

“The First Shall Be Last”

Mark 9: 30-37

30 Leaving that region, they traveled through Galilee. Jesus didn't want anyone to know he was there, 31 for He wanted to spend more time with His disciples and teach them. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of His enemies. He will be killed, but three days later He will rise from the dead.” 32 They didn't understand what He was saying, however, and they were afraid to ask Him what He meant.

After they arrived at Capernaum and settled in a house, Jesus asked His disciples, “what were you discussing out on the road?” 34 But they didn't answer, because they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve disciples over to Him and said, “Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.”

36 Then He put a little child among them. Taking the child in His arms, He said to them, 37 “anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also my Father who sent me.”

And Jesus said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last.” The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Everyone who does not have Jesus Christ and the needs of others as a priority in his/her life, ... will be last. If we don't wake up and listen we will all be last. Jesus said, “If anyone wants to be first, He must be the very last, and the servant of all.” “How many of you have done something to serve others this week? That question is not an easy one for me to answer myself. Okay so maybe you don't want to be first. What if you or I just want to be somewhere in the middle of the pack? Then what? Well, if we approach it logically that could mean that we would not have to be servant of all, but servant to some. But if we are going to start getting technical then we are missing the point. Jesus' point is that it doesn't matter in the kingdom of God who earns six million dollars on earth and who earns \$600. What Jesus is trying to get the disciples to see, is that we will be judged as much by how we treat God's creation, especially His children, as by how we treat Him. You see, the disciples were still thinking about an earthly kingdom when they were arguing about who was the greatest. Now Jesus is trying to help them see that they must be like Him, a servant leader, one who leads by example and puts the needs of others ahead of His own. God's kingdom turns everything upside down. The first shall be the last and the last shall be first. But only if you make it there to start? If you don't accept Christ into your heart as Lord and Savior, if you don't make striving to be Christ-like a priority you may not even be part of God's kingdom. The idea is humility! [NOTE 1]

When Jesus gave the disciples this new knowledge, that He would suffer and die, they had a tough time understanding. They also had a tough time understanding this last to be first stuff. Here are four steps to the creative life, as developed by change-masters

and creativity theorists; I'll call them the four "ations" (ay-shuns): preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. **[NOTE 2]**

First is preparation. As Jesus took His disciples "On from there and passed through Galilee" (verse 30), He taught them all the way. He taught them as He took them. Some stages of learning don't invite very much creativity because we simply need to get prepared or "get the facts." Before you can read, you have to learn your ABC's. Before you can be a chemist, you have to learn the Periodic Table of Elements. Before you become a financier, you've got to learn your multiplication tables. Rote learning, memorization, the input of mountains of raw data, make up a huge part of our educational process. The preparation stage isn't always much fun. What kid hasn't complained that they'll never have to use geometry or calculus in "real life" or wondered why they must learn the major export of Paraguay? The disciples didn't understand either why Jesus was teaching them strange things about the future. What had suffering and death to do with their current fabulous ministry in the countryside? But Jesus continued to give them information and basic data even though they continued to give him blank looks and silent stares. **[NOTE 3]**

In the long run, this preparation stage teaches much more than mere facts and figures. As snippets of information and strands of knowledge continue to infiltrate stubborn minds, they gradually knit together and form a new framework for our assumptions, guideposts for future experiences and additional data. This preparation stage can last a long time...days, years, or even decades. Eight years of college and graduate school seemed to take forever and a day for me. This stage lasts as long as it takes to prepare a sturdy groundwork for the experiences that will follow. The family, the church, and the community are key forces in the preparation stage of creativity.

Then comes the second stage called incubation. If rote learning of facts is to be transformed into creative wisdom, it must undergo a period of incubation within each individual's heart and mind. This is a necessarily chaotic, untidy period, where each individual must struggle personally with the information received in the preparation stage. Some information may be shed and rejected, other info may be shaped into strange new creations. Believe it or not, a decent adolescent rebellion is crucial if we are to arrive at the higher stages of integration. **[NOTE 4]**

When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up? I remember that at first I wanted to be a race car driver, then I wanted to be a famous musician, and then I wanted to be a professional football player. Sometimes children will say they want to be exactly what their mommies or daddies are. What parent hasn't glowed, just a little, when their 6 year old announces, "I want to build houses, just like daddy," or "I want to be a teacher like my Mom." But at some point, most kids take it all back, shut themselves in their room with music parents can't stand, insist on their distance and declare they are nothing like us and will NEVER be like us when they grow up. Ah, teenagers. They do this only to find out years later that one should never say never.

This incubation period sometimes leads to a time of strangeness where nothing feels like home. When a person incubates knowledge, they sometimes try on new

identities while they simultaneously harbor odd ideas. This happens when we get to start over in college where hardly anybody knows us. There is a reason that so many “crazy” new ideas and notions come out of college campuses. When we try to form new knowledge into our own sense of self, the results are often odd. Each of us needs to fit the new knowledge of the world and of God into our own unique personalities. The disciples demonstrate how strange the turns of incubating information can be when they contort and twist Jesus’ teachings on discipleship into an argument over which of them is the greatest.

The third stage is illumination. An example of the need to pass from the incubation stage to the illumination stage in discipleship is found in the writing of W.H. Auden. He complains that it is possible for people to say, “Of course I am a Christian. There are the gospels to prove that Jesus existed, and the existence of the church to prove that His claim to be Christ was true. I go to church every Sunday. What it all means, I can leave to the theologians.’ This person is just like the married woman who says, ‘Look at my large centrally heated apartment, and here is my marriage license which my lawyer tells me is valid. I can’t say I remember ever having met my husband personally, but I will leave that to my lawyer. The important thing is that I can put Mrs. in front of my name.’ Something just doesn’t add up here. Christianity has to be a personal relationship. [NOTE 5]

The illumination stage is where the “aha!” moment or revealing event that suddenly sharpens all our data into a clear-cut point of visceral clarity happens. It may be a stunning, surprising disclosure—but its truth will rivet us and allow us to leave behind the messy, methodless searchings of the incubation period. When learning to do “proofs” in geometry, many students struggle along for awhile until suddenly the deductive process becomes glaringly clear. That must only happen some of the time because I don’t think it ever happened for me. That class was my first C ever. It is burned in my brain. The same kind of thing occurs when trying to learn the Greek language. But that moment only comes after a period of first-hand experience, of direct, hands-on, hard-won knowledge.

Geometry students must memorize all those theorems, practice lots of proofs and come up with some pretty strange solutions before they finally can put it altogether. Greek students have to put together and memorize all the vocabulary and the grammatical rules with the prefixes and suffixes, verbs, nouns, adjectives etc. Then after translating the Bible for a while one starts to put it altogether. Jesus provides this point of illumination for His disciples when He sums up His messianic identity and mission by proclaiming ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all’ in verse 35. Immediately the disciples’ experience of life in the ministry of Jesus crystallizes this revelation. What had they been doing but preaching, teaching, and healing people. Dealing with people in the most desperate need, those in dire straits? Jesus’ words form a theorem for the discipleship that lends sense and sensibility to every past occasion and all encounters. But it was still a shocking, radical, illumination. What does it mean for those who want to be first? Jesus tells them they need to act like a servant!

The first are last when ... powerful corporations and institutions open their eyes and ears to the crisis of their employees and provide on-site childcare and programming. The first are last when ... wealthy individuals and nations pour out their pocketbooks and their compassion on debtor countries and struggling neighborhoods, bringing relief from hunger today and hope for a better tomorrow. The first are last when ... healthy men and women volunteer their hands and laps to cuddle children afflicted with AIDS. The first are last when ... human beings reach out to protect and nurture the other living things of this earth, our home. The first are last when ... loving congregations risk their safe, stable, existences by opening their doors to the homeless, the mentally disturbed, the developmentally disabled, and welcome them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The last stage is verification. When we can DO those things, actually putting the first last and the last first; when we can be a servant to all, then we have reached the fourth step of creative knowledge: verification. **[NOTE 6]**

Armed with the nugget of truth our illuminating moment and visionary experience has given us, we must now ACT on it in our own lives. Jesus didn't let His words stand alone and untested in the midst of His disciples. He immediately brought a commanding example of profound weakness before them and demanded His disciples accept that little helpless child, as if it were Jesus Himself. Those considered great in the ways of the world cannot be bothered with the clamoring neediness and naughtiness of children.

Those great in the ways of the Spirit should barely be visible amidst a crowd of sticky-fingered, smudged-faced, small fries. Not long after that Jesus demonstrated again the principle by washing the disciples' feet.

Verification is what transforms illuminated knowledge into creative wisdom, an every new and renewing force in the world. As we continue to verify the truth of our knowledge in new and untested situations, we re-create those moments of illumination again and again. **[NOTE 7]**

The first became last when ... "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life."

The first became last ... when Jesus foretold, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, He will rise again."

The first became last ... when Jesus said, "It is finished."

Let's pray: O Lord of life, give unto us the grace and the power to live risen lives, we pray, that we may walk the way of the Servant of God, who came not to be ministered unto but to minister. Fill our hearts with the assurance of eternal life. Make us confident that whether we live or whether we die, we are Yours. We ask in the name of He who died that we might live, even our Savior Jesus Christ our Lord. We pray in His name ... AMEN

“Sermon Notes for The First Shall Be Last based on Mark 9:30ff

Given at Doster Community Church on October 12, 2025

- I. “If anyone wants to be first, He must be the very last and servant of all!” The main idea is humility!
- II. There are four steps to understanding this “The first shall be last” stuff!
 - a. Preparation
 - b. Incubation
 - c. Illumination
 - d. Verification
- III. Preparation: (verse 31) “He wanted to spend more time with His disciples and teach them.” This stage is mostly knowledge gathering and can last a long time ...even decades until a groundwork is laid for the future. The family, the church and the community are key forces.
- IV. Incubation: If rote learning of facts is to be transformed into creative wisdom, it must undergo a period of incubation within one’s heart and mind. Each of us needs to fit the new knowledge of the world and of God into our own unique personalities.
- V. Illumination: Where there is an “Aha! Moment” where data is sharpened to a clearcut point of clarity. We understand and implement our knowledge. The statement, “The first shall be last and servant of all” is a shocking, radical, illumination. It crystallizes all that he has been demonstrating and teaching.
- VI. Verification: When we actually DO those things and actually put the needs of others first and act like a servant to all, showing love and compassion, making Christ-followers of everyone around you from your words and example.
- VII. Where is the first becoming last in your life? What are you going to do about it? Please write down something you will do today, this week!