

Corrie ten Boom said, “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.” Jesus Christ alone has travelled backwards and forwards through every year of human history; He alone, along with His Father and the Spirit, knows the end from the beginning; He alone knows the trials of the human race, walking every inch of human existence sinlessly; He alone was able to merit God’s blessing as a Man; He alone is able to walk with us through every trial with complete consistency, undying compassion and untiring power to save. After all – He is the same, “yesterday, today and forever.” How does Hebrews 13:5-8 put it?

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Monday: Read Matthew 19:23-30

Last before First

In last week’s passage, the Apostles were dumbfounded, watching the rich young ruler (because he was unwilling to part with his wealth) walk away from their Lord Jesus. They ask their Master, “Who then can be saved?” If a man so full of the good blessings of this life can turn away from a saving relationship with God’s Son, who, indeed, can be saved?

Jesus picks up on that question in the last verse of our chapter. Many think that their good works and having the good things of this life are signs that they are first on God’s list. They will find out that they are shut out! On the other hand, many whom the world despises as “last on the list” of people deserving Heaven will be led by Jesus into their ordained places in God’s Kingdom: “The last shall be first”! This is why Jesus humbled Himself to the lowest birth possible – in order to lift us up to an inheritance as high as the riches of God’s Heavenly Grace!

Meditate and Pray: Let us thank God for giving us a Savior who loves the weak ones of this world, and shames the pride and ungodly wisdom of the powerful by showing special regard for the lowest sinners! What good news this is for us! If God did indeed bestow His favor on those first in line by virtue of their might and merit, which one of *us* would ever know salvation? But He has shown special regard for our low estate, glory be to His Name!

Tues/Weds: Read Ex. 20:1-2, Mat. 20:1-16 & Acts 13:44-48

The Last Blessed before the First

God redeemed His people out of Egypt so that they would learn the joy of running in His commandments as people saved by grace, through faith. The Prologue to the Ten Commandments teaches us that the Law was given *because of the relationship of grace* which God had already established with His people when He saved them out of the Red Sea. Thus began the long history of God’s people in the Old Testament. In the words of the Parable of The Landowner in Matthew 20:1-2, God chose Israel to work in His vineyard “from early in the day.”

Sadly, Israel began to think that, *because* God had chosen them first, and *because* they had labored through all the trials of the Old Testament (described in Matthew 20:12 as the, “burden of the work and the heat of the day”), somehow they *deserved* the highest wage, and greater blessing than any of the Gentiles whom God would call later. Sure enough, then, when the the people of Israel saw the Gentiles given equal status, though

they were hired last to work in God's vineyard, they grumbled with jealousy against God's generosity towards the Gentiles.

The Landowner asks the first workers, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong...Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Do you begrudge me my generosity?"

Yes, the Jews were envious because God was generous to the Gentiles, and they objected to God's giving those pagans who would be called to believe *just as full a salvation* as Israel! When the Gospel of free and abundant saving grace was preached by the Apostle Paul, the Jews were filled with jealousy and spoke abusively against God's generous plan!

Meditate and Pray: In Acts 13:46 Paul speaks for the Landowner. Because Israel would not receive the Gospel of free grace, that Gospel would now turn away from Israel as its primary focus and be preached instead to the Gentile church. Because God did this, we Gentiles have been saved; the rejection of Israel means the ingathering of the Gentiles. One day God's own people Israel will turn back. Zechariah 12:10 says,

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

We will rejoice when that Day comes! But even then – Israel will bow to the Gospel as it is preached in the Church of Christ and not apart from the Church! As the great hymn below says... for as long as the Church Age lasts, until the Judgement Day, the Church "shall never perish," safe in the undeserved vineyard of God's loving grace.

Sing hymn # 347 to celebrate this fact:

*The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord,
She is His new creation
By water and the Word.
From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her
And for her life He died.*

*She is from every nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth;
Her charter of salvation,
One Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy Name she blesses,
Partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses,
With every grace endued.*

The Church shall never perish!
*Her dear Lord to defend,
To guide, sustain, and cherish,
Is with her to the end:
Though there be those who hate her,
And false sons in her pale,
Against both foe or traitor
She ever shall prevail.*

*Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed:
Yet saints their watch are keeping,
Their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song!*

Thurs/Fri: Read Matthew 20:17-28**Jesus, Last for His Beloved**

The Cross, predicted so poignantly by our Lord in verses 17-19, has now become the glory of Christ's Church. For as often as we gather as God's people, we do proclaim the Lord's death, in Word and Sacrament, as the beating heart of our joy and devotion.

What an affront for our Lord, when John and James send their mother to Him to ask for the places of pre-eminence for themselves! These brothers, along with the rest of the Twelve, appear unable to grasp the Cross-centered nature of the Church. They are too much interested, like Israel of old, in victory over the nations, and thrones from which they can rule. They desire glory for themselves, instead of grasping by faith the glorious Cross of their Savior!

Some may object that thrones are indeed promised the Twelve in Matthew 19:28. That is true, But the brothers' request is for thrones of personal pre-eminence. They didn't understand that the thrones Jesus speaks of are thrones of *Apostolic authority* – whereby sinners are judged in terms of their response to the *Apostolically proclaimed* Gospel. So, James and John misinterpret Jesus' honoring the *Apostolic office* (Matthew 19:28) as somehow a ticket to their own personal prestige (Matthew 20:21).

Meditate and Pray: Pray for all of your church leaders that God would enable them to keep their own pride of place *out of* their understanding of their official service for Christ's Church. As Jesus clearly says to James and John, and to us, in Matthew 20:26: If we would exercise our authority in a meaningful and lasting way, then we must humble ourselves in our capacity as under-shepherds of Christ's flock!

Dear Father, we humbly commit the task of leading your flock back into your capable hands. Please help the sheep of your flock to hear your voice behind their gentle words; to heed your authority from behind their human opinions, and to sense how much you love them as you guide the leaders of this church. Lead this flock into green pastures. Amen.

A hymn in which humble, Cross-centered Christian leadership and service in Christ's church is highlighted, (# 253):

*I love Thy kingdom, Lord,
The house of Thine abode,
The church our blessed Redeemer saved
With His own precious blood.*

*If e'er to bless Thy sons
My voice or hands deny,
These hands let useful skills forsake,
This voice in silence die.*

*For her my tears shall fall
For her my prayers ascend,
To her my cares and toils be given
Till toils and cares shall end.*

*I love Thy church, O God.
Her walls before Thee stand,
Dear as the apple of Thine eye,
And written on Thy hand.*

*Should I with scoffers join
Her altars to abuse?
No! Better far my tongue were dumb,
My hand its skill should lose.*

*Beyond my highest joy
I prize her heavenly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows,
Her hymns of love and praise.*