

# Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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## The last first...the first last

(Jerry Fite)

**P**eter at one time had a fishing business, but he did not consider himself among the rich, especially the rich who had no interest in the kingdom of heaven. For after hearing Jesus say how difficult it would be for the rich to enter heaven, Peter asked, “*Lo, we have left all, and followed thee; what then shall we have?*” (Matthew 19:27). Jesus replied by saying... “*And everyone that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or lands for my name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life. But many shall be last that are first; and first that are last*” (Matthew 19:29-30).

While Jesus answered Peter’s question by enumerating the manifold blessings that would come to the faithful now, including persecutions, and the ultimate blessing of eternal life in the world to come (cf. Mark 10:30), why did Jesus then add “*the last first and the first last*” caveat? What did Jesus mean?

Jesus offers a parable to help answer this question. The kingdom of heaven is like a

householder who starts early in the morning hiring laborers in his vineyard. The laborers were agreeable to a-shilling-a-day wage. As the day wears on, the householder continues in the third, sixth and ninth hours to seek laborers who are standing in the market place, promising to pay them what “*is right*” (Matthew 20:4). When the late eleventh hour came, the householder found others idle, and he hired them. When the wages were paid at the end of the work day, the householder began “*from the last to the first*” (Matthew 20:8).

When the first hired workers saw those who were hired last receive the one shilling wage, they thought they would receive more. When they too were paid the one shilling, they began to murmur to the householder complaining that those just working an hour had received the same wage as they who had endured the burden of the day in the scorching heat.

The householder draws our attention with three questions: “*did you not agree with me for a*

*shilling?* We know they did, so the householder therefore did them “no wrong” (Matthew 20:13). As a householder, “*is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?*” (Matthew 20:15)? All would have to agree, he has the right as owner. “*Is thine eye evil, because I am good*” (v.15)? With this final penetrating question, Jesus concludes, “*So the last shall be first, and the first last*” (Matthew 20:16).

The Lord is faithful and righteous to give the crown of life to those who faithfully serve Him (2 Timothy 4:8). The Lord, though righteous, is also “good”. From His own will, not through a consulting board of tenured laborers, He will show mercy to whom He wills (cf. Romans 9:15). This parable is not an illustration of “degrees of reward” in heaven, nor “eleventh hour” conversions. Jesus will bless Peter and all faithful followers, but the point of this parable is that the basis of these promised blessings is God’s goodness, not “the first ought to be first”. Humble yourself and serve! Is your eye evil, because God is good?