

THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST

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Lessons: Mark 9:1-35, 10:31, Matthew 20:1-28

Children, “Me first.” How often have you said that, or perhaps something like it? “Me first.” “I want to be first.” “I want to be the first one to choose a place in the car.” “I want to be the first one to choose a piece of candy from the box.” In a ball game, “I want to be the first one up to bat.” Or perhaps in school, “I want to get the highest marks and be the first in my class.” Whatever it is, I want my turn first. Me first. How many times have you said things like these—or at least thought them?

The trouble with this is that if you always want to be the first in everything, then you will grow up to be a very selfish person. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to have nice things or wanting to do things as well as you can do them. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be successful in what you do. It’s a good thing always to want to do things well. But if you feel that you have to be first, or the greatest, or the most important all the time, then you can never be happy, for you will be thinking only about yourself. You will be selfish, and you will never be satisfied with what you have; you will never be satisfied with what you are doing. You will always be ready to argue about who is going to be first.

And you know something? It’s not only children who are like this. Grownups too can be selfish, and grownups too can argue or dispute about who is going to be the first or the greatest or the most important. Even the Lord’s disciples had some wrong ideas about this. Once the mother of two of them — James and John — asked the Lord whether her two sons could sit next to Him in His kingdom. This would have meant that they would have been the two most important angels in heaven. And at another time, the disciples were coming to a house in the town of Capernaum. As they were walking along the way, they were talking together and arguing with each other. Jesus was not close to them at the time, and they did not think He could have known what they were talking about. But when they came into the house, the Lord asked them a question. “What was it that you were arguing about along the way?” (Mark 9:33).

The disciples were very quiet; they said nothing. Perhaps they were ashamed, because along the way they had been arguing about which one of them was going to be the greatest, or the most important. They were disputing about who was going to be the first. They thought the Lord didn’t know what they had been talking about, but the Lord knew what they were arguing about because He knows all things. And He sat down and He called His twelve disciples to

come close to Him so that He could talk to them. And when they all came around Him, He told them what it really means to be great, what it really means to be important in His kingdom, which is heaven. And He said to them, “If any man wants to be first, he must be willing to be the last, and the servant of everyone else.” (cf. Matthew 19:30, 20:16 Mark 9:35, 10:31 Luke 13:30) And then Jesus explained to them that a truly great person is one who is humble, a person who loves to help other people. And the Lord showed them what He meant. He brought in a young child, and when He had taken this little child in His arms, the Lord said to His disciples, “Whosoever receives one such little child in My name receives Me.” The Lord said this because those who are the closest to Him are those who are like little children, for those are close to the Lord who are innocent, who do not want many things for themselves, and who are willing to do every day what the Lord tells them to do or gives them to do. And the great people are those who are *not* always arguing about what *they* want but who like to be helpful, and who like to do things for others.

Just think for a moment—do you know a person you think is really great, who is important to you, who is first in your heart? Isn't this person one who is not selfish, a person who loves you, a person who likes to do things for you? The great people are the people who love others the most. They are people who are humble and helpful, and the greatest of all, of course, are the angels of heaven, because the angels like to be useful. They don't think just about themselves. They want the Lord to guide them in everything they do, and this is why they are so strong—because they look to the Lord for everything. He gives them whatever strength they need; He makes them very strong. We too can be strong, from the Lord. And we can have strength from the Lord if we turn to Him, if we read His Word and listen to what He tells us in His Word, and let Him guide us and lead us in everything we do. The Lord tells us that we should love other people, and that we should want what is good for them as well as for ourselves. He tells us we should be helpful, that we should be ready to do things for other people. The angels are like this, and *this* is why they are such great people. For they understand and they obey the words that Jesus spoke to His disciples: “If any man desires to be first, the same shall be last and servant of all.”