paul, having a proper appreciation of the promises of God for those who belong to him, he now speaks in this epistle of his attitude in preparing, in running the race.

And he says in verse 26, I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air. In other words, Paul says, I know what's on the line.

I have a right appreciation of what is mine in Christ. Therefore, I'm not dilly-dallying. I'm not fighting as one beating the air.

Instead, I fight as one who is in a true existential battle. And what does that look like?

To fight as one in a true existential battle. Paul gives us what it looks like in verse 27. He says, I discipline my body and keep it under control. Lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.

[11:42] I discipline my body and keep it under control. Now, the ESV, that's what the ESV translation says. But I don't think that translation actually does justice to the weight of Paul's words there in verse 27.

In the Greek, Paul is saying, I pummel my body and I enslave it. I pummel my body and I enslave it. Now, Paul isn't referring to his flesh. He's not that he's saying the body is the enemy and he's not advocating self-hatred or self-flagellation.

But rather, what he's saying is that what he has in mind is he's mortifying his flesh. It's the mortification of the flesh. That's a Christian practice. A Christian practice of self-denial.

That's what modification of the flesh is in Christian terms. Self-denial and discipline. That's what it looks like. Paul is saying, I'm resisting the sinful temptations of this world that the world offers so that I might be anchored to Christ.

[12:51] The temptations that threaten to keep me away from my anchor, which is Christ. I resist those temptations. I do not give in to them. I watch myself.

I'm careful not to walk in ways that will lead to my stumbling and falling. Paul sees that doing this requires a dugout and martial discipline, like an athlete, like a soldier, like a fighter.

In like manner, Paul is saying to us, we must watch over our minds and watch over our body, so we do not indulge in habits and sins that enslave us.

That's the real goal. It's that so you may not bind yourself to things that will enslave you and keep you from the eternal glory that Christ has for you. You know, we can either enslave our bodies or it will enslave us.

That's the reality of this, of the world we live in and the fact that we live in this fallen body. The body itself must be our servant or we will serve it.

[14:02] And remember what Paul says in Romans 8, 13, for if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

And so we must subdue our bodies by self-denial and discipline and that takes honest self-introspection before God.

The things that you might be susceptible to are not, in fact, perhaps the same thing that I am susceptible to. You yourself must look into your hearts.

and then rely on the grace and mercy of God. Allow the Holy Spirit, who is our helper in this, allow him, who is ours, allow him to convict us and guide us.

And all that is left for us in that work is to surrender to him through his word. And then that's what we have as we look at the epistle. Now, looking at the gospel that we read this morning in Matthew 20, and that's on page 980 of your Pew Bible as well.

[15:19] If we look at our gospel reading, we will see Paul's words in his epistle come alive in this parable of our Lord. And Jesus told this parable after, the context of it is right after his encounter with the rich young ruler.

If you're aware of your gospels, you might remember the rich young ruler who came to Jesus. And his question to Jesus was this, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

And Jesus told this young man, he told him to sell all his belongings and give them to the poor and follow them. Before that, Jesus says, do the commandments that God has given.

Do, you know, follow God, worship God. And the rich young man said, I do all of them. And he meant it. But then Jesus says, well, okay, that's good.

Now sell all your belongings, give it to the poor, and follow me. And Matthew tells us, in Matthew 19, tells us that man, that man could not do it.

[16:25] He could not, because he had great possessions, and he refused to part with those great possessions. He loved his great possessions more than he loved God.

thereby proving that in fact, he is not keeping the Ten Commandments. Because the first of it is to love the Lord your God, with all your heart, mind, body, and soul, and strength. and he walked away from the Lord, sad, sorrowful. And as he walked away, Jesus' disciples, like the rest of the world, will have looked at a man such as this young ruler and said, there goes a righteous man.

They looked at Jesus and they were saying to Jesus, how difficult is it then to enter the kingdom of God if this man could not enter the kingdom of God? And Jesus said to them, it is impossible to enter the kingdom of God.

