

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

www.meetingwithchrist.com

MANY WHO ARE FIRST WILL BE LAST

Matthew 19:30

The OT prophets looked forward to the time when God would establish his kingship on the world. Their hope was a hope for a divine revolution. Jesus announced the coming of this great revolution when he told people in Mark 1:15 that *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.*

The Lord Jesus had in mind a spiritual revolution that will affect people's hearts, their relationship with God and their relationships with each other. Like any revolution, this is going to stir up a lot of people. Many things will be turned up side down. Matthew 19:30 gives us an idea of the extent of the change that is about to take place.

Matthew 19:30. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

This sentence will be the object of our study today. Many who are first now will be last. Conversely, many who are last will become first.

First and last eternally

What do these words mean? There is something enigmatic in the way the sentence is expressed, isn't it? *Many who are first will be last, and the last first.*

The first point we have to say about this passage is that Jesus is talking about salvation. Whatever 'first and last' mean specifically, I think it is fair to say that the statement deals with salvation, with the way we receive eternal life.

This saying of the Lord Jesus occurs in several places. It appears in the parallel passage in Mark 10:31 in the same context, i.e., right after the story involving the rich young ruler and his question, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'

In the gospel of Luke, it is again repeated in the context of salvation. You remember this question that was addressed to Jesus. 'Lord, will many people be saved? Or will few be saved (Luke 13:23)?' Jesus went to speak about salvation and said in v. 24, *Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.* He concluded his explanation with the same first-last words. *And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last* (Luke 13:30). How many will be saved? Narrow is the way that leads to salvation and few will find it. So here again the 'first-last' expression has to do with salvation and it is reasonable to think that it refers to the same subject in Matthew 19:30.

An unequal society

There is a second point that we need to notice. And it is that the expression 'first and last' can be viewed as a description of the character of our world. What I mean is that the human society is an unequal society. Some are first; others are last. And the rest of the people are somewhere in between.

You see, first and last are comparative terms. You are first compared to someone who is second. And somebody is second compared to someone else who is third. If there is no last, there is also no first. If there is no first, there is also no last. So the expression 'first and last' brings to us the fact that human society is not even. People are not equal. No matter which department of life you look at in this world, you cannot escape this categorizing of first and last. We have the rich and the poor. We have the upper class, the middle class and the lower class.

The communists denounced this social inequality. They said that if you have a society stratified by various classes, then those who are last are going to be perpetually exploited and marginalized by those who are first. Their solution? The abolition of social classes and the establishment of a classless society in which the means of production are owned by the whole society. Discussions on what to produce and what policies to follow are made by the workers in the best interests of everybody. In this way, you don't have a rich class controlling all the wealth and everyone else working for them. Communist thinkers, however, never gave a specific description as to how such a system could be set up.

The problem is that classes cannot be abolished just like that. The nature of this world is such that you simply cannot eliminate the existence of all classes by some political decisions. The 1949 communist revolution in China had replaced an old elite with a new one, the Communist Party of China. Important members of the party had special privileges. Some, for example, were allowed to drive cars when the majority of the people had to ride bicycles. A classless society in China? That is not what I see. The idea that we can have a classless society by changing the economic system may be quite appealing. But it is not realistic. Whether you like it or not, the nature of the human society is such that it is impossible to remove the reality of classes. There will always be people who are first, and others who are last.

A revolution

So we saw that Matthew 19:30 has to do with salvation. Secondly, we saw that this first and last statement exposes the very nature of this sinful society and its inequalities. But now, thirdly, we can say that these words of the Lord Jesus tell us about a revolution. The first will become last; the last will become first. You don't need to have great insight to see what Jesus means. He is simply saying, 'There is going to be a big change. Things will turn around. Things which were below will come on top. Things on top will go below.' The last becomes first; the first becomes last. This kind of change is nothing less than a revolution.

The Marxist vision of a new society was characterized by new economic relationships. Jesus' revolution is very different. It does not affect directly any of the man-made systems. The Lord Jesus came to change the world by changing the people who constitute the world. His revolution turns the man inside upside down. It is the heart of people that is transformed.

Becoming a Christian means a revolutionary change of attitude. Instead of desiring the first position, you go for the last. That humble attitude is very much associated with what the Bible calls repentance. The term 'repentance,' *metanoia*, signifies 'to have a changed attitude.' It expresses the idea of the spiritual change implied in the sinner's return to God. Before I selfishly wanted to put myself first all the time. Now, I realize that my attitude has to change, that I cannot come to God with the

'number one' attitude. I am willing to put myself last. I am willing to humble myself before God and to put myself in His hands.

This is the revolution that Jesus came to bring into the world. It is not a revolution of a system. It is a revolution that takes place inside the man and which radically changes his attitude. Instead of always wanting to be first, he is now willing to be last towards God and among men.

Some might say, 'Well, what happens to my own interests, to my well-being? With an attitude like that, how am I going to survive in this society? People will take advantage of me! People are going to treat me like a carpet. They are going to walk back and forth over me!'

This is what the Bible means by faith. Faith means that you trust God to do justice for you. Faith means that you humble yourself in repentance before God for your sins and you are willing to let God take care of your interests.

It takes faith to be honest even though others are crooks. When you are playing with the rules and other people are playing against the rules, you are bound to lose because they have a big advantage over you. If you did not have a real confidence in the living God, you too would be tempted to play against the rules.

So a fundamental change takes place in our attitude. Instead of wanting to be number one, I help the other person to advance, to be better. Things are completely turned upside down. Before, I used to think that I lost when the other person was first. Now with Jesus' revolution, I win when I help the other person to be number one.

There is another thing you need to know. This one is harder to take. If you are not willing to do this, to become last and let God or your neighbor to be first, then you have to expect that God will turn your life upside down on the day of judgment. Whether you like it or not, God's revolution is now under way. If you do not join His revolution willingly at this time, He will one day impose His kingly rule upon you. He turned Jerusalem upside down in the OT. He will do the same, on the day of judgment, with people who resist His revolution.

In this respect, I would like to read to you 2Kings 21:13.

*2Kings 21:13. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab; I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and **turning it upside down.***

Here the prophet is saying to Jerusalem, 'You, wicked people! You put yourselves first and you put God last. Don't think that because you are religious, you are safe. I will tell you what God is going to do to you, Jerusalem. He will treat you as men do with a dish that has been used. You know what we do after we eat. We empty the dish by wiping it thoroughly and we turn it upside down so that nothing remains in it. God will deal with you in the same way. He will turn Jerusalem upside down. He will thoroughly empty and purge Jerusalem from all its wicked inhabitants.'

These were tough words for Jerusalem. For us today, the situation is like this. Either you allow God to turn you upside down now through His revolution, or God will do it on the judgment day. The difference is that if it happens now, you will be saved. If it happens at the judgment, you will be wiped out.

The rich and the poor

The first-last principle is behind many of Jesus' words. *Blessed are you who are poor* (Luke 6:20), and *Woe to you who are rich* (Luke 6:24), Jesus said, precisely because their status will one day be upside down. In another place, He said, *Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who*

humbles himself will be exalted (Matthew 23:12). Those exalted in this life will be humbled in the next; those humbled here will be exalted. The first will be last; the last will be first.

In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus told a vivid parable in which the fortunes of two men were reversed at the moment of death. There was a rich man and a poor man called Lazarus. The rich man had splendid clothing, ate delicious food of all types, lived in a nice house... In contrast, Lazarus was a sick and hungry beggar. All he wanted were the scraps of food from the rich man's table.

If I were to ask, 'Who would you rather be, the rich man or Lazarus?' I think that everyone, Christian or non-Christian, at this point in the story would say, 'The rich man, of course.'

And that would be a reasonable response. Nothing in the story tells us that the rich man was dishonest or irreligious, or that he was any better or worse in character than most other rich men or poor men. We are not told that he despised Lazarus. We only know that he ignored Lazarus, that he lived his own life as if the poor man did not exist, and that he did nothing to care for him.

Then everything changed when the two men died. The rich man went to hell; the poor man went to heaven. When the rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus to relieve his suffering, Abraham said, 'Remember that in your lifetime, you received your good things, but Lazarus received bad things. Now, he is comforted here and you are in agony.'

I am going to ask the same question. 'Now, who would you rather be, the rich man or Lazarus?' Now, of course, we would like to be Lazarus.

In this life, the rich man was first. He lived in luxury every day. Lazarus was last. He begged at the gate of the rich, living in misery. At death, their situation reversed completely: the rich man was in hell's torment, and the poor man in heaven's comfort. Abraham explained that the rich man's extravagant wealth and lack of compassion on earth has resulted in spiritual poverty in the afterlife. It is easy to see how the story pictures what Jesus declared in Matthew 19:30. 'Many who are first will be last; and many who are last will be first.'

In the context of Matthew 19, the 'first-last' principle should be interpreted from two perspectives. It can be seen as a positive comment on the disciples' situation. By making themselves 'last' through giving up their homes and families (v. 27), they have become first, whereas the rich young ruler, whom the society would have considered as first, turns out to be last.

On the other hand, the 'first-last' principle can also be seen as a warning to the disciples not to imagine that they at least have it right. Those whose 'sacrifice' has put them at the forefront of Jesus' revolution might naturally expect to be the greatest in the kingdom of God. But in reality, there is no such guarantee. Those who have served the most in the kingdom cannot assume that their status will be greater than that of others. The kingdom of heaven operates by divine grace and not by human achievement.

The example of Jesus

Do you know what touches me the most in this teaching of Jesus? This is the last point that I want to say about the first-last principle. What touches me is that Jesus lived this principle in His own life. He was the first, and He became the last in order that we, who are last, may be exalted to the position of life in Him.

That is what the whole of Philippians 2 is about. He was the Lord of lords. He was equal with God. But He humbled Himself and came into our world. Not as some earthly king. He was born in a manger, among animals. His parents were ordinary people. His mother was a peasant woman. His father was a carpenter. He was born in the small village of Bethlehem, not even in the great city of

Jerusalem. All His life, He never sought glory for Himself. Even when the crowds wanted to make Him king, He refused. He was content to go all the way down to the cross, to lay down His life. Lower than that, you cannot go. More 'last' than that, you cannot get. From the first to the last, that was His life. And God raised Him up, as the apostle Paul said, from the last to the first. God gave Him the name that is above every name that by the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow. Every tongue shall confess.