

SERMON UPON MATTHEW XIX. 30.

But many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first.—
MAT. XIX. 30.

THESE words are a part of Christ's answer to Peter's question, ver. 27, 'Behold, we have forsaken all and followed thee: what shall we have therefore?' What had Peter to forsake? a cottage, a net, a fisher-boat: a great all! But we are apt to think much of what we part with on Christ's score, if it be but the superfluity of our estate, if we suffer a disgraceful word or a small inconveniency, or be but browbeaten with a frown, we are apt to inquire, 'What we shall have therefore?' as if God were greatly indebted to us. We need not seek another paymaster; Christ will not be behindhand with us. Christ's answer is—

1. To their particular case, as apostles, ver. 28, 'Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me in the regeneration, when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.' We do not enough think of the general renovation of all things. It seemeth the number of the apostles ought to be twelve. Therefore Matthias was chosen in the room of Judas. And that the apostles shall have eminent honour in that day.

2. As to the general case, ver. 29, 'And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. None can be a loser by God, no, not in the midst of his troubles and persecutions, but hath the comforts and experiences of God by the way: Mark x. 29, 30, 'And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands with persecutions, and in the world to come eternal life.'

3. By way of admonition, not to reckon too much of their present fidelity to Christ, for temptations might come; others later called might exceed them: 'Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first.'

In the words observe two things are asserted—(1.) The 'first shall

be last;’ those in the first rank might be cast back; (2.) The ‘last shall be first;’ advanced to the highest place in christianity.

First, For the former proposition, ‘Many that are first shall be last.’ For explaining of it, observe—

1. That it doth not universally and necessarily prove so, but for the most part it will be so; not all without exception, but many that are first shall be last. Therefore: Luke xiii. 30, ‘And behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.’ You may keep your priority and precedency to the end, if you do not grow dead, and drowsy, and sleepy. If they that began early acquit themselves with any zeal and industry suitable to their beginnings, the saying shall not prejudice them. Proverbs hold, *ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ*, for the generality; and this is a proverbial speech, adapted and used by our Saviour with an holy purpose, to caution his disciples against pride in what they had already done and suffered for his sake: they were too well conceited of their forsaking all to follow Christ.

2. Observe, that it is applicable not only to persons, but nations and societies and communities of men; for in Luke it is applied to the rejection of the Jews and the calling of the gentiles: Luke xiii. 29, 30, ‘And they shall come from the east and from the west, and from the north and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. And behold, there are last which shall be first; and there are first which shall be last.’ Many nations, cities, and countries that have embraced the true worship and service of God may lose their crown, and suffer their candlestick to be removed to others. In a little succession of time there are strange changes and revolutions as to the state of religion among a people: Mat. xi. 23, ‘And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shall be brought down to hell.’ The gospel is the honour of any country, city, or town; and where it is most clearly preached, that place is exalted most, and made nearest heaven; but through their unthankfulness, unfruitfulness, and contempt, this honour and glory may be taken from them, and they sunk as low in judgments as formerly exalted for privileges; and thus it may be interpreted as to the enjoyment of means, ‘They that are first shall be last;’ that is, they that get away the gospel from them.

3. Observe, that this firstness and lastness is to be understood with respect to matters of religion. In the world it is often verified that they who have had the precedency of others may afterwards be set far behind them: 1 Sam. ii. 7, 8, ‘The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s, and he hath set the world upon them.’ That prosperity may not be without a curb, nor adversity without a cordial in the government of the world, God turneth things upside down, and the mighty and opulent are brought low, and the base and despicable raised to great riches, dignity, and honour; which should quiet our minds whenever it falleth out, because the great sovereign of the world hath so appointed it, and will take his own course without asking our leave or waiting for our consent. But here it is meant of religious matters, or things appertaining to God. First and last often shift places.

4. In matters of religion it may bear a good sense, that God's latter dispensation is better than the former, and those that live under it excel the other.

[1.] Our condition under the covenant of grace is better than that in innocency under the covenant of works; as a vessel that is soldered is strongest in the crack, or an hedge that is mended is more firmly fenced than it was before the gap or breach. Take, for an instance, Adam and Job. Job is more happy in his misery than Adam in his innocency; he was victorious on the dunghill, when the other was defeated on the throne; he gave no ear to the counsel of his wife: Job ii. 10, 'Curse God, and die,' when the woman seduced Adam. He despised the assaults of Satan, when the other suffered himself to be worsted at the first temptation; he preserved his righteousness in the midst of his sorrows, when the other lost his innocency in the midst of paradise, where he had all manner of delights and pleasures. So that the grace of the Redeemer doth much excel the innocency of Adam.

[2.] The last edition of the covenant doth excel the former, and they that live under the gospel of Christ are in a much better condition than those that lived under the economy of Moses. They had more of outward prosperity, but these have more of the Spirit. They were more exempted from suffering, but these are more fortified against sufferings; Christ hath not taken away the fight, but secured the victory; and though all that will live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer persecution, yet they have an hundredfold in this life, and in the world to come life everlasting: 'For many that are first shall be last, and the last first,' Mark x. 30, 31.

5. In matters of religion some may have the precedency of others; either—(1.) In reality and truth; or (2.) In appearance only; or in their own opinion; or in the opinion of others.

[1.] In reality and truth. Some may have the precedency two ways; either—(1.) As to time; (2.) As to zeal and fervency in the profession of religion.

(1.) As to time. As they began sooner, or have served God longer, so they are first. Surely this is a precedency and a privilege. The apostle saith of Andronicus and Junia, they 'were in Christ before him,' Rom. xvi. 7; Eph. i. 12, 'That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ.' Those who do not retard or delay their conversion, but are converted early to God, are more obliged by his mercy to serve and honour him, because he did so soon break off the yoke of their slavery to sin and Satan, and also they take the way to honour and obey God sooner than others that yet lie in their sins. They are sooner capacitated to serve him, and therefore it is their honour and glory that they are first.

(2.) As to zeal and fervency in the profession of religion. Some are in the first rank of christians, and are more forward than others; as the apostle made boast of the forwardness of the Corinthians, and thereby stirred up other people, yet was afraid this boasting might seem a vanity and over-confidence of them: 2 Cor. ix. 2-4, 'For I know the forwardness of your mind, for which I boast of you to them of Macedonia, that Achaia was ready a year ago; and your zeal hath provoked very many. Yet have I sent the brethren, lest our boasting of

you should be in vain in this behalf ; that, as I said, ye may be ready : lest haply if they of Macedonia come with me, and find you unprepared, we (that we say not, you) should be ashamed in this same confident boasting.' This the apostle doth lest the rich Corinthians would be disgraced before the poor Macedonians, the business cooled again ; he was forced to quicken them. We see many in their youth are eminently zealous, willing to run all hazards with Christ ; but when their first heats are spent, grow worldly, careless, if not greatly profane, and are strangely withered and blasted in their age.

6. Those that have these advantages of being first may become last.

[1.] Some that come after them in time may exceed them in labour and christian diligence ; and though the other keep up the life of grace still, yet they may be much outshined, and outstripped ; as, for instance, these apostles of our Lord who left their all, and seemed to deserve so much of him, were exceeded by Paul, who professed himself to be 'one born out of due time,' 1 Cor. xv. 8, yet laboured more abundantly than they all, ver. 10. Well, then, the first may be last ; though called sooner, yet may do less service than those that were called afterwards ; so to be last doth not imply a loss of grace, but an excellency in latter converts.

[2.] As to zeal in profession and practice. Certainly it is our duty to keep up our vigour to the last, for they that 'are planted in the house of the Lord should bring forth fruit in old age,' Ps. xcii. 14. The older they grow they should be the more fruitful. Enoch kept up his communion with God throughout his whole life : Gen. v. 23, 'Enoch walked with God,' after he begat sons and daughters. And it is the commendation of Mnason of Cyprus, that he was 'an old disciple,' Acts xxi. 16 ; one that was rooted in the doctrine of the gospel, and had for a long time owned Christ. But oftentimes it falleth out that they that are longest at work do not always the most or best service.

This may fall out two ways—

(1.) By the larger measures of grace vouchsafed to the latter converts above others, of which no reason can be given but God's will. He is arbitrary in his gifts, but not in his judgments. In converting grace, as to time and degree, he acts *ut dominus*, as a free lord : Rom. ix. 16, 'It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.' But in rewarding grace, he acteth *ut rector et judex* : 1 Cor. ix. 24, 'So run that you may obtain.' They that have done most, and served him longest, are most richly rewarded. But in mere donatives God will do with his own as he pleaseth. Instances in David : Ps. cxix. 98–100, 'Thou hast made me wiser than mine enemies, wiser than my teachers, wiser than the ancients.' God may furnish the younger with larger gifts of prudence, knowledge, boldness, zeal, and industrious activity. So Paul : 1 Cor. xv. 10, 'But by the grace of God I am what I am : and his grace which was bestowed on me was not in vain ; but I laboured more abundantly than they all ; yet not I, but the grace of God which was in me.' Now this might affect the apostles, who being leavened with carnal conceit, dreamed of great offices in the kingdom of the Messiah, that might become others more worthy than they, richly furnished to do God and the church service.

(2.) By the fault of those that did formerly excel ; by their pride,

carelessness, and security, they may be thrown back behind many, who for a time had nothing of God and goodness in them.

(1st.) For their pride; if they be conceited that they deserved more at God's hand than others. Many who, in the conceit of their own merit, were first, shall, in the course of God's dispensations, be found last: James iv. 5, 6, 'Do ye think the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? But he giveth more grace.' The envious, proud spirit is blasted: 'The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy, but he giveth more grace; wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.' Now, of all pride, spiritual pride is most provoking: as the pride of the legal judiciary: Luke xviii. 9, 14, 'And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.' The humble publican is preferred before the conceited pharisee. So the elder brother, who impersonateth those who grow conceited of their own profession, and envieth the grace of God to others: Luke xv. 29, 'And he answering, said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment, and yet thou never gavest me a kid that I might make merry with my friends.' If any of this leaven get into the hearts of God's children, God will prefer others before them. He will have his grace magnified and adored. And we must cherish an humble sense of all that we suffer and do for him, that we are nothing and that he is all.

(2d.) Their laziness. They do not improve and grow according to their standing, and the many advantages they have by so long acquaintance with God; but are apt to grow dead, drowsy, formal, and customary, and go on in a tract of duties without any life and vigour, Luke viii. 18. He that useth not grace shall not increase it; whereas others' diligence shall be blessed. Some start up that have more grace in a little time than they that have been getting many years.

(3d.) It may come to pass through their security. When they have had some losses for Christ, they may think all their trials are over. A man of long standing, being secure of salvation, may grow negligent, and supposing that he hath grace, and is possessed of the love of God, there needeth not such diligence as when he was doubtful; and if he go round in a course and tract of duty, and avoid grosser sins, it is enough, and he is now past all danger; and so is tempted to leave his first love and zeal, Rev. ii. 4. After the first labours of regeneration, and the difficulties of reconciliation with God, are past over, and he hath gotten some peace, and confidence, and freedom from the terrors of the law, then he is in danger of security, by which means all runneth to waste in the soul, and our nakedness will soon appear. Take, for an instance, David and Joseph. The one will show us the danger of laying aside of our fear and caution, the other the benefit of a constant watchfulness and circumspection: 2 Sam. xi. 2, 3, 'And it came to pass in an eveningtide that David arose from off his bed, and walking upon the roof of the king's house; and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. And

David sent and inquired after the woman : and one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite ?' Gen. xxxix. 7-9, ' And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph, and she said, Lie with me. But he refused, and said unto his master's wife, My master wotteth not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand. There is none greater in the house than I ; neither hath he kept back anything from me but thee, because thou art his wife : how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God ?' The one was a young man, the other old, and well experienced in the ways of God : Joseph a single man, David had a multitude of wives ; Joseph had the advantage of secrecy, David was fain to make way to his adultery by other sins ; Joseph was solicited, David the solicitor ; yet how foully did the one fall, because secure ? The other had his heart possessed with the fear of God.

2. In appearance only. I have spoken to you of the softest interpretation of the words ; now I shall show you how they may be understood of those that are first in their own opinion only, or in the opinion of the world ; and so they that are first, that made a great blaze of profession for a while, and at length, last ; and so to be last is to be nothing. It is not meant of gradual declinings, but total apostasy, which is the end of many that are forward in outward show and profession of Christ and the gospel, do, after they have professed a religion awhile, suffer it to die away, and vanish into nothing ; a greater abuse and mischief to the church of God than if they had never professed : so they come to be least in the kingdom of heaven ; that is, to have no room nor place there, Mat. v. 19 ; and elsewhere, to reap sparingly is not to reap at all, 2 Cor. ix. 6 ; and Mat. xxi. 31, ' Publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.' It is not to be understood as if the one made haste into the kingdom of God, and the other were only slow and remiss, but did at length enter. No ; they were opposite, and averse, and never entered : ' This man went to his house justified rather than the other,' Luke xviii. 14. Not as if the pharisee was justified ; but the meaning is, not justified at all. There are many such speeches : so that many that have begun well for the present shall afterwards fall away, and be utterly excluded from the kingdom of heaven. Such as are foremost in outward shows and profession of religion are not always the best christians : Gal. iii. 3, 4, ' Are ye so foolish ? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh ? Have you suffered so many things in vain ? if it be yet in vain.' All former profession, praying, hearing, suffering, is lost, if we by one afterchange should reproach our former practice : Gal. v. 7, ' Ye did run well ; who did hinder you ?' They had made some progress in the ways of God ; their after-carriage may be no way answerable to their promising beginnings ; they may not only grow remiss and lazy, but strangely perverted by the allurements of the flesh and the world. A carnal and unsound heart will either take some offence, or by some temptation or other be taken off from the profession and practice of godliness, by sensuality, error, or worldliness : John vi. 66, ' From that time many of the disciples went back, and walked no more with him.' Demas for a time made a good profession, but afterwards was blinded by the world : 2

Tim. iv. 10, 'For Demas hath forsaken us, having embraced the present world.' So the scripture taketh notice of many other blazing meteors that fell from heaven like lightning. It will be so; all that are called are not elected: Mat. xx. 16, 'So the last shall be first, and the first last; for many are called, but few are chosen.' Therefore we should not be contented with the beginnings of christianity only; many times there are plenty of blossoms, and yet but little fruit, and those that have had good beginnings may afterwards greatly dishonour the name of Christ by their scandal or defections from him. They may seem to be first in the kingdom of heaven, and to be the very flower of christianity, but prove afterwards the very dregs of christianity. The foolish virgins had their lamps as well as the wise, but their oil failed; they went forth to meet the bridegroom as the wise did, but they were afterwards shut out, Mat. xxv. 10. It is not enough to make the profession plausible, but to see the practice be real and the heart sound. Some in an hopeful way went far, but at last all is lost.

Use 1. See that you do not make an ill use of it.

1. It is not to discourage men from beginning betimes, or remembering their Creator in the days of their youth. No; we should believe with the first. Epenetus is called the first-fruits of Achaia, Rom. xvi. 5. Surely it is an honour to be first in the service of God. The sooner the better. The more experience of God, the more inured to his blessed yoke. All the sacrifices of the law were to be offered to God young, and in full strength. We expect eternal life, and therefore no part of our temporal life should be diverted from God. Therefore to discourage beginning early were to play the devil's game, who would fain feast upon the flower and freshness of our youth, and leave God the scraps and fragments of old age. No; begin betimes; but hold on and keep your crown.

2. Not to quench your zeal and forwardness in profession of godliness, provided it have a root: Deut. v. 29, 'Oh that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and their children after them.' And that you keep up this life and vigour, and still stir up yourselves that you may not grow dead, and drowsy, and sleepy, but acquit yourselves with a like affection in the progress as in the beginning: Heb. iii. 14, 'For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end.' An old disciple keepeth up his dignity still; it is not the newness of the thing affected him. No forwardness in religion is good, if you do afterwards grow remiss and lazy.

Use 2. The right use that we should make of it—

1. Is to excite men to a perseverance in a course of holiness and righteousness, that the end may answer the beginning. Do not break off the race till you come to the goal: Heb. iv. 1, 'Let us therefore fear, lest a promise being left with us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it;' Phil. iii. 14, 'I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.' If you trust to your former righteousness, and commit iniquity, all is lost, Ezek. xxxiii. 13. No; this work must be brought to an end, that you

may not be rejected and disallowed at last, after all that you have done and suffered for Christ. They came into the vineyard at several hours, Mat. xx., but all tarried till the close of the day. Some are converted sooner, some later; but all hold out to the end. In the work of redemption Christ never gave over till all was finished, John xix. 30. So must we never give over till we can say, It is finished; or, with Paul, 2 Tim. iv. 8, 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.' We have no licence to slacken our course and give over till all be finished, and then we keep our precedency to the last.

2. To press you to diligence in growth and progress, that you may still go on from strength to strength, Ps. lxxxiv. 7; for this is the way to keep up your precedency. Many do not fall off, nor make shipwreck of the faith; yet they make no progress, but are soon outstripped by those that come after; they do not provoke them to an holy emulation: Heb. x. 24, 'Let us consider one another to provoke to love and good works.' Actively we must provoke others by our example, and passively we must provoke ourselves; we must not justify and encourage that common negligence and forgetfulness of God which prevaileth in the world. Cold dealing in christianity doth so; but when zealous in the best things, we enkindle one another, and awaken one another to a greater zeal and mindfulness of God and the world to come. You should condemn the world by your seriousness, and you harden them in their impenitency by your straitness and worldliness, as if you had no other hope than what the world can afford you.

3. To an humble sincerity, thinking meanly of yourselves, or anything that you do or have done. Surely the first are last in their own account. If you are low and poor in your own eyes, affect not to be great in the eyes of others. God will show you that it is his grace made the difference, by raising up other instruments of his glory that have not half your advantages, and yet how do they grow both in the knowledge and love of Christ. Twice Christ marvelled; at the faith of the centurion, having so little means: Mat. viii. 10, 'When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said unto them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel;' and at the unbelief of his own countrymen, who had so great means: Mark vi. 6, 'And he marvelled at their unbelief.' And truly it is an humbling consideration to us when others have thriven in less time, and by smaller means than you have had; though low in the esteem of the world, yet outshine you in meekness, patience, and blameless conversation, and fervent prayers.

'And the last shall be first.' The last, such as are backward as to any affection to heavenly things, yea, afar off as to any profession or sense of religion; these shall in time to come show themselves more forward than others who were in Christ before them; prove glorious christians at the last: it may be so.

Now here are 'first' and 'last.' God doth not call all his elect at once, but some sooner, some later. Andrew and Peter were first called, and then Philip. Some called young; as Timothy, 2 Tim. iii. 15. Some in elder age. Obadiah feared God from his youth, 1 Kings xviii.

12; Lydia and the jailer in middle age, Acts xvi.; Manasseh about sixty years of age, near on his death, 2 Chron. xxxiii. 19.

Use 3. Let us not despair of any.

1. Judge of nothing before the time. They may be called that are afar off: John x. 16, 'Other sheep have I.' Christ knoweth the elect, looketh upon himself engaged to bring them in. We know them not, but Christ knoweth them.

2. As soon as you are called, mind your work: Col. i. 6, 'Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world, and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you since the day ye have heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth.'

3. These last shall be first. Many late converted ones grow eminent in grace, for these reasons—

[1.] Those that have been great sinners love much, because much was forgiven to them: Luke vii. 47, 'Her sins, which are many, are forgiven her; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.' It was long ere they would hearken to God and regard his offers; therefore now they bestir themselves the more.

[2.] They live in a constant admiration of grace; whereas others may bear up themselves too much upon their own worth: James iv. 6, 'Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.'

[3.] Because they recompense their long delay by their after diligence: Eph. v. 16, 'Redeeming the time;' as travellers that set out late ride the faster: 1 Peter iv. 3, 'For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness and excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries;' 2 Sam. xix. 11, they that were last in bringing back the king to his house, were most zealous for his interest afterwards.

[4.] They look upon themselves obliged to do as much for God as they did for Satan: Rom. vi. 19, 'For as you have yielded your members servants to uncleanness, and to iniquity unto iniquity, even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness.' Therefore those that have been grievous sinners, when God toucheth their hearts, prove eminent saints and seek to excel in righteousness and holiness.

Use 1. You that are converted late should double your diligence. As you have been instances of the corrupt vigour of nature, so also of the sacred power of grace: or if recovered out of some eminent fall, as Peter, John xxi. 15, Peter had been boasting before, that if all men forsook him, yet he would not forsake him. Now Christ puts the question to Peter, John xxi. 15, 'Simon Peter, lovest thou me more than these?' He expecteth not only love, but comparatively more love; not only to check his making comparisons, but also to show that those that are recovered by grace from grievous errors should be more eminent in love to Christ. The renewed sense of pardoning mercy should sharpen their affections to Christ, and we should show more unfeigned zeal.

Use 2. Do not upbraid others with past sins, when they are afterwards more forward and earnest in the ways of God. We should not rake in that filth which God hath covered. Many a choice instrument of God's glory hath been recovered out of Satan's clutches.