

WHEN THE FIRST BECOME LAST

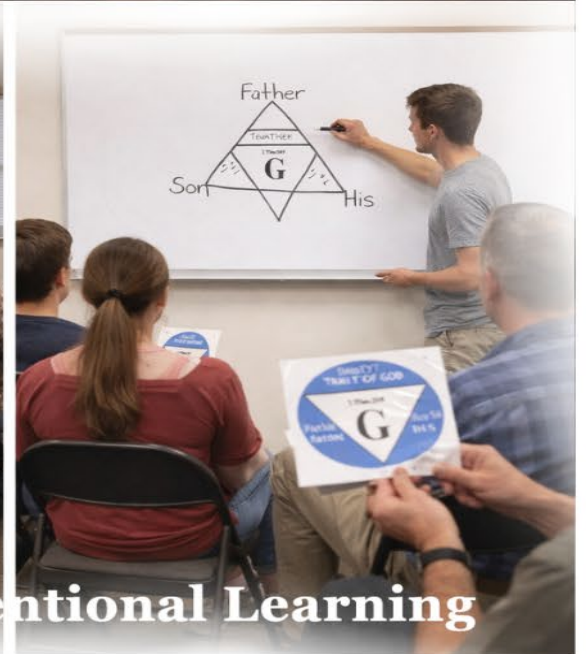
THE HIDDEN DANGER IN HEALTHY CHURCHES



Vineyard – Healthy Church



Cultivated Soil – Greater Fruitfulness



Discipling – Intentional Learning

When the First Become Last The Hidden Danger in Healthy Churches

There are churches where the fellowship is sweet, the people are willing, and the pastor labors faithfully in the Word week after week. The doctrine is sound. The services are orderly. The members are glad to serve. Such churches are a gift from the hand of God. They are not broken. They are not in need of repair.

Yet our LORD once spoke of a vineyard that was active and full of workers, and He ended His teaching with these words: “So the last shall be first, and the first last.”

Those words were not spoken to rebels. They were spoken about workers.

In Matthew chapter 20, the laborers in the vineyard bore the burden and heat of the day. They arrived early. They worked long. They agreed to a fair wage. The Master was just, and the vineyard was productive. Nothing appeared neglected. Nothing appeared disorderly. Yet when the day ended, something in the hearts of the first laborers was revealed.

They compared themselves to others.

When those who had worked only one hour received the same generosity, the first workers measured their service by duration rather than by the Master's goodness. They had labored faithfully, but they had lost sight of grace. Their murmuring exposed a subtle shift in perspective. The vineyard was healthy, but their understanding required cultivation.

The parable follows Peter's question in the previous chapter: “What shall we have therefore?” It was not a wicked question. It was an honest one. Yet our LORD answered it with a story that gently redirected attention away from reward and back to trust.

The Kingdom of Heaven does not operate by human calculation.

Men often measure by length of service, visible activity, numbers, and outward stability. But God's Kingdom measures differently than men do. Our LORD looks beyond what is seen to what is being cultivated within the heart. He measures by obedience, by trust in His goodness, and by fruit that multiplies from life to life. It operates by confidence in the generosity of God.

Even thriving churches should pause and consider this carefully.

The question is not whether the church is healthy, but whether that health is being cultivated for multiplication. If the vineyard in our LORD's parable was active and yet still needed cultivation of heart and perspective, then even strong congregations today must consider how they intentionally prepare believers to move from faithful attendance to fruitful multiplication. In many churches, Sunday School already gathers willing people each week. That gathering can become a gateway not merely for fellowship, but for identifying and equipping those who will grow into disciplers of others.

The ground does not need correction. It needs cultivation.

When the first laborers murmured, the Master did not dismiss their effort. He reminded them of their agreement and then asked a searching question: "Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" The issue was not their labor. The issue was their perspective. They had worked many hours, but they had allowed comparison to shape their understanding of grace.

The issue was never the vineyard itself, but the heart of the laborer. It needed cultivation.

Comparison is subtle. It does not announce itself loudly. It settles quietly into faithful service and begins to measure worth by visibility, duration, and

effort. It forgets that the Master is free to show generosity as He wills. It forgets that joy in service flows from gratitude, not calculation.

Healthy churches are not immune to this subtle shift. A congregation may labor faithfully for years. The preaching may be steady. The ministries may function smoothly. The people may serve willingly and gladly. Yet if service slowly becomes routine rather than reproductive, something essential begins to weaken. Faithfulness remains, but multiplication slows.

The words of our LORD remain: “The last shall be first, and the first last.”

Those words are not a threat. They are a warning wrapped in grace. They remind us that heaven measures differently than we do. Length of service matters, but it is not the only measure. Activity matters, but it is not the final measure. The Kingdom rejoices most when truth multiplies from life to life.

This is where cultivation becomes necessary.

Soil that is left untouched will still grow something. But soil that is intentionally turned produces more. Roots grow deeper. Fruit becomes fuller. The difference is not in the nature of the soil, but in the care given to it.

The ground does not need correction. It needs cultivation.

When our LORD gave the Great Commission, He did not command His disciples merely to gather followers. He commanded them to teach those followers to observe all things whatsoever He had commanded. The word “observe” implies more than hearing. It implies understanding that leads to obedience. It implies truth that settles into life.

Teaching that produces observation requires intention.

Preaching is central. It is ordained by God to declare truth boldly and clearly. Through preaching, hearts are stirred, conviction is awakened, and direction is given. But preaching alone does not always ensure that believers can explain truth clearly to another. Hearing is not the same as retaining. Retaining is not the same as reproducing.

The vineyard in Matthew 20 was active, yet something deeper was lacking. The laborers had worked, but their understanding of grace had not matured as it should have. In the same way, a church may be active, yet still need cultivation in how believers grasp and pass on truth.

Healthy churches often possess great potential. The people are willing. The leadership is faithful. The atmosphere is warm. Nothing is fractured. Nothing is drifting. But potential must be cultivated to become fruitful. Without intentional disciple-making, churches can slowly settle into patterns that maintain rather than multiply.

The ground does not need correction. It needs cultivation.

Cultivation in the Kingdom of God means creating pathways where believers move from attendance to understanding, from understanding to confidence, and from confidence to teaching others. It means helping willing members become capable disciplers. It means providing environments where Scripture is not only proclaimed, but also discussed, clarified, and practiced.

Such cultivation does not compete with preaching. It strengthens it. It does not replace pastoral leadership. It extends it. When believers grow in their ability to articulate truth and guide others through Scripture, the pastor's labor multiplies far beyond the pulpit.

In many congregations, Sunday School already gathers believers faithfully each week. Classrooms are filled with willing people who desire fellowship

and instruction. Teachers prepare lessons. Members attend consistently. Relationships are formed. The soil is present.

The question is not whether Sunday School exists. The question is whether it is being cultivated intentionally for multiplication.

If the gathering remains primarily informational, believers may grow in familiarity without growing in confidence. But if the gathering becomes a place where Scripture is carefully examined, questions are openly welcomed, memory is deliberately strengthened, and members are encouraged to explain the truth in their own words, something begins to change. The classroom becomes more than a meeting. It becomes a training ground.

The vineyard in Matthew 20 was not empty. Workers were already present. The Master did not need to plant new soil. He revealed the need for a deeper understanding within those who were already there.

In the same way, healthy churches do not need new foundations. They need deeper cultivation of what already exists.

The ground does not need correction. It needs cultivation.

When Sunday School becomes a gateway for identifying those willing to grow into disciplers, the church begins to multiply naturally. Those who grasp the truth clearly begin to strengthen others. Families grow stronger at home. Conversations become more grounded in Scripture. The pastor's teaching is reinforced throughout the week by voices cultivated to speak with clarity and humility.

This is not innovation. It is obedience to the pattern our LORD established. Teaching that leads to observation. Learning that leads to living. Living that leads to multiplication.

When our LORD concluded the parable with the words, “So the last shall be first, and the first last,” He was not speaking of sudden collapse. He was revealing a gradual reversal. Those who appeared first by human measure were not rejected; they were exposed. Their labor had been real. Their endurance had mattered. Yet their understanding had not matured as it should have.

The danger was not open rebellion. It was a subtle misalignment.

Healthy churches must guard against that same quiet shift. It is possible to be first in activity and yet become last in multiplication. It is possible to be first in longevity and yet lag in reproduction. It is possible to be first in structure and yet shallow in cultivation.

None of these are accusations. They are invitations to examine ourselves in light of our LORD’s words.

The vineyard was good. The workers were present. The Master was generous. Yet perspective needed to be turned, much like soil must be turned if it is to remain fruitful season after season.

The ground does not need correction. It needs cultivation.

Cultivation requires intention. It does not happen by accident. A field left unattended may still produce something, but a field carefully tilled yields far more. In the Kingdom of God, intentional disciple-making is that careful tilling. It is the deliberate help given to believers to understand, retain, and reproduce the truth they hear.

When believers are cultivated in this way, something beautiful happens. Faith becomes articulate. Conviction becomes steady. Service becomes purposeful. The pastor’s influence expands through the lives of those who have been strengthened to disciple others.

The vineyard becomes more fruitful, not because something was broken, but because something was cultivated.

The words of our LORD remain before us: “So the last shall be first, and the first last.” Those words are not spoken in anger. They are spoken in clarity. They remind faithful workers that the Kingdom of Heaven measures differently than we do. The Master looks not only at hours worked, but at hearts cultivated. He delights not only in activity but in multiplication.

Healthy churches are a blessing. Faithful pastors are gifts to their congregations. Willing members are evidence of God’s grace. Nothing needs to be dismantled. Nothing needs to be condemned. Yet every vineyard, no matter how fruitful, must be cultivated if it is to remain so.

Sunday School classrooms already hold gathered soil. Teachers already labor. Members already attend. Within those rooms lies great potential. When those gatherings are intentionally shaped to help believers move from hearing to understanding, from understanding to confidence, and from confidence to discipling others, the fruit begins to multiply.

The ground does not need correction. It needs cultivation.

May the LORD guard healthy churches from quiet complacency. May He protect faithful leaders from measuring success only by stability. May He help congregations rejoice not merely in attendance, but in reproduction. And may He give wisdom to cultivate what He has already planted, so that none who have labored long will ever find themselves last in fruitfulness because the soil was left untouched.

The vineyard is good. It can bear more fruit.

It is a mercy that our LORD gave this parable to faithful workers. He did not wait until the vineyard was empty. He spoke while it was active. He

spoke while labor was taking place. He spoke so that those who were first might remain fruitful.

That mercy remains for us.

Healthy churches are not warned because they are failing. They are reminded because they are capable of much more. The same grace that saved them is able to deepen them. The same truth that has sustained them is able to multiply through them. The same Master who called them into the vineyard still walks among the rows, desiring fruit that remains.

Cultivation is not dramatic. It is steady. It is patient. It is deliberate. It happens when leaders and teachers give thoughtful attention to helping believers understand what they believe and why they believe it. It happens when members are encouraged to speak truth aloud, to answer questions carefully, and to guide others gently through Scripture. It happens when gatherings become places not only for listening, but for learning that leads to making disciples who multiply.

The ground does not need correction. It needs cultivation.

If we allow the words of our LORD to search us, we will not ask how long we have labored, but how deeply we have cultivated. We will not measure only by what has been maintained, but by what has been multiplied. We will rejoice in the generosity of the Master and seek to reflect that generosity by strengthening others.

“So the last shall be first, and the first last.”

May those words never become a quiet reversal among us because we were content with stability. May they remain a gentle reminder that faithful vineyards must always be tended. And may the LORD, who is gracious and good, grant us wisdom to cultivate what He has planted for His glory. Amen.