



# THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST: Why is it better to be last? Facilitator's Guide

KINGDOM

## 🎯 OVERVIEW:

The world has trained us to expect life to work in a specific way: the survival of the fittest. The mighty and forceful will always win over the weak and humble. What's the best way to succeed? By putting yourself first and others last. You see this in businesses, grad school, and even on the childhood playground. The most successful people push others around and look out for "number one." But God's kingdom works in unexpected ways. This lesson focuses on the principle that Jesus teaches his followers: the last shall be first, and the first shall be last. God chooses the lowly and the servants of the world to take up his great mission. Those who put others down for their own benefit will find the new economy of God's kingdom a hard pill to swallow.

## ? OPENING QUESTIONS:

- When was the last time you chose to be "last" instead of "first" (e.g., let your sibling have "shotgun" in the car, let a friend choose the movie or TV show to watch, offered to clean the dishes without being asked)? Why did you do that?
- Why does it seem so unnatural to try and be last?

## 💬 WHAT THE BIBLE HAS TO SAY ABOUT IT:

"I hope I finish last." Has anyone ever said that to you? That would be pretty weird, right? Imagine a commercial for a brand new sneaker in which a star athlete sprints and spins, showing off the shoe. Then the athlete ends the commercial by saying, "With these shoes, you'll always finish last." That wouldn't make sense. We know how the world works. Winning matters. And if you ask most people how to "win" at life, their answer might sound like a strategy for winning a board game like Monopoly or The Game of LIFE: "Get a good education so you can find a well-paying job so you can buy a huge house so you can retire in luxury. The other players are your enemies, so you should do whatever you can to push them back and propel yourself forward. In the end, whoever has the most power and money wins!"

But God's kingdom has a different system for "winning" at life. According to God's rulebook, people who step on others and clamber to the top of the heap at the expense of those below them will end up losing—not always in this life, but certainly in eternity. And those who put themselves last by serving people in need and propping others up to success will be made first in God's kingdom. At the end of the day, God doesn't care about how successful you've been. He's more interested in your relationship with him and how you've treated others. Jesus' followers and friends had to learn this lesson the hard way. In the following passage, note how Jesus flips his disciples' expectations on their heads.





**LEADER'S NOTE:** This concept may not rock your students' world. They've probably heard over and over the benefits of putting others first. But Jesus' emphasis on service is fundamentally different from the world's. Chances are, your students have been told to do good things because good things will happen to them. "Be humble because humility will make you a more successful leader." "Serve others and others will be more likely to do what you want." "Help people because it will make you feel good." Service (becoming "last") isn't the goal; it's a means to an end, a strategy to put them ahead of others in the future. That's the trap Jesus' disciples fell into. They may have put themselves last by leaving their jobs, homes, and families, but they only did it to earn future power and rewards in heaven. To them, service was just an investment—sacrifice now to earn a better reward later. They clearly didn't understand the new economy of God's kingdom. But soon Jesus would demonstrate the radical sacrifice he called his followers to, putting other people first out of love, not future rewards. At the cross, Jesus showed what it truly means to put others first by making yourself "last."

**Read:** Mark 10:35–45

**Discuss:**

- No one can argue that James, John, and the other disciples sacrificed nothing to follow Jesus. They gave up so much! So why does Jesus rebuke them?
- What were the disciples concerned with? What did Jesus want them to focus on?
- Do you expect to get more from God by doing certain things or following him longer than someone else? Is this the way God's kingdom works?
- How did Jesus demonstrate to his disciples and to us what it means to make yourself "last" instead of "first"?



**A SECOND LOOK:**

Just as God's grace often works in mysterious ways, God often uses people the world wouldn't expect. God chooses to use people who follow the principle that Jesus shares with his disciples in Mark 9:35, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Richard Allen was born a slave. In 1760, when Richard Allen was born, people could be legally bought and sold in the United States. This may seem strange now, but to Richard, it was all he'd ever known. The person who owned Richard was not a Christian, but he allowed Richard to go to church. Allen embraced Christ as his Savior and worked hard to show his owner the dramatic difference Christ makes in a person's life. Many slaveholders thought that attending church would make slaves lazy, but Richard and his brothers pushed themselves to show that Christ's influence actually makes a person better. Through Richard's example, his owner started following Christ and came to realize that slavery was wrong. He allowed Richard to purchase his freedom.

