

MATTHEW 20:1-16

WILL THERE BE DEGREES OF REWARDS?

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”¹

The issue raised may be phrased in different ways, any of which you have undoubtedly heard at some time, or perhaps that you have even raised in your own mind. “What’s in it for me?” “Why should I work hard when I get the same reward as those who do nothing?” “God doesn’t seem all that fair if someone else who comes to faith late receives the same reward as I receive.” The question is tough primarily because we want to think in terms of being recognised for what we have done. Unconsciously, we believe that God is our debtor.

At the outset, let me set the thought of labouring for rewards against a truth Jesus taught the Twelve. The Master said, “Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” [LUKE 17:7-10].

Note that the parable before us is not about salvation; no one works for salvation, which is the free gift of God. Paul writes, “The free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ” [ROMANS 5:15-17].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Neither is the parable before us about rewards for service. God rewards believers differently, according to their service. You may recall that Jesus said, “Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together” [JOHN 4:36]. Similarly, Paul has written, “He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labour” [1 CORINTHIANS 3:8].

Rather, the parable before us focuses on examining our attitudes—focusing on motivation in service and teaching about gratitude. It is only through the intervention of the Master that anyone receives anything. If we imagine that we deserve anything for our time, our effort or our commitment to serve, we negate the true value of all that we might have done. We respond to grace extended and we serve because of grace. We dare not measure our worth by what we may have accomplished or the labours we may have performed. When we fall into that trap, we shortly begin to question the wisdom and the fairness of God, and we grow envious of other fellow servants of the Master.

BACKGROUND — In order to understand Jesus’ teaching we need to go back to what had just transpired to bring the Master to present this parable. You will recall that a rich young man had sought to justify entrance into Heaven. He was not unlike so many today. I watched part of the funeral for a noted singer this past week. Various people spoke at a four-hour funeral, each of them assuring all who listened that she was in Heaven because “she really loved the Lord.

Tragically, despite beginning her career singing in a church choir and despite having a mother that appears to be committed to the Faith, her life took another direction. There was little in her life to make anyone imagine that she was following the Master. However, those identified with this dying world attempt to assure one another that all is fine and God will overlook their rebellion and utter focus on fulfilling their own desires. That was the attitude of the rich young man who went away dejected and grieved when the Master told him to divest himself of his wealth and seize on that which was true wealth [see MATTHEW 19:16-22].

The event providing a teachable moment, Jesus spoke to His disciples. “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” [MATTHEW 19:23, 24].

Notice the response of the disciples. “When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, ‘Who then can be saved?’” [MATTHEW 19:25]? It is as though they exclaimed, “Wow! If he doesn’t deserve Heaven, who does?”

Listen to Jesus’ reply to their astonishment. “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” [MATTHEW 19:26].

Now, take note of Peter’s interjection. He appears to have voiced the unspoken position each of them held. “Look, we’ve given up everything to follow you. What will we get out of it” [MATTHEW 19:27]?² His response was much like that we might give, “What’s in it for us?”

Take especial note of Jesus’ response to Peter’s question. “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” [MATTHEW 19:28, 29]. Focus on the final sentence, for it is the inverse of what is stated in our text. “Many who are first will be last, and the last first” [MATTHEW 19:30].

² **God’s Word Translation** (Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids MI 1995)

Peter appears to be trying to assert his superiority to the rich young man, calling on Jesus to take note of his service. In this, Peter is very much like us in seeking for recognition of what he thinks of as sacrifice. Isn't it strange that we trust the Master with our eternal salvation, and doubt His fairness in taking cognizance of what we may have done in His Name?

This questioning of God's fairness served as the basis for Jesus to instruct the disciples. He told of the owner of a vineyard who sought men to harvest his grapes. The Jewish day is divided into three hour segments. Accordingly, this vintner hired day labourers to work for the day, agreeing to pay each of them one denarius, which was the going rate for a day of labour. About nine o'clock, he saw that the task would be greater than he had thought, so he hired more labourers out of the marketplace. Inspecting the work, he felt compelled to hire men at twelve noon and again at three in the afternoon. Apparently wishing to ensure that the work was completed, he brought still more workers into the vineyard at five p.m.

At six, when the work for the day was complete, he called the men to pay them for their labours, as was the custom of the land. Beginning with those hired last, who had worked but one hour, he gave each a denarius. However, those who had worked the longest grumbled, complaining that they had worked longer than the others, and so they should have received more. Jesus has the master of the house saying, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"

Then, Jesus appends this commentary, "Many who are first will be last, and the last first." As has already been noted, the comparison between what Jesus said here and His earlier words concluding his response to Peter are evident. Many who imagine they deserve something will be disappointed when they receive nothing. Many who laboured out of love will be richly rewarded. The Master's words call us to examine our motives for serving, asking what we seek, and ensuring that we seek His glory.

LESSONS FROM THE PARABLE — *Heaven is all of grace.* No one will attain Heaven because he or she deserves to be there; the redeemed give glory and honour and power to the Lord God [REVELATION 4:11]; thus, we will give blessing and honour and glory and might to the Lamb [REVELATION 5:12, 13]. Though the Master does not specifically state the issue, this is nevertheless the first great lesson arising from what Jesus teaches in this parable.

Let me explain the issue by exploring popular assumptions commonly held by some individuals. Many people assume that because they have been active in some church related work, or because they have been a member of a church for many years, or because they are prominent in their own assembly, that they deserve consideration from God. They are disappointed when recognition is not forthcoming, or when they imagine prayers are not answered, or when they don't receive some reward they felt they deserved. Such people are labouring under the concept of a contract, rather than operating in the sphere of grace.

God does not over-promise. The labourers agreed to work for a denarius; they assumed because the master of the house was generous to those hired late in the day that their agreement would be raised accordingly. In effect, the ones hired first attempted to work from a contract rather than depending upon the generosity of the one who hired them. Herein lies the peril in Peter's question posed in MATTHEW 19:27: "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" We must not suppose we will receive more when we do not deserve more. Labourers must trust Christ without reservation, believing that He will provide generously.

Believers must beware of overconfidence; likewise, they must not grow discouraged. God has promised to be generous toward us, and we need to leave reward to His discretion. Many professed saints of God attempt to be motivated by fairness when we need to be motivated by gratitude. We would do well to recall the rhetorical question Paul asked Christians of Corinth: “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it” [1 CORINTHIANS 4:7]? We must strive to ensure that our motivation is pleasing God who has shown us such grace rather than merely seeking rewards.

Be careful not to look at other workers, comparing your compensation to what they receive. ***Beware of measuring yourself by others***. “Do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes,” cautions the Apostle. At the return of the Lord, “Each one will receive his commendation from God” [1 CORINTHIANS 4:5]. There is a tendency among the most spiritual saints to compare themselves to others. You must realise that you shall stand before God for yourself. Perhaps we would do well to remember Paul’s assertion when cautioning against judging fellow Christians. Focus especially on the latter part of this verse, “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand” [ROMANS 14:4].

Again, ***we must avoid complaining against God***. Perhaps this need not be mentioned, but since Jesus spoke of the grumbling of the labourers, I suspect that it is important for us to receive the caution of stating what should be obvious. If some who would call God “Father” are seen to act like the elder brother from the parable of a lost son [see LUKE 15:11-32], then it is apparent that any of us are capable of falling into the trap of complaining that God is not fair.

Are there degrees of rewards? Perhaps! However, there is grace for all, and that is what is promised. God deals with His people on the basis of grace, showering us with far more than we deserve. Where we deserved condemnation, we received mercy. Where we deserved death, we received life. Where we deserved rejection, we received adoption. Whatever we received from the Master, it is far more than we should ever expect. Amen.