

“The first will be last and the last will be first.” It was annoying. These mothers kept bringing their children to Jesus so he could touch them, bless them, and pray over them. It sometimes felt like a nursery around us and we were exhausted by it. Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, we had more important political things to be doing than hanging out with children and mothers. So we started turning them away, telling them to stop wasting Jesus’s precious time and energy. Jesus caught wind of this and was angry. He said, **“Let the children come to me! Do not stop them! The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like them!”** He was so frustrated because he had previously stood a child in front of us when we asked about who was **great** in the Kingdom of Heaven. But we assumed that was merely a metaphor. Dealing with actual children was messy and annoying.

Then a man came up to Jesus. He asked Jesus what good he must do to have eternal life? Jesus said, **“If you want to enter life, then obey the commandments.”** The man insisted that he had carefully guarded all the commandments. He wanted to know what was still lacking, what was incomplete about his life. Jesus said, **“If you want to be complete, then go sell your possessions and give to the poor. Then come, follow me.”** When the man heard this, he walked away depressed, for he had great wealth and he did not want to let go of it and his position of **greatness** in the world. Jesus then told us it was **impossible** for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Their camels carrying their possessions could not enter, so unless they left everything behind to own nothing, like a **child** does, they could not be part of the Kingdom. Shocked, we asked Jesus who could be saved. He said, **“With man this is impossible. But with the Creator all things are possible.”** The Creator alone could give a person the strength to let go of all possessions. He said all those who left everything behind—houses, siblings, parents, children, and lands—would receive a hundred times more and have the heavenly inheritance of eternal life. Jesus said, **“The first will be last and the last will be first.”** Those who were **first** in the world’s eyes, in wealth and power and earthly things would be torn down to nothing. But those who made themselves **last** by giving up their earthly wealth and power would be lifted up in the Kingdom of Heaven. To enter the Kingdom, we must be willing to become the **last**.

Then Jesus told us a story, saying, **“The Kingdom of Heaven is like the owner of a vineyard going out to hire workers...”** Jesus said the owner of the vineyard hired workers all throughout the day, all at different points. Then when the work day was over, the owner gathered all the workers to be paid. He **first** paid those who worked the **least** amount and gave them a day’s ration. Then **last** of all, he paid those who had worked the **greatest** amount and gave them a day’s ration as well. Everyone was given the **same**—what they **needed** for the day. The workers who had worked the **greatest** amount were upset. They felt they should get more than those who worked the **least**. But the owner told them they had been given all they needed. Why were they upset by his generosity with others? Jesus then said again, **“The first will be last and the last will be first.”** The point was clear, everyone who was **in** the Kingdom would have what they **needed** for the day, no matter who was the **least** or the **greatest**. All would be equal in the Kingdom. Those who were **greatest** would be lowered and those who were **least** would be lifted up, so all could **share** in the same generosity of our heavenly Father.

Then Jesus again told us we were heading to Jerusalem and that the Creator’s faithful people must go to the cross and **die**. Right after this the mother of James and John showed up and asked Jesus for a favor. It was ironic, we had been previously annoyed with children being brought to Jesus and now it was our own mothers who were coming to Jesus on our behalf. Jesus said to her, **“What do you want?”** She wanted her two sons, James and John, to sit at Jesus’s right and left in the Kingdom—she wanted her boys to have the most privileged positions of power in the Kingdom—she wanted her sons to be **great** and be **first** in the Kingdom. Jesus said, **“You do not know what you are asking.”** For we were learning that to be **great** in the Kingdom we must be the **least**—lowly, poor, and emptied of everything—it meant losing **everything** and dying on a **cross**. Did this mother really want the **greatness** of the Kingdom for her sons? When we learned what James and John’s mother had requested, we were angry. How dare they use their mother to try and get the best positions for themselves, over the rest of us! Then Jesus said, **“You know that the rulers of the nations lift themselves up over others. It must not be like this among you!”** He told us true **greatness** was found in being the **servant** of all and laying down our lives to lift others up.

After this, as we were leaving Jericho on our way to Jerusalem, two blind men began begging Jesus for mercy. Jesus called them over and asked, **“What do you want?”** They said, **“Lord, open our eyes.”** Jesus touched their eyes and immediately they could see and they began to follow Jesus. It was embarrassing. These blind men got it more than us. Here we were fighting with each other over who had more and who was **greatest** and most deserving. And all they wanted was to be with Jesus. They just wanted to follow him everywhere. We instead had sought to lift ourselves up and now we were being brought down. We thought we were so special and **great** because we had left everything behind to follow Jesus. And so now we were being humbled again. **“The first will be last and the last will be first.”**

The Kingdom of Heaven turns **everything** on its head, over and over. If we want to enter the Kingdom, then we must give up everything and become the **last** in the world. And then the Lord will lift us up to be **first** as he brings us into his Kingdom. But once we are **in** the Kingdom we must continue to pursue being **last**, by being servants of all, and not boast in thinking we are now the **first**. There can be no competition within the Kingdom. All are equal, all are loved, all are taken care of, no matter whether we think some are more worthy, more deserving, or **greater** than others. The Lord will constantly be lowering the **first** and lifting up the **last**. This never stops. The moment we get complacent in being **first**, we will be torn down again to be **last**. So we must pursue being **last** every day and every moment, giving up all we have, over and over, and repeatedly lowering ourselves to be the **servant** who lifts others up above ourselves. **“The first will be last and the last will be first.”**

Do you want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Then like the rich man, you are being called to make yourself the **last** by letting go of all your wealth, privilege, and power. If you pursue being the **first**, then you will **never** enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Do you want to continue to live in the Kingdom? Then you are being called to make yourself the **last** every day by lowering yourself to lift up your brothers and sisters around you in the church. If you try to be **first** in the church, in the Kingdom, then you will find yourself cast out and on the outside looking in. **Greatness** in the Kingdom of Heaven is only found in being the **least**, in being the servant who lifts others up, through humility, through submission, through self-sacrifice. The Creator is **first** and yet he has made himself the **last** in order to give everything he has to take care of you everyday. Jesus was the **first** and yet he made himself the **last** to lift you up and forgive you when you did not deserve it. Making yourself the **last** is impossible for your flesh. But with the Creator’s all-powerful Spirit, all things are possible. Through the power of Jesus’s Spirit you can make yourself the **last**, you can let go of everything and be the servant of all. **“The first will be last and the last will be first.” Amen.**