

THE PARABLE OF THE PENNY

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Matthew 20:1-16 records a parable of Christ, often referred to as the parable of the penny. Many people misunderstand this parable to teach that everyone who goes to heaven will receive the exact same reward and that there will be no degree of rewards. Since all the laborers received a penny for their labor no matter when they started or how much work they did, then many conclude that the “penny” in this parable represents eternal life in heaven and that all who go there will get the same reward. But such is not the case.

The gift of eternal life

The notion that Matthew 20:1-16 teaches an equality of reward to the righteous in the hereafter is a misunderstanding of the parable that Jesus teaches in these verses. First of all, to equate the penny in the parable to heaven would mean that the parable is teaching that we can earn our salvation! The first laborers were *hired* in the early morning (Matt 20:1), and they all *agreed* to work in the vineyard for the wages of one penny for the entire day (Matt 20:2). Later, at nine o’clock, more laborers were *hired* to work for “whatsoever is right” (Matt 20:3-4), and then the same thing happened at noon and three o’clock in the afternoon (Matt 20:5). At five o’clock in the afternoon, the last laborers were hired, also agreeing to work for “whatsoever is right” (Matt 20:6-7). In the evening, all the laborers were called to receive “their hire” (Matt 20:8). The ones who worked only for an hour (Matt 20:12) were given a full penny (Matt 20:9), as were the ones who had worked for twelve hours (Matt 20:10). The ones who were hired first “supposed” that they would receive more (Matt 20:10), and they murmured against their master when they received their penny (Matt 20:11-12). The master replied, *“Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen”* (Matt 20:13-16). All of these laborers were given *wages* that they had agreed to and then had worked to *earn*. This cannot be equated with eternal salvation. Salvation is a reward reckoned of *grace* and not of *debt*

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(Rom 4:4). Rather, eternal life is “the *gift* of God” (Rom 6:23). Yes, we must obey God in order to receive the gift (Heb 5:9), but it is still a gift and not something that God owes us. In the parable in Matthew 20:1-16, the penny was not a gift, but was indeed *owed* by the master to the laborers who had worked for it according to their agreement.

Degrees of reward

Secondly, to equate the penny in the parable to heaven would contradict the many passages of scripture where the Lord plainly teaches that there *will* be degrees of reward given in heaven.

Whatever the parable in Matthew 20:1-16 is talking about, it cannot stand in contradiction to other scriptures. The Lord plainly teaches that in eternity he will reward every man according to his works (Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 5:10; 1 Pet 1:7; Rev 20:12-13). For this to be true, it would be impossible for everyone to get the same reward, because not everyone does the same works. For example, Paul “labored more abundantly” than all the other apostles (1 Cor 15:10). For those who serve God more than others to end up with the same reward as those who served less would require a *loss* of reward for them. But the Lord promises us that we will not lose any reward for any service we render to him (Matt 10:42; Mark 9:41). The more treasure we lay up in heaven, the greater our reward will be (Matt 25:34-40; Col 3:23-24; 1 Tim 5:24-25), and it cannot be corrupted or stolen (Matt 6:20; Luke 12:33). That is why Christians who become the “servant of all” will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 20:25-28; Mark 9:35; 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-26). Yet the Lord does warn us that we can lose a reward if we do not labor for Him wisely (1 Cor 3:15; 2 John 8). Those who build wisely and whose works “abide” will receive a reward (1 Cor 3:10-14). Those whose work does not abide will “suffer loss, but he himself shall be saved” (1 Cor 3:15). This clearly shows that there will be different rewards for those who are saved. The scriptures categorically teach that “every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor” (1 Cor 3:8). There will be degrees of reward for the righteous, and degrees of punishment for the wicked (Matt 11:20-24; Luke 12:47-48; Heb 10:28-29; 2 Pet 2:20-22).