

The Parable of the Penny

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard.”

—Matthew 20:1,2

“standing idle,” and he said to them, “Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you.” They agreed, and went to labor in the vineyard.—vss. 3,4

At the sixth and ninth hours the householder similarly hired additional workers. At the eleventh hour he found still others who were idle, and said to them, “Go ye also into the vineyard.” (vss. 5-7)

IN THE PARABLE OF THE

penny, recorded in Matthew 20:1-16, Jesus tells us of a householder who left his home early in the morning to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. As indicated in our opening scripture, he agreed with these to pay them a penny [Greek, *Denarius*] for a day’s work. Three hours later, while at the market-place, the householder saw other potential laborers

Here the *King James Version* adds, “And whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive,” as in the case of those hired at the third hour. However, this phrase is omitted in most other translations with respect to the eleventh-hour workers. At the close of the day, all the laborers received the same pay, which was the penny agreed upon by the householder when he hired the first workers in the morning.—vss. 8-10

In the parable, these “first” ones to be hired are said to complain because they did not receive more than those who worked fewer hours. (vss. 10-12) The householder’s reply to this complaint is in the form of a simple question: “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?” (vs. 15) An important prerogative of our Heavenly Father is thus set forth, upon which the Apostle Paul enlarged.

Paul said, “It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy. . . . Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?” (Rom. 9:16-21) A more understandable rendering of verse 21 is found in the *Contemporary English Version*, which reads, “Doesn’t a potter have the right to make a fancy bowl and a plain bowl out of the same lump of clay?”

It would seem that one of the important lessons of the parable of the penny is that none of God’s

servants has the right to criticize him for the manner in which he bestows his benefactions. Certainly any “wages” he may pay are actually unearned, hence manifestations of divine grace. Paul wrote, “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.”—Eph. 2:8

THE SETTING

The setting of the “penny” parable throws much light on its purpose and meaning. In the previous chapter of Matthew’s gospel, it is recorded that a young man had approached Jesus and asked him what he could do to inherit eternal life. Jesus’ ultimate answer to this man was, “Go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.”—Matt. 19:16-21; Luke 18:18-22

The account states that “when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.” (Matt. 19:22) Puzzled by this, the disciples asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus replied, “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.” (vss. 25,26) Then Peter, evidently having in mind the invitation to the young man to give up all his possessions and follow Jesus, brashly said, “Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?”—vs. 27

Jesus’ reply to Peter’s question was: “Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children,

or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first."—vss. 28-30

The Master's answer to Peter is his introduction to the parable of the penny. This fact is obscured somewhat by the chapter division made by the translators. However, this is overcome to some extent in some translations by the placement of a paragraph sign at the beginning of verse 27, in chapter 19, and indicating the continuance of the same subject through verse 16 in chapter 20.

This continuance of the lesson from chapter 19 to chapter 20 of Matthew is indicated by Jesus' opening words to the parable—"For the kingdom of heaven is like unto. . . ." Also, at the close of the parable, Jesus makes this statement: "So the last shall be first, and the first last." (Matt. 20:16) These words repeat what he had said at the end of chapter 19. In other words, Jesus, at the end of the parable, is simply noting that the parable is the explanation of how "the first shall be last" and "the last shall be first," as stated in verse 30 of the preceding chapter.

Prior to Pentecost, before the apostles received the Holy Spirit and were able to discern the true meaning of the promises pertaining to their heavenly inheritance, they displayed some anxiety over what their reward for following the Master would really turn out to be. In a vague sort of way they believed that they would share in the honors of his kingdom, but with this they were not entirely satisfied. Some wanted to be greatest in the kingdom. James and John wanted to sit, one on the right

hand and the other on the left hand of Jesus in the kingdom.

Now circumstances had again reminded them of what they might expect to receive, hence the question, "What shall we have therefore?" Jesus had explained to the young rich man that if he would give up all that he had and become his follower, he would have treasures in heaven. It is doubtful if the apostles at that time understood what this meant. They did not expect a heavenly reward. They expected to be co-rulers with Jesus in an earthly kingdom centered in Jerusalem, but now he had mentioned treasures in heaven. What did he mean?

This question was of vital concern to them because they had done exactly what Jesus suggested to the rich young ruler—they had given up all they had, and had become his followers. If this rich man could buy treasures in heaven with his riches, to what would they be entitled for the giving up of their all, which was doubtless much less?

In addition, the apostles had been following Jesus for some time—from nearly the beginning of his ministry. Would any consideration be given to this? There is no evidence that they were complaining, but they surely were concerned—indeed, overly concerned—as to what they would receive in return for giving up all that they had. This, of course, is understandable, because they were still natural men, and had not yet received the begetting of God's Holy Spirit.

THE BOUNTIFUL REWARD

Jesus had reassured his disciples in a marvelous manner that, if faithful in following him, they

would receive a far greater reward than anything to which they were entitled. In the time of the “regeneration”—the Messianic Age of restitution—when he would sit on the “throne of his glory,” they also would be enthroned, to share with him in the work of judging Israel and the whole world of mankind. In addition to this, they were to inherit eternal life—immortality—as was later revealed to them.

There is no real comparison between this “prize of the high calling” and the few earthly possessions that Jesus’ followers gave up to be his disciples. There is also no real comparison between the eternal years of joy with the Lord on the other side of the veil, and the few short years of imperfect service amid trial and suffering which the followers of Christ render now. The disciples, however, had not yet grasped this larger viewpoint of their relationship to the Master.

When the apostles were arguing over which one of them would be greatest in the kingdom, Jesus gave them a lesson in humility by calling attention to the humbleness of a child and stated that they should be as a little child. (Matt. 18:1-3; Mark 9:35,36) So now, seeing that they were too concerned over how much they would receive in return for following him, he related the parable of the penny to help them see that all his faithful followers would receive a just and bountiful reward, greater than anything of which they were worthy.

Of even greater importance then, and throughout the age, is the need to have full confidence in Jesus and in his Heavenly Father. With that should come the recognition that they have the right to reward their servants in any way they desire, and that

whatever rewards they mete out are unmerited. This has been an important lesson for all of the Lord's people. It is by grace that we attain unto the "great salvation," and not by any meritorious works of our own.—Heb. 2:3

That the amount of work done by the followers of the Master has no specific bearing on the reward received, is emphasized in the parable by the statement that the first became last and the last became first. This is simply an exchange of positions. The initial workers hired put in more hours, but then the "last" ones employed were paid the same as the "first." Similarly, the original "first" ones were paid the same as "last." All the laborers received the "penny," emphasizing that the number of hours worked did not enter into the amount of wages paid.

Jesus taught that "wonderful works" would not earn his favor. He stated, "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name have done wonderful works?" Jesus explained that he would say to these, "I never knew you."—Matt. 7:22,23

This does not mean that the Lord's people are not expected to sacrifice and serve. Those in the parable were hired to work. However, it is the matter of faithfulness in service that is important. This is indicated by the statement at the end of the parable, "Many be called, but few chosen." (Matt. 20:16) Those who ultimately will be enthroned with Jesus are described in Revelation 17:14 as those who not only are "called," but are also "chosen, and faithful." Faithfulness, however, is not determined by the length of time served, nor by the amount of

sacrifice, but whether or not the service is rendered in a way pleasing to the Lord.

The motive for serving the Lord is one of the vital considerations from this lesson. Paul wrote that even though he gave all that he had to feed the poor—as Jesus had suggested to the rich young ruler—and did not have love, it would profit him nothing. One might even give his body to be burned, but it would be to no profit so far as treasures in heaven are concerned, if it were done from any other motive than unselfish love.—I Cor. 13:3

There is only one sense in which the amount we give of “goods” or “time” enters into acceptable service to the Lord. That is, it must be our all. This “all” of the disciples of Christ in every part of the age includes time, talents, strength, and goods. In the parable these are all illustrated by the element of time. Those who were hired early in the morning had to spend the entire day working in the vineyard in order to obtain the “penny.” Those hired at the eleventh hour had to be faithful during the one hour remaining of the day, for this was their all.

In Jesus’ day, the “all” of the apostles who had been fishermen would be different from the “all” of Matthew, the tax collector. However, regardless of how little or how much our all may be, if we give it freely and with love, we will receive the “penny.” What a wonderful arrangement this is! It is encouraging to the widow with her “mite,” and it is a reminder to others who may have much. Each has a great responsibility with their “all” in connection with the work of the vineyard. The test of worthiness in all cases is the spirit with which the sacrifice is laid upon the altar, and kept there until it is consumed.

A PARABLE

What beautiful truths concerning the Christian life are illustrated by the parable of the penny when viewed in the light of the Master's own introduction to it. In any parable, the thing said is never the same as the thing meant. None of the details of this parable have ever had a literal fulfillment, and never will. For example, mention is made of five periods of the day in which servants are hired to work in a vineyard. There is nothing in the Bible, nor in the history of the Gospel Age, to indicate that at five different times throughout the centuries anything remotely resembling this has ever happened.

The parable illustrates the simple basis upon which the called ones, all during the Gospel Age, may prove worthy of living and reigning with Christ. They must give their all, regardless of how little or how much that may be, unto death. In relating the parable, Jesus anticipated that there might be some who, when learning of this arrangement, would not be satisfied with it. Thus, he takes these into account and shows how wrong such an attitude would be—that, in effect, it would be calling in question the justice and wisdom of God.

Another important point to remember is that the parable was not given to reveal what will happen when the saints pass beyond the veil. Rather, it is to teach the importance of a proper appreciation of God's abounding grace, and respect for his decisions, while we are still on this side of the veil. How impressively the parable teaches these vital lessons!

The Bible clearly reveals, through this parable and otherwise, that the disciple who faithfully

follows the Master for fifty or more years will receive the same reward in the kingdom—that of glory, honor, and immortality—as the one who has been faithful for a very short period of time. The brethren in the Early Church knew this, and we know it today. This is not a truth which will be discovered by some only after they pass beyond the veil.

Upon the basis of God's promises, we have already received assurance of our reward—if we prove faithful. In prayer, Jesus said of his disciples, "The glory which thou gavest me I have given them." (John 17:22) At that time, Jesus had received this glory only by promise, and he had given it to his disciples only by promise. However, the promises of our Heavenly Father, and of our Lord Jesus, are sure, and it remains only for us to be faithful to the conditions attached to them for the glories promised actually to become ours.

Jesus did, by promise, give his disciples the glory which his Father had given to him. When Peter asked what they would receive in return for the "all" which they had given up to follow him, he said, "When the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones." Over and over again the Lord, through his Word, gives this reward to us by promise. Jesus said, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne."—Rev. 3:21

Whether our reward be thought of as a promise now, or as a reality beyond the veil, it is entirely a gift of God's grace. No one can work long enough to earn it, nor has anyone sufficient "goods" to purchase it. This priceless "penny" is given to those who

demonstrate their faithfulness by giving their all, regardless of how much that might be. In the parable, Jesus emphasizes how wrong it would be for any of us, when we understand the matter properly, to question God's goodness and justice in making this gracious arrangement. Thanks be to the Heavenly Father for his unerring wisdom and boundless mercy! ■