It took him five years, but Richard eventually worked enough to become a free man. What did he do with his newfound freedom? Richard devoted himself to spreading the message of Christ's love and grace. He started the first independent black denomination in the United States, and oversaw its growth and ministry. Because God chose him for a unique purpose and brought him out of slavery, Richard focused on helping other black people and slaves claim the dignity with which God made them. He provided opportunities for them to worship God without fear of oppression and operated a station on



the Underground Railroad to help slaves find their way to freedom. In Richard Allen, God chose someone society deemed the absolute “last” and used him to help put others first. Richard was able to do amazing things for God’s kingdom that other people could never have done.<sup>1</sup>

**Discuss:**

- Even though Richard Allen was considered the “last” in society, how did he treat others?
- Do you think God’s opinion of Richard changed when he became free?
- When Richard became free, he could have used his freedom to keep moving forward and to concentrate on his own wants and needs. What did he do instead?
- Who are the hardest people to serve in your life?
- Most of us won’t experience difficulties like Richard Allen’s, but you may still feel like you’re at the bottom of society’s hierarchy (below your government, parents, school administrators, teachers, coaches, and even upper-classmen). How can you start impacting the lives of others, even when you’re pretty far down the social ladder?



**RATE IT:**

Give yourself a 1 to 5 rating. How well are you doing at putting others first and yourself last?

<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
I hate to admit it, but I usually put myself and my needs first.	I focus on serving others when there’s a service event at my church or school.	I go out of my way to serve others on a daily basis, even when it takes a toll on my life.



**LIVE IT OUT: My Cup Runneth Over**

**What you’ll need:** a few boxes of small paper clips, a 10-oz plastic cup, and a pitcher of water.



**Say something like:**

*Mark 9:35 says, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” That’s a pretty big shift in our expectations. The world teaches us that those who put themselves first and put others down often end up ahead in life. But God’s kingdom defies our expectations. Just when we think we know what to expect, something else happens. As we’ve learned in this lesson, Jesus tells us that those who put themselves first will end up last, and the last will be first. This demonstration will show that God created the world in a way that regularly defies our expectations.*

**BASIC INSTRUCTIONS:** Use the pitcher to fill the plastic cup with water as much as you possibly can. You might even let it spill over a bit, just to prove that it’s as full as it can be. The water should bubble up slightly above the rim of the cup.

1. Ask the students how many paper clips they think you can drop into the cup of water before it spills over. Use a whiteboard to write down their guesses. (Most students will probably guess one or two, but some may try to over-shoot it by guessing 25 or so).



2. Once all the students have made their guesses, start dropping paper clips into the cup of water, one by one. Be sure to drop them in slowly and carefully, taking care not to splash. Have a student tally the number of paper clips you've dropped in.
3. Stop adding paper clips, once the water spills over the edge. If you're careful, you should be able to drop in over 250 paper clips (depending on size) before the water spills over. After 100 paper clips, you might start dropping them in two or three at a time to speed things up and add some interest. As long as you do so carefully, the demonstration should still work.

**LEADER'S NOTE:** It's always a good idea to practice a demonstration at home before you do it in front of students. You'll have a better idea of what to expect, and you can work out any issues that may pop up.

### **Discuss:**

- Why didn't you expect the cup of water to hold that many paper clips?
- What does this demonstration show us about the way God made the world?
- How are God's rules for living different than what the world expects of us?
- Why is it worth it to follow God's rules for living rather than the world's rules?



### **APPLY IT:**

Write down one way you are going to apply what you now know about being a servant in God's kingdom. What difference will it make in your life this week? How will you apply it to your life?

### **Be specific:**

What are you going to do?

When are you going to do it?

Is there someone who can keep you accountable?

**LEADER'S NOTE:** Whenever students make applications, challenge them to be specific. It's one thing to say, "I'm going to trust God more." The truth is, our students won't really know if they did this, or if they grew in trust over the week. It's another thing to say, "Every morning this week before I eat breakfast, I'm going to tell God that today is his and that I trust him, and I'm going to ask him to give me the strength to replace worries with trust." Challenge your students to answer the questions under the "Be Specific" section. You can even have them pair up, share their applications, and ask for accountability from their partner.



### **THINK ABOUT IT:**

"And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, 'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.' And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me,'" (Mark 9:35-37).

\*\*\*Any reference within this piece to Internet addresses of websites not under the administration of LeaderTreks is not to be taken as an endorsement of these websites by LeaderTreks; neither does LeaderTreks vouch for their content.

<sup>1</sup> Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).