

The Last Shall Be First — Three Gospel Patterns and the Willing Leper

Ministry · June 1, 2008

The Principle — and Who Is Number One

Matthew 20:16 states a principle by which God Himself operates: the last shall be first, and the first last. The Lord Jesus Christ is the one who went to the very last place. They chose Barabbas over Him — and Barabbas was a leader of sedition and a murderer, the most dangerous man available. To choose him over Jesus was to choose the worst possible person over the best possible person, putting the Lord at the absolute bottom. God has therefore made Him the absolute first. Peter wrote concerning the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. The sufferings come first; the glory follows. And the one who took the absolute last place is now the absolute first.

This principle creates a corollary. If you want to be second, you must become second to last. If you want to be third, you must become third to last. This is not caprice — God is just, holy, and righteous. He will take the one who was next to the last and make him next to the first. The rank holds, only the order reverses. But this only follows from the principle, and the principle only holds because of the cross. You cannot arrange your own suffering so as to secure your own glory — self-inflicted suffering does not count. What counted was the suffering of Christ, who suffered according to the will of God to display that God is light and God is love.

Three Times in the Gospels — Always the Same Pattern

Three times in the three synoptic Gospels, the sufferings of Christ are stated by the Lord, and three times, immediately after, the same dispute breaks out among the disciples. The pattern is identical in each case.

Matthew 20: the Lord tells the twelve He is going to Jerusalem to be delivered, condemned, mocked, scourged, and crucified. Immediately, the mother of James and John comes asking for her sons to sit on the Lord's right hand and left in His kingdom. The ten hear of it and are filled with indignation. The Lord gives the same answer: it shall not be so among you — whoever will be great among you, let him be your minister.

Mark 9: the Lord says, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of men and they shall kill Him. They understood not and were afraid to ask. And by the way they disputed who should be the greatest. The Lord sat down, called the twelve, and said: if any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all and servant of all. And He took a child in His arms.

Luke 9: let these sayings sink down into your ears — the Son of Man shall be delivered into the hands of men. They understood not. Then there arose a reasoning among them which of them should be greatest. The Lord set a child by Him and said: he that is least among you all, the same shall be great.

Three gospels. Three different occasions, probably — though the accounts may overlap. The same dispute. The same answer from the Lord. He never changed His position. And the dispute about who would be the greatest has continued in Christendom from that day to the present. The Lord's answer is always the same: the last shall be first. It shall not be so among you.

For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. — Matthew 20:28

Peter — First to Be Called, First to Fall, Called by His Old Name

Mark 16:7 has a single significant detail: go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee. Not just the disciples. The disciples and Peter. Why was Peter separated out? Because he had denied the Lord three times. Among the twelve, who was number one? Peter. Simon, Peter, Andrew, James, John — the names were learned in that order from childhood. It was Peter who said, though all others forsake you, I will not. It was Peter who was taken to the Mount of Transfiguration. It was Peter who was taken to Gethsemane.

And when the test came, Peter was first to fail. The one who had claimed the highest position was first to fall. Mark 16:7 does not name any of the others separately. Only Peter. He had been first by his own claiming; he was named separately in the resurrection message because of his specific failure. The last shall be first, and the first last.

Isaiah 14 and Matthew 8 — Two Wills

Isaiah 14:12–15 records the will of the one who said I will five times: I will ascend into the heavens, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will sit upon the mount of the assembly, I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High. Five wills, all upward. And the result: thou art brought down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit. The one who insisted on being first was brought to the last place.

Matthew 8:1–3 records the opposite. A leper came to the Lord and said: Lord, if thou wilt, thou art able to cleanse me. He did not say I will be cleansed, or cleanse me. He said if thou wilt. He placed himself entirely in the Lord's hands. And the Lord, who in Gethsemane said not what I will but what thou wilt, said for the only recorded time in His ministry the words I will: I will. Be cleansed. There is no higher place to be than before the Lord saying if thou wilt. And there is nothing better to hear than His I will. But the highest place is still the if thou wilt — whatever His answer is. The leper's position, placing himself in the Lord's

care, is the right one. The Lord's answer will always be right. That is enough.

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