With man, it is impossible. Based on human effort, it is impossible. But with God, that which is impossible with man, with God, it is possible.

[17:43] And that's the context in which we have our parable this morning. And remember St. Peter, after Jesus said that, St. Peter, speaking for the rest of the disciples, reminds Jesus, hey, by the way, Jesus, we have left everything.

We're not like that young man. We've left everything. We followed you. What day will we have? And Jesus promised his disciples, he said, you will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes in my kingdom.

But then he also warns them, for many who are first will be last, and the last first.

And so now Jesus tells this parable in between this phrase, for many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. Jesus reminds us that yes, we are to run a hard, disciplined!

We are to train as hardened boxes, our bodies, against sins, the sins which threaten to enslave us. But in all our disciplined work, we are not to be presumptuous, or arrogant, or prideful.

[18:54] We are not to trust in our own efforts, but we are to trust in God who calls us and invites us to the work in his vineyard. And Jesus tells this parable to show us the way of humility in our work.

Jesus says, 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. He agrees to pay the workers one denarius for a day's labor.

And this was a generous wage, a typical wage for a laborer in those days. And so he hired these workers early in the morning.

And the workers he hired early in the morning, he hired them probably at sunrise. That would have been around 6 a.m. in the morning. Then the master of the house went back to the marketplace.

And at the third, at the sixth, and at the ninth hour, he hired more workers for his vineyard.

And that would have been around 9 a.m., 12 noon, and 3 p.m. Each time he sent these workers into the vineyard to work, promising them compensation for their labor.

[20:08] Note first that the call to the vineyard is at the initiation of the master. He's the one that goes out. He's the one that finds the workers and calls them and invites them into his vineyard.

It's not the other way around. And this is a picture of the church. It is God himself who calls us. He's the one who sets us out in his grace.

He's the one that finds us in the merry clay we find ourselves and picks us up and covers us and cleans us and forgives our sins and covers us in his righteousness. And this is the picture of the church.

Some are here who are called early at sunrise, at the sunrise of their lives. They were baptized and they're welcome into God's vineyard in their tender years.

Some in their youth, some in the peak of life, and some by various circumstances that God only knows in his sovereignty, chooses to bring them into his fold.

[21:17] Some later towards the end of their life. But all of them, all of them, God calls. He calls into his vineyard. All these workers are called by the master. Some may have heard of the vineyard, and they may have heard of its master, but they choose to remain idle in the marketplace.

Yet the master keeps going out, even to the ninth hour, to wake them from their idleness, by his gospel proclamation about his son, and he invites them into his vineyard.

He goes out, and he even goes out at the eleventh hour, 5 p.m. Now, that's an hour before closing.

He goes out at the eleventh hour, right an hour before sunset and the close of the work there.

When it will seem like all hope for employment is gone, the master goes out into the marketplace.

He calls workers into his vineyard, promising them a reward for their labors.

And such are many people. Such many people are called by God's mercy. Some of us may be at the sunrise of our lives, but some may be at the eleventh hour, like the thief on the cross, having

spent a whole life idling in the marketplace, toiling for that which only will perish, seeking after the things of the world that would perish away.

[22 : 50] Yet the master in his goodness goes out to call them into his vineyard. But it would be foolish of us if we were to think, if you were to think, you can wait until the ninth or eleventh hour to heed the call of the master.

You may be young, and you may think you are in the prime of your years, and you have time to decide to heed the call of the master. But it doesn't matter whether you are young or old, because who are you to say what hour it is that the master has come.

Maybe it is your eleventh hour. And if it is, then you need to heed the call of the master and turn and heed him. Go to him.

Who are you to measure your years as if it is yours to preserve? Who are you to say, this is the prime of my years, I have a lot more time awaiting!

me. The God who gives life can require the life of any when he chooses. And you do not know when your life may be required of you.

[24 : 06] So heed the call of the master as he comes to invite you. Wake up from idleness. EVE the call. Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call he upon him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. And let him return unto the Lord. And he will have mercy upon him. And to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

That is the nature and character of our God. He's merciful. Abundant in mercy. Such is the mercy of the Lord towards all who will respond.

No matter the hour, such is the mercy of the Lord towards all who will respond to his call by faith. And this is why the prophet Isaiah says he abundantly pardons.

Perhaps you're still in the marketplace, hiding away, refusing to leave the empty pursuits of this life. Perhaps not the rich young ruler. You've enslaved yourself to the things of this world.

[25 : 10] I ask you this morning to heed God's call. Hear him. Forsake worldly pursuits. The worldly pursuits that can never satisfy and follow after the only one who can satisfy the deepest places of your soul and give you peace and joy.

The peace that you need with God. Now let's look in this parable at the goodness of God towards all whom he calls. Look at the goodness towards all whom he calls.

And in verse 8 we're told, when after the end of the day, the work day, when evening came, the owner of the vineyard called to his foreman, called the laborers, paid them their wages, beginning with the last up to the first.

And when those hired by the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. That's those people who were called at 5pm. They didn't walk less than an hour. And how much did they receive?

A full day's wage. And then Matthew tells us, verse 10, Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. Why would they think they would receive more?

[26 : 21] Well, those people who just walked half an hour, just received a full day's wage. We've been here since 6am. We've walked 12 hours. We've been at this, maybe an hour for lunch.

We've walked 11 to 12 hours. We must receive at least 10 times what they've received. That's what they're thinking to themselves. But what did they receive? Each of them also received a denarius. And so at close of day, the master calls them all to receive their reward. They all received a denarius. interestingly, look at how the master's sort of orchestrated this.

The ones who came at 5pm got their money first, and then the ones who came earlier got their money last. They got to see it all. Imagine if it was flipped.

If the ones who came at 6am were the ones who had gotten their money first, and they were sent out. And they received the denarius, which they were agreed to. What do you think their attitude would have been?

[27 : 23] Gratitude. This is what they agreed to. The master hasn't cheated them, has he? He agreed to give them a denarius, and he gave them a denarius. And they would have been grateful for a full day's work, and a full day's reward.

But what is it that troubles them? What is it that's troubling them? It is, as you can imagine, and I don't think we will be any different, it is that those who came later got the same compensation.

They got the same reward. Imagine, we've started working at 6 a.m., 9 a.m., and he's giving these guys the same amount that he gave us.

And so they grumble, they're envious, because they see it as an injustice. But there is no injustice at all in it, is there? They've received what they've been promised.

And what is this reward that they've received? It is eternal life. It is the mercy, the reward is eternal life, the mercy of God, peace with God through the perfect righteousness of an atoning death of Jesus Christ.

[28 : 36] That's what they've received. The love of God and the fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That's what they've been given. All these privileges are what the denarius represents.

But here are those who have come early. They resent God's gratuitous grace. They resent God's grace in offering the same privileges to the late comers that he's offered to them.

This is the same attitude in the parable of the prodigal son that the elder brother had. God, they regarded themselves as deserving of God's blessing.

They saw themselves as having heard it, forgetting that it is God who works in us to will and to do of his perfect will. They forgot that we are nothing, but his workmanship prepared beforehand by God himself that we should walk in them.

And like them, we as well must be careful not to fall into that same prideful, arrogant spirit. We must be careful because we're so easily inclined towards this attitude in the church as well.

[29 : 52] It's so easy to pride ourselves on our longevity in the faith, of how early we've come to the faith, how long we've been serving in the church, how long I've been working, how many ministries I've served in.

And then you look at those who've come in the 11th hour. And you see the privileges and the blessing and the grace of God upon them. And it's easier to then become arrogant and be prideful. And here is the warning of our Lord that shall ring loudly in our ears. The last will be first. And the first, last. We cannot be like the Jews who gave in to pride and placed their trust in their work rather than in place their trust in their place.

Jews haven't been in the vineyard, in God's covenant long before the Gentiles. And instead of trusting in the God who has invited them into the covenant, they trusted in themselves.

They were overtaken and eventually these same Jews were overtaken by the Gentiles. Because as St. John says, all will receive Jesus Christ, the word made flesh.

[31 : 05] All will receive him, will believe in his name. all of them have been given the right to become children of God. And it's not based on blood or birth, but it is by faith.

So the work we're called to do, brothers and sisters, the work we're called to do is the work of repentance. We've been talking about work here. It isn't the kind of work that earns us anything. We've been given the privileges already. God has lavished his love for us. He's invited us into his vineyard. He will compensate us, give us all the privileges of being children of God. It is ours. But we must be tethered to the one who gives the gifts. We must be tethered to the giver of the gifts, rather than the gifts themselves.

We must be tethered to Christ by whom we have these privileges, rather than looking at ourselves and seeing the gifts that God has given us and taking pride in the gifts.

[32 : 08] And so, how do we do that work then? How do we keep from being arrogant and prideful? We must do the work of repentance. And that's what this Lenten season invites us to.

We must remember that we are heartily dependent, all of us, without exception, we are utterly dependent on the finished work of Christ on our behalf.

And this work of repentance then, for us, requires humility, not pride. Humility. In this, all we can boast is in the cross of Christ, by which our sins and guilt are done away with, through the abundant mercy of God.

That's all we can boast in. Think of St. Paul. Look what he writes in his epistle. He says, Lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.

Look at Paul's words there. Paul, having done more than anyone for the cause of Christ, having done more than any apostle for the cause of his master, could say this, Lest after preaching, after planting churches all over, the Roman empire, Lest after doing all of that, and all my sufferings for the course of the gospel, Lest after doing all of it, I should be disqualified because of pride and arrogance.

[33 : 43] This is what St. Christosem said about Paul. The best of men, now alive, that includes us, when he compares himself to Paul, must think himself standing idle in the marketplace all day.

If we weigh our works for the kingdom, for the vineyard, compared to the things that St. Paul, the apostle had done, we must think we are the late comers. When we look at such great feats, he's done for the kingdom of God.

And yet, this Paul, who had done all of this, on wounds work, we stand redeemed in Christ, based on his faithfulness about preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and pointing us to Jesus Christ. This Paul worked on his salvation. He speaks it of himself. I worked on my salvation with fear and trembling, not arrogance and pride.

And what does that mean when he says I worked on it with fear and trembling? He means I mortified my flesh. I am disciplined in my pursuit of God. I'm committed to the race against sin and darkness.

[34 : 51] And so what makes us think we can be complacent when we have Paul's example? Maybe you feel, maybe you do feel this morning that you're an 11th hour convert.

You might think you deserve, you don't deserve much. You might think you will get no reward. Maybe you've been in the faith but you know you're stumbling and you're beset by sin. And you see some around you and say what can I be like that person. As faithful, as on fire for God. And perhaps you think you're an 11th hour convert. There's not much that can be offered you. Well look to the goodness of God in this parable. You get a denarius just as much as those who have come at sunrise. Not because of anything you've done but because of the goodness and mercy and abundant mercy of God.

You get eternal life if you've come to him by faith. If you're tethered to Christ, not looking at your own works, not looking on your own efforts and your own exploits, but you're looking to Christ and his finished work for you on the cross, you get all the privileges of being sons of God.

[36 : 09] God. And look at what Jesus says. I choose, this is his goodness, I choose to give to this last walker as I give to you, he says to those who will come first.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? Where do you fall this morning? Do you begrudge the Lord's generosity?

If you do, because you have forgotten that that same generosity is what found you out and brought you from death to life, how could you then begrudge it when it is offered to others in the household of God?

God is the father who runs to you, rejoicing. He is the father who kills the fattened cow because you have come home. In fact, he does that when each of us comes home to him.

So this Lenten season, brothers and sisters in Christ, fix your eyes on him. Do the work of repentance and rest in his goodness and rest in his goodness and mercy.

[37 : 26] Take comfort and consolation in his promise of forgiveness and redemption as you turn to him by faith. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen.