



## **The Meaning Of Prowtoi(First) Andexcatoi (Last) In Matthew 19:30 And 20:16: Implications For Preachers(Gospel Workers)**

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***Abstract:***

*This study examined the meaning of the Greek words: prowtoiandexcatoi and its implication for preachers and gospel workers. Using exegetical method of enquiry, it was found that these words were used to show that people will be treated on equality basis in the kingdom of God. Moreover the parable in Matthew 20:1-16 was used to illustrate that those who labour in God's vineyard will be given the same reward irrespective of the time they commenced. It is on this forte that this research recommends that preachers should bear in mind in their labour they are to treat everyone on equality basis and their fellow preachers the same way.*

***Key words:*** Preacher, Gospel, Laborer, God, Vineyard, Kingdom

### 1.Introduction

From Gibbs' (1991:28) perspective, a preacher is the person who proclaims the gospel. Amanze(2007:12) defines the gospel as "God's good news that all we have lost in the first Adam is totally restored through what the second Adam, Jesus Christ has done for us..." From this definition, the gospel is God's good news to sinners who lost everything at the beginning and by that gospel, what was lost, is regained through Christ. White (1915:18) affirms that "the greatest work, the noblest effort, in which men can engage, is to point sinners to the Lamb of God."

Consequently, it is substantial to affirm that a preacher is a gospel worker whose primary duty is to take God's good news to the sinner. This elucidates that preachers are laborers in God's vine yard who have come to know the gospel and are in turn working for others to hear this good news. These are contracted or called by God and work in earnest for Him.

Talking of laborers, the parable in Matthew 20:1-16 discusses how a landowner went to the *agora* (market place) to contract laborers and agreed to pay them a denarius for their labor. The story reveals that the landowner contracted different laborers at different hours of the day. He subsequently paid all laborers a denarius for their labor and when those who came first disapproved of the matter, he said "Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you" (Matt 20:14, NIV), then the parable ended with "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matt 20:16, NIV) However, the complete story did not begin with Matthew 20:1-16. It was the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man that gave rise to the statement 'the first shall be the last and the last first'. This statement evidently appears in two verses 19:30 and 20:16 in the book of Matthew. In trying to unravel who the first are and why they will be the last, a critical study of the verse reveals the following:

- It belongs to the larger context of Matthew 19:16-20:16 which has three immediate contexts; 19:16-22, 19:23-30 and 20:1-16.
- It appears in the last two immediate contexts mentioned above.
- Matthew 19:23-30 was a discussion that resulted from the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young man.
- The statement was made after Jesus had detailed the rewards of the disciples for following Him and the rewards of any other who will do as the disciples had done.

- Matthew 20:1-16 was used to explain the statement in Matthew 19:30.
- Both Matthew 19:30 and Matthew 20:16 are same statements.
- The statement ‘the first shall be the last and last first’ is not only perplexing but enigmatic.

### *1.1. The Problems*

The problems are:

- Who are the first or *prw/toi*(*prw/toi*) in 19:30 and 20:16?
- Why would they be the last or *e;scatoi*(*e;scatoi*) 19:30 and 20:16?
- Does *prw/toi* and *e;scatoi* have any implication for ministers and gospel workers

In order to answer the above questions, an analysis of both *prw/toi* and *e;scatoi* will be done, then an interpretation will follow in order to arrive at the implications.

## **2. Analysis Of Key Words**

### *2.1. prw/toi*

*prw/toi*(*prw/toi*) appears 155 times in the NT with about 24 different forms. It occurs 25 times in the gospel of Matthew (25.16%). Of all its occurrences, the 5 times in which it appears in Matthew in its form deals specifically with this pericope which is in view (Wogu, 2012:52). It is used in the NT as either a noun or an adjective. (*Vine's Expository Dictionary*, 1997: 433). It is an ordinal numeral and when used as an adjective, it could mean “first”, “earlier” or “earliest”. Here it means “first” referring to the many that were earlier in time, although it is plural in nature; it appears in the nominative case.

### *2.2. e;scatoi*

On the other hand, although *e;scatoi* is an adjective in its nominative case and pluralistic in nature, it is not an ordinal number or numeral. It is rather a normal adjective used to qualify a noun (person or thing) that are in extreme either in place, rank, or time. (*Vine's Expository Dictionary*, 1997: 640). Basically, it means “last” (Arndt and Gingrich, 1979:313). Also this *word* is similar with *prw/toi* which is supposed to appear in the accusative rather than nominative.

Since both words *prw/toi* and *e;scatoiare* similar in case and usage, Wogu's (2012)proposal should be accepted that these words are of equal nature because it is used later in a reverse other. This is explained below. Notice the reversal of the two words that makes them to be equal.

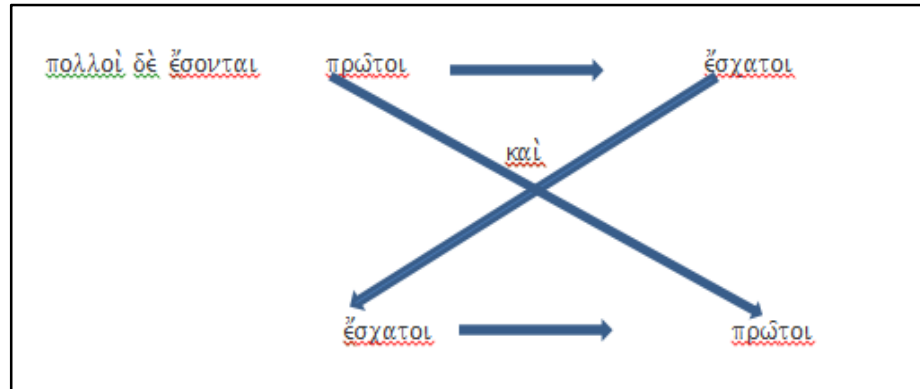


Figure 1: The Reversal in Equality in the Use of *prw/toi* and *e;scatoi*

From the above, *prw/toi* and *e;scatoiare* similar in case and usage and are of equal nature. This reveals that whoever the *prw/toi* and *e;scatoi*were, they were considered with equality by Christ.

### 3. Interpretation

#### 3.1. The First Will Be Last And Vice Versa

One question scholars have grappled with is who the first were and who will be the last? While some opine that at “the end of everything”, the rich will become poor and the poor, rich, others suggest that the first refers to the Jews, and last, the Gentiles. Another group infer that the “proverb assumes that the disciples had been arguing about priority on the basis of who was first called, to which Jesus” proves wrong by saying that the first will be the last and the last, first (Gaebelein and Douglas, 1984:426)

Gaebelein and Douglas, (1984:426) also postulate that “those who approach God in childlike trust will be advanced in the kingdom beyond those who, from the world’s perspective, enjoy prominence now.” Lenski (1943:762) on the other hand comments that “many who at first were in the kingdom will finally be out of it; while many who at first were out of it will at last be in it.”

To adequately achieve the best interpretation of this text, a look at the original language is imperative. From the word analysis above, it is noticed that both words used to signify first and last are *prw/toi* and *e;scatoi* respectively, are similar in case and usage. If this is

so, then this statement (the first shall be the last and the last, first) is used to show equality to those who come to God's kingdom at any time.

This is actually demonstrated in the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16. It is quite glaring that all the workers received the same amount of wages-a denarius for a day's wage. If the land owner contracted some laborers in the morning and at different hours of the day (the third, sixth to the ninth hour) and decided to pay them "whatever is right," and eventually paid all of them a denarius for the reward of their labor, then, it is true that he took all of them as equals. He took them at the same level no matter who came first or last, everyone is equal and will receive the same reward the others received whether first or last.

The interpretation of the first could rightly be said to be the disciples. This is so "for the singular fact that they (the disciples) were Jesus' immediate audience at the time the statement was made according to the context." (Umahi and Wogu, 2011: 80). Jesus had told them about their reward in the kingdom for their denial and also extended it to every other person, he sums by saying that the incredible inheritance of eternal life which is the most important gift will be given to not only the disciples but also every other who makes such denial. From the text, it is clear that the disciples were the first to make this denial and Jesus was using this statement to warn them that inasmuch as they were first to make this denial and follow Him, those who will eventually make such denials at last, no matter the time will also receive the same reward as those who were first. Hence the use of the parable to interpret that statement: the first shall be the last, and the last first.

### *3.2.The Parable In Matthew 20:1-16*

The English word parable "refers to a short narrative with two levels of meaning."(Green and Scott,1992:591).Parables were the teaching methods Jesus chose to explain the kingdom of God, the character of God and the expectation God has for His people. They are "story-lessons designed to be mirrors of real life in order to teach a spiritual truth." (Kimble, 2012)

From the explanations above, it is right to say that parables are not literal, in fact, the "etymology of the word parable is a tip-off that the stories' imagery possesses a symbolic or allegorical level of meaning."(Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman III, 1998:623)Several interpretations have been given to the meaning of the denarius in this parable. While some say it is Jesus our sacrifice, others assume it as the image of God, and many think it is eternal life. (Lenski,1943:766)

Consequently, since a parable must be interpreted in terms of the truth it is designed to teach, (Akpa, 2009:42) a look at the whole block-larger context and the story from its evolution and the relationship presented by each block is required. From the whole block of Matthew 19:16-20:16, three groups can be noticed. The table below shows these groups and their relationships.

	<b>Young Man</b>	<b>Disciples</b>	<b>Laborers</b>
<b>Desire</b>	Eternal Life	Reward for their denial	Reward for their work
<b>Proposal/Requirement/Condition</b>	Sell Possessions	Leave everything and follow Christ	Work in the Vineyard
<b>Promise</b>	Treasure in Heaven	To sit on twelve thrones, gain a “hundred times as much” and eventually inherit Eternal life	A day’s wage-A denarius
<b>Reward Obtained</b>	Nothing	To sit on twelve thrones, gain a “hundred times as much” and eventually inherit Eternal life	A denarius

*Table 1: Relationship between the Three Groups of People in the Pericope of Matthew 19:16-20:16.*

From the table, it can be observed that the three groups desired something, were promised something and lost or gained that thing either at the present time or for the future as in the case of the disciples. Empirically, the table above shows that

- The denarius was promised the workers in the vineyard as the reward for their labor.
- The disciples sacrificed and denied this world even to the extent of leaving family members to follow Jesus and become fishers of men (working for Jesus to gain other souls),

- What the disciples did could be compared to working in the vineyard which the rich man refused to do.
- The laborers in the vineyard received a denarius irrespective of the time they came.
- The denarius as a mode of payment was given to the laborers to show that the land owner treated everyone on equality bases irrespective of the time they came.
- God will also treat every worker on equality bases irrespective of the time one starts working in His vineyard.

It could therefore be stated that the denarius which was given to the laborers who came at different times is the reward (whatever the interpretation might be) for those who enlists to work in the vineyard of God as a preacher or Gospel worker. Consequently, workers in the vineyard of God will receive the same reward irrespective of the time they heed the call to start work, every worker are considered equal by God.

### *3.3. Implications For Preachers (Gospel Workers)*

- The Preacher is a laborer and he is laboring in Gods' vineyard.
- The Gospel Worker has made denials to follow Christ just like the disciples.
- Following Christ could entail working in God's vineyard.
- The Preacher has knowledge of salvation and this makes him/her first to those who he is ministering to.
- The Preacher should understand that at the long run if he/she continues steadfastly in the ministry, he will be considered equal with any other who later heeds the call to the ministry irrespective of the time.
- In God's kingdom everyone is treated with equality no matter who he/she is.
- No preacher is considered high above other preachers or low below other preachers by God, all are equal before God.

## **4. Conclusion**

A preacher is a gospel worker whose primary duty is to take God's good news to the sinner. Preachers are laborers in God's vine yard who have come to know the gospel and are in turn working for others to hear this good news. The words *prowtoid* and *excatoi*

were two words Jesus used to show that everyone will be treated based on equality in the kingdom. The parable in Matthew 20:1-16 further explains that the reward for those who work for God will be equal no matter irrespective of the time a worker commences.

Since the Preacher or Gospel Worker could be considered a laborer in God's vineyard, such person should be aware that his reward is not on merit basis but on equality basis and should treat fellow workers in such manner even those they are laboring to bring into the kingdom.



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