

Masterwork of the Messiah

Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

Rewards Of The Righteous

Written By

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Sometimes the answers to questions are not what you anticipate. Take, for example, what happened as I purchased a computer book at a Barnes and Noble to help me understand how to better use Adobe Illustrator. The only problem was I didn't know the version I had back at the office, and just in case it was a different version than the book, I asked the cashier, "Say, if this book is the wrong version can I bring it back?"

I didn't know if he heard me or not because I couldn't see his face because of the long hair hanging over his face. He punched a few keys on the register, and then a voice came out of the hair, "Yeah, man, you can return it, that is, if you bought it here."

In situations like this sometimes you just have to say what needs saying ... as a caring Christian, of course. So, I proceeded ...

"Hey, am I not standing here in your store with your book?"

He replied in a monotone voice from behind the hair screen, "Well, I guess that means you can return the book."

I don't know about you, but cashiers like that make me worry a little bit for the next generation. No, really, I couldn't believe he said what he said.

Jesus, on one particular occasion faced a similar jaw-dropping question from Peter. You'll remember the context. A rich, young ruler asked Christ how to make sure he would enter the heavenly paradise. Knowing that the young man worshipped his money and financial holdings, Jesus challenged him to sell everything and follow him. If he would do this, then heaven would be his for he had chosen, by faith, to follow the true God. As we know, the

twenty-something just couldn't liquidate his holdings to make sure he would inherit a heavenly home.

The disciples listened to this whole exchange, and Christ's words got them all thinking. "We have done everything Jesus called the rich, young ruler to do, so we just have to know, 'What is in it for us? What is the heavenly payout? What do we get?'" Representing the disciples, Peter articulated their selfish, though admittedly, spiritual question, and he did so with highly emphatic wording in Greek:¹

Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?"

The New Living Translation, a paraphrase, captures the egocentricity of Peter's question:

Then Peter said to him, "We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get out of it?"

I don't know about you, but I can't believe he, of all people, asked this particular question. His words just take your spiritual breath away because they sound so narcissistic, so utterly childish. Yet, as with the rich, young ruler, Peter's question will find direct answers from the teaching of Jesus. And so it is with the Lord. He graciously and lovingly makes sure that ...

Key Spiritual Questions Find Key Spiritual Answers (Matthew 19:16-30)

The first question has been answered.

What Is The Path To Paradise? (Matthew 19:16-26)

The answer is simple: Faith in Jesus as Savior puts one on the path to Paradise, and it's the kind of faith which lays aside all other false gods to worship Him and Him only. This is so monumental I am pressed to ask: "Are you on the path to Paradise?" Jesus patiently waits your faith statement.

The second question, which as I have said, naturally flows from the first question:

What Are The Rewards In Paradise? (Matthew 19:27-30)

As shocking as Peter's statement was, note well Christ's response:

And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

¹ Donald Hagner, Matthew 14-28, Vol. 33. The emphatic *ἰδοὺ ἡμεῖς*, "look, we," betrays a certain self-satisfaction, for example, in comparison to the rich young man, to which v. 30 (and 20:16) as well as the parable of the workers in the vineyard may be directed.

Before we sink our interpretive/applicational spades into this rich soil, I first want to make some observations.

One, Jesus didn't rebuke Peter's bold, self-centered question, but He did offer some emphatic insight, as is denoted by the grammar.² This shows you Christ's patience with us when we ask similar questions. He knows our frame and our weaknesses and treats us with great grace.

Two, Jesus actually answered Peter's question here and in the *Parable of the Workers* in Matthew 20:1-16. Why did He answer this query? Because it was true. If believers were not going to receive divine reward(s) for following hard after Jesus, then Jesus would have corrected Peter. He purposefully did not. Why? Because heavenly and kingdom rewards are an eschatological reality, hence the need for a clear, concise answer from Jesus.

Three, it is all right to talk about rewards. Some Christian's cringe at the thought, thinking it draws too much attention to us. You shouldn't cringe. Why? Because the Lord has lovingly promised rewards to you. What you should cringe at are believers who live just for inheriting heavenly rewards. That motivation is dead wrong and probably means the folks in question will actually lose reward(s).

Personally, I follow Jesus and seek to keep His commandments because I love Him, and it will be enough to hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21, 23). Further, to stand in glory before His magnificent throne, along with all the angels and saints of all time will be enough for me. To sing songs of praise while I stand on the translucent glassy sea before His splendor and glory will be enough for me. Conversely, whatever rewards I might earn for my service to Him while on earth will be just icing on the cake. In fact, they will be just one more thing to bring to Him in absolute worship. John reminds us of this future reality as he describes the scene in heaven right before the commencement of the Tribulation:

And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ¹¹ "Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created" (Revelation 4).

Who are the twenty-four elders? Good question. Some say they are angels, but there are nine reasons I believe they represent glorified leaders of the raptured Church:

- (1) Elders are nowhere designated as angelic beings.
- (2) Elders are men who govern the local church (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-7).
- (3) In Revelation 5:11 and 7:11 the angels are clearly distinct from the twenty-four elders.

²Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Vol. 33: ... 28 The first part of Jesus' response is given with a similar emphasis, ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, "truly I say to you" (see *Comment* on 5:18). The ὑμεῖς, "you," and καὶ ὑμεῖς, "even you" (which is partly resumptive), lend great emphasis to the reply and correspond to the emphatic pronouns of v. 27.

- (4) White clothing in Revelation always refers to the redeemed (Revelation 3:4, 5, 18).
- (5) In Revelation 5:9-10 the elders state in a song devoted to God that He redeemed them and made them a kingdom of priests. Surely, this applies only to believers. No angel has ever been, nor will they ever be redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.
- (6) Angels never occupy thrones. On the other hand, they stand in God's presence and are prepared to do His bidding (1 Kings 22:19; 2 Chronicles 18:18; Luke 11:19; Revelation 8:2).
- (7) The crowns the elders wear are called in Greek, "stephanos," which denotes the crown of a victor. "Stephanos," is used in the NT regarding believers (2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; Revelation 2:10; 3:11). We are not pictured wearing the diadem, the crown of governmental authority. This is a crown reserved for the Davidic Messiah, Jesus. Believers must then be in view here for believers are certainly victors over the world, death, and sin because of the redeeming work of Christ.
- (8) The priesthood in the OT was a representative group of twenty-four priests. When these priests met they represented the entire priesthood, as well as the nation of Israel. Similarly, God uses twenty-four elders to represent the Church.
- (9) Elders were representatives of the people in the local church as well as leaders (Acts 20:17, 28; James 5:14).

Hence, just as the ancient Israelite priesthood had twenty-four representative priest, so, too, does the risen, raptured Church in God's presence. And if these leaders cast the crowns they have earned at the feet of Jesus in total worship of Him who is worthy, you can rest assured the rest of us will willingly, lovingly, and automatically follow suit. The reward(s) will be nice gesture from Christ; however, who could possibly keep their crown(s) on their head knowing He made breathing the breath of heaven a reality?

Casting your crown at the feet of Jesus, however, will not abrogate the rewards He has promised. Casting your crown will be a sign of humility, thanksgiving, and complete worship of the risen King of Kings, but this will, in no way, truncate or terminate the logical outcome of the rewards He promised to those who follow hard after Him. I know this to be true because of what Christ told Peter in this exchange in Matthew 19, and from what is taught elsewhere in the Scriptures.

Now, concerning Christ's answer to Peter's startling question, there are three facets to His answer.

The Reality (Selected Texts)

Christ's words about future spiritual/heavenly reward(s) were merely built off rich Old Testament teaching. Ideally, this entire concept of these types of rewards for followers of God is clearly taught in both testaments.

In the Old Testament we bump into reward motifs all over the place. Here are a few to prove the point:

¹¹ And men will say, “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; Surely there is a God who judges on earth!” (Psalm 58).

¹² And lovingkindness is Yours, O Lord, for You recompense a man according to his work (Psalm 62).

¹⁸ The wicked earns deceptive wages, but he who sows righteousness gets a true reward (Proverbs 11).

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him (Isaiah 40).

¹¹ Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth, say to the daughter of Zion, “Lo, your salvation comes; Behold His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him” (Isaiah 62).

We'll stop there. From these texts we learn that adherence to God's word and teaching does, in fact, lead to temporal ethical reward. Translated: To follow Him leads to blessing in your life (The reverse is true, as well, as we learn in Proverbs). All of this, however, does not take away from the greater rewards we will receive, as Isaiah points out, at the revelation of the Messiah. There are many rewards for following Christ now, but the better rewards await His arrival to establish His prophesied Davidic kingdom (Isaiah 2; 9).

In the New Testament, especially from the lips of Jesus, we encounter more detailed teaching about rewards.

¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5).

⁴¹ For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he will not lose his reward (Mark 9).

This last reference is directly related to the appearance of Jesus at the end of age, and it directly speaks of reward given for doing acts of kindness and compassion for the less fortunate among us (Matthew 25:31-42). And these are just some of the texts where Christ spoke of spiritual rewards for the righteous. Others are found sprinkled throughout the gospels (Matthew 6:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, 18; 10:41, 42; Luke 6:23, 35). Some, as we find in the Old Testament, relate to blessing in the here and now for following hard after God. Matthew 6 is illustrative of this statement. Other rewards await the saints when they stand before Jesus, as we find in the quote from Matthew 5 above.

Paul further develops the reward motif in his writings. Writing to the cantankerous and highly carnal church in Corinth he founded, the apostle warns them of the judgment of believers before Christ's throne.

¹² Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴ If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. ¹⁶ Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? (1 Corinthians 3).

I cannot go into a full exposition of this tremendous chapter, so permit me to make a few cursory observations.

One, this is the Bema Seat judgment of believers, which will occur at the rapture of the Church and just prior to the Tribulation. This is not a legal judgment by a family judgment where the Lord will seek to determine the quality of our work in the investment and advancement of our spirituality and His kingdom/church.

Two, all we have done for Jesus will be revealed in His holy presence as our work(s) will be tried in His fire (Luke 12:2-3). Those works done with the right motive will come out as gold, silver, and precious stones. Those works done with the wrong motives will be burned up and gone forever and are represented by wood, hay, and stubble. Makes you wonder if your work for Christ and His church is of gold or of stubble. More precisely, since we shall all stand before Christ's judgment seat (2 Corinthians 5:10), we should be very careful to given him the best of our efforts. As the old hymn says:

Give of your best to the Master;
Give of the strength of your youth;
Throw your soul's fresh, glowing ardor
Into the battle for truth.
Jesus has set the example,
Dauntless was He, young and brave;
Give Him your loyal devotion;
Give Him the best that you have.
Refrain:
Give of your best to the Master;
Give of the strength of your youth;
Clad in salvation's full armor,
Join in the battle for truth.
Howard B. Grose

Are you giving the Lord your best? The best of your service in the local church? The best of your service to the less fortunate? The best of your study of His Word? The best of your efforts to follow His commandments? The best of your efforts to share your faith? The best of your tithes and offerings? The best of your care and compassion for the downtrodden and hurting?

With the reality of the coming judgment and its attendant rewards, let us not forget some of the final words of Jesus at the close of the New Testament:

¹² Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done (Revelation 22).

In addition to the reality of heavenly/kingdom rewards, we see some of their specificity in the next two verses. Yes, Jesus gives us a small glimpse of what awaits us in His presence.

The Revelation (Matthew 19:28-29)

This is but a small taste of what Peter and other saints would get as reward for following Jesus:

²⁸ And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.”

Key here is the phrase “the regeneration.” The article tells us it is a highly unusual eschatological event. The word, comprised of two words in Greek, again (πάλιν) and genesis (γένεσις), or a new genesis, a new beginning.³ In light of this key word, I agree with Hagner who observes:

The temporal dative phrase ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ, “in the renewing of the world,” probably modifies what follows rather than what precedes; i.e., it is at that time, when the Son of Man assumes his throne, that the disciples will also sit on thrones. παλιγγενεσία, which literally means “rebirth” or “regeneration” (the only other NT occurrence of the word, in Titus 3:5, is used in a personal sense; cf. John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:3; 2 Cor 5:17), refers here to the eschatological renewal of the world at the end of the present age (cf. ἀποκατάστασις, “restoration,” in Acts 3:21; cf. Rom 8:21–23; Rev 21:1–4; 2 Peter 3:13; given the extensive background for this understanding of the word ...⁴

Eschatologically (viz., the study of the end times, prophecy ... from the Greek word *eschaton*, or the end), I believe this denotes the time when the Messiah returns and refashions the earth so He can establish his long-awaited Davidic empire, as prophesied and promised in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89; Isaiah 9:6; Zechariah 12-14). At His revelation, Jesus will make the twelve disciples responsible for judging and ruling over Israel. This will be a reward, in and of itself, to be a judge and ruler alongside of glorified Messiah, Jesus. Quite a privilege. I am sure Peter and the disciples were humbled by the graciousness of Jesus as revealed in this statement.

Moving from the disciples, Christ touches briefly upon saints in general. He specifically talks about rewarding those who have made tough sacrifices for the advancement of His kingdom and His cause. He speaks about the toughest things in life: leaving your home to follow

³ Gerhard Kittel, **Β.παλιγγενεσία in the NT.1.** In Mt. 19:28: ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ, the use of παλιγγενεσία is in full agreement with that of Philo and Josephus. The Jewish faith in the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of the world is clothed in this term. The parallel saying in Lk. 22:30 has ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ μου. In Mk. 10:30 and Lk. 18:30 the phrase ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τῷ ἐρχομένῳ has the same meaning. The Stoic usage obviously stands behind this Jewish or Jewish Christian expression, but in the sense of Jewish and Christian eschatology. There is no influence of the Mysteries.

⁴ Hagner, Matthew 14-28.

Jesus, as so many missionaries do, along with countless saints who leave homes to go where God leads; leaving family to fulfill God's call on your life ... talk about doing the hard thing. Been there. Done that. Personally, I would love to live near my twin grandchildren and my daughter, son-in-law, mother, and family: however, God has us here to accomplish His lofty purposes which, in the biblical view, overshadow all earthly relationships. We will have eternity to enjoy each other's presence. What counts now is we make the tough sacrifices, be what they may, to grow in holiness, to preach the Word, to share the gospel, and to build His Church. For those who sacrifice much, Jesus promises eternal blessings which will far outweigh the sacrifices you have made in the here and now.

In light of this, I must ask, "What sacrifices are you making for Jesus? What tough calls are you making to put Him, your faith, and His Church first?" Some among us might be too comfortable in the faith. You've grown accustomed to your life, your job, your relationships, and so forth. I think it is time to re-consider how you, as a disciple, need to take your faith to a whole new level, not because of reward, but because of a deeper love for Christ and desiring to give Him your best. Just what those hundred-fold rewards will be remains to be seen, but knowing Him they will be jaw-dropping.

Yes, rewards will be given based on our sacrifice. But that is not all. Jesus left the disciples, and us as well, with ...

The Rule (Matthew 19:30)

Some apply these words to the rich, young ruler. Taken in this fashion, the words are a warning to those who are first in line by the world's standards. They have it all: sizeable financial portfolios, equally large homes, business connections, fame, notoriety, and the nicest things money can buy and so on. They might be some of the folks who wind up on the red carpet at the Golden Globe and Grammy Awards, you know, the people the paparazzi can't wait to take pictures of. They are so beautiful, so, well, perfect. But in God's mind they will be last in line when the kingdom arrives. As Jesus warns:

³⁰ But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.

The great reversal is coming, the time when those who thought they had the world by the tail will utterly miss the next world and the kingdom. This is, indeed, one application of these closing verses, but I'm not convinced it is the final or correct application.

I believe these words refer directly to the disciples, after all, Jesus was speaking directly to them. The rich, young ruler had already walked away in grief. Based on this, I think these words stand as a word of caution and warning to the disciples and all disciples. We, like the disciples, can tend to clamor for who will be the greatest in the kingdom of the Messiah, and who will sit where in relation to Jesus. Yes, we, who sacrifice much and accomplish much for Jesus can be tempted to point to our accomplishments, hiding behind spiritual language, of course. "Look at what Jesus has done through me. Look at how the Holy Spirit has moved." One must be careful. The flesh is so deceptive and powerful.

- Pastors, who have accomplished much for Jesus, outwardly speaking, must take note.

- Saints, who have the gift of giving, must take note, especially if they want a plaque with their name engraved on something they have given to God.
- Saints, who have sacrificed much for Jesus, must take note.
- Saints, who are known for a great commitment to public prayer, must take note.
- Saints with great gifts in teaching the Word, must take note.
- Saints who use their musical/vocal gifts in worship must take note.

We must take note because our best efforts for Jesus, if done with the wrong motive or the wrong spirit, can quickly turn from gold to stubble and move us to the end of the eschatological line in the kingdom of the Messiah. And there will be great differences in how He rewards us. He tells us this much in the *Parable of the Ten Servants* (Luke 19:11ff).⁵ Each servant will be given, for instance, different levels of rulership authority in the Messiah's kingdom based on the level of their faithfulness to Him.

In addition to this, John tells us that not all saints will receive the full reward of what God would have/could have given to them:

⁸ Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward (2 John).

Again, he is not speaking about the loss or gain of heaven, but the loss or gain of spiritual reward when Christ dispenses them.⁶

⁵ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 4: Christ's Followers Will Be Positionally Rewarded in His Reign*

Christ's disciples will reign with Him, each being rewarded according to his works (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 3:11-15); in a parable of a king entrusting servants with resources, those who were faithful and industrious were congratulated and promoted (Luke 19:16-19). Jesus said, "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (Rev. 22:12).

⁶ Bible Knowledge Commentary, Vol. 2: 907-908: V. 8. Because of the appearance of these deceivers, the readers needed to **watch out** for the disastrous spiritual effects which any compromise with their ideas could lead to. The danger is not loss of salvation, of course, but loss of reward. The NIV uses the second person verb (**you**) for all three of the statements in this verse. But "we" (following most mss.) is preferred: "that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward" (KJV). Early scribes and editors may have altered the "we" to "you" in these places to avoid the suggestion that the apostle could share in a loss of reward. But the author's touch was both delicate and humble. He regarded himself as a co-laborer with his readers and their loss would be shared by him if they did not effectively resist false doctrine. The antichrists were a threat to the work of the Lord in which he and they were mutually engaged. It should be noted that the phrase **be rewarded fully** shows that failure by the readers would not totally deprive them of reward. God would not forget what they had done for Him (cf. Heb. 6:10). But the fullness of their reward (cf. 1 Cor. 3:11-15) was threatened by the subversion of the antichrists.

V. 9. The danger is now spelled out clearly. **Anyone who runs ahead** (*proagōn*; most mss. read "turns aside," *parabainōn*) **and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God**. These words suggest strongly that the apostle was thinking here of defection from the truth by those who had once held to it. The word "continue" renders the Greek verb *menō*, familiar because of its frequent use (23 times) in 1 John in reference to the "abiding" life. A person who "does not continue" in a thing has evidently once been in it. The New Testament writers were realists about the possibility of true Christians falling prey to heresy and warned against it (cf. comments on the Book of Heb.). John had just cautioned his readers about possible loss of reward (2 John 8). They were thus now (v. 9) cautioned not to "overstep" the boundaries of sound doctrine, but to "remain" where they

I wonder. When you stand toe to toe with the Savior, when He personally evaluates your spiritual life, what will He say to you? Better yet, how will He reward you? And beyond all of this, when you stand before His holy, brilliant presence, how many crowns will you have to lay at His feet in complete worship and adoration?

The day of reckoning is fast approaching. Might the Lord Jesus find each of us being faithful to do His word and to obey His word.

were, to “continue in the teaching (*didachē*; cf. v. 10) of (i.e., about) Christ.” To deviate from the truth is to leave God behind. God is not with a person who does so. What such a person does, he does without God. This, of course, does not suggest loss of salvation. Instead it points to a doctrinal deviation, with its accompanying disobedience.

In contrast with the defector from the truth, **whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.** This says that God is with those who persist in the true doctrine about Christ. (Here may also be another subtle affirmation of the deity of Christ; cf. v. 3.) But John no doubt had more in mind than mere creedal orthodoxy. He used *menō*, his characteristic word in the Johannine Epistles for the life of fellowship with the Father and Son, for the second time in verse 9. The roots of its significance in these letters are in texts such as John 8:31 and 15:1–7. For John, a person who “continues in the teaching” is one who “abides” or “makes his home” there. His connection with the truth is vital and dynamic, so he has a dynamic relationship with God whose commands he obeys (cf. John 14:21–23 for another expression of this kind of relationship). “Abiding” and obedience are inseparable in Johannine thought.