



LESSON 17

Jesus teaches the parable of the equal wages

MATTHEW 19:27–20:16



All believers will enjoy the full blessings of eternal life.



“So the last will be first, and the first last”
(Matt 20:16).

Supporting Truths

1. The reward is great.
2. The reward is equal for all believers.
3. The reward is fair.
4. The reward is more than fair—it is far beyond what anyone deserves.
5. The reward stops Christians from comparing and competing.

Objectives

1. Define eternal life.
2. Explain what “the first shall be last and the last shall be first” means.
3. Retell the parable.
4. Explain why the vineyard owner paid workers more than they deserved.
5. Explain why no Christian is in a position to boast about eternal life.

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Lesson Summary

After the rich young ruler left, the disciples wondered what reward they would get for leaving everything to follow Jesus. Jesus assured them that they would get eternal life, a prize far greater than anything they had given up. But Jesus also corrected them for thinking that they were special for having sacrificed so much. The story of the vineyard shows that all believers will enjoy the full blessings of eternal life, because the reward God gives is not something we deserve.

Spotlight on the Gospel

Salvation is not fair. No one deserves eternal life. Because of our sin, we all deserve death—both physical and spiritual death. But God, because of the richness of His grace, graciously gives eternal life to all those who trust Christ. In Christ, we are spared the punishment our sins deserve, and in Christ we receive the righteousness we could never earn. If we are jealous about God's grace in salvation, then we do not truly understand God's generosity in saving anyone at all.

LAST WEEK



Jesus confronts the rich young ruler
Matthew 19:16–26

THIS WEEK



Jesus teaches the parable of the equal wages
Matthew 19:27–20:16

NEXT WEEK



Jesus enters Jerusalem
Luke 19:28–44

JESUS' JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

THE PASSION WEEK OF JESUS

Lesson Commentary

All believers will enjoy the full blessings of eternal life.

The rich young ruler had just made two huge mistakes. First, he thought eternal life was something he could earn (Matt 19:16). He thought he was better than others, so he chose to depend on himself instead of on Jesus (19:20). Second, he was unwilling to give Jesus first place in his life. He clung to his earthly possessions, refusing to forsake them in order to follow Christ (19:21–22). Unlike this man, the disciples had left everything to follow Jesus (19:27). Yet they, as events would soon prove (20:20–21, 24), were still fixated on their own personal rewards and status in Christ's kingdom. Jesus told them a parable to remind them that salvation is God's free gift. It is not deserved or earned. It is given freely and equally to all who trust in God's Son.

Jesus encourages: the prize is worth the cost (19:27–29)

It is not wrong to wonder if the Christian life is worth it (19:27). Jesus Himself urged the disciples to accept the cost because His glory in the kingdom would be worth it (16:25–27). Jesus encouraged the disciples that the prize would be far greater than what they had given up. They would enter the “*new world*,” literally, *the “regeneration,” the universe recreated to be new, perfect, and glorious* (19:28). The prophets looked forward to this (Isa 65:17; 66:22), and the disciples would cling to this hope for the rest of their lives (Acts 3:21; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1).

But when Jesus said that they would rule over the twelve tribes of Israel, is Jesus saying that the disciples would get a better prize than other believers for their extra special effort? No, for every believer will rule with Christ in the new world (Rev 3:21; 22:5). And the ruling is not the main point anyway, since ruling is simply serving (Luke 22:26). It is ruling with Christ that is so special, and every believer gets that prize. Instead of thinking they should get something better than others, the disciples should have been astonished: the reward is so massive it makes the greatest sacrifice look like no sacrifice at all. That is

what is meant by “a hundredfold” (Matt 19:29). This does not mean you will get exactly 100 times what you gave up. It means that the prize will go far beyond what anyone deserves.

This prize begins even now (Mark 10:30). As believers join the family of God, they gain countless brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, and children, united by a common devotion to Christ. As they voluntarily share their possessions, they gain houses and lands to use for the goal they all have in common—“for my name's sake” (Matt 19:29). In fact, as they die to themselves and are united with Christ (Gal 2:20), they begin eternal life even now (John 17:3). But all this is still just a tiny taste of the real prize to come: eternal life. Jesus mentioned “eternal life” last because He saved the best for last. **Eternal life is *being with Jesus forever*.** Jesus is saying to Peter and the others, “Is it worth it? Of course it's worth it! The prize of being with Me forever is far better than you can ever imagine.”

THINK ABOUT IT

Is Jesus worth it to you? If not, seek to know Him for how great He really is.



Jesus corrects: the prize is not something earned (19:30–20:16)

But there's a problem with Peter's question. To the disciples, it seemed that the trouble was mostly past and the kingdom was about to come. They wondered: if that rich man could have gotten heavenly treasure for following Jesus now, right at the end, won't we get even better treasure for following Him through thick and thin these last three years? They were calculating their reward as if God owed them something.

Jesus restates His point: the first will be last and the last will be first (Matt 19:30). In other words, everyone will finish the same. Our prideful hearts think, “That's not fair! I should get more for all I've done!” Jesus uses a simple story to explain what reward in the kingdom is like (20:1). It is like a landowner hiring workers for his vineyard. Vines were common in the hills of Israel, and about September there was a short period of time to harvest the grapes before the winter rains. Landowners needed more help than usual at that time. They would hire day-laborers, people who

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did not have a guaranteed job. These workers needed to find work each day in order to buy food for themselves and their families.



THINK ABOUT IT

Everyone who follows Jesus to the end gets this same prize.

Harvesting vineyards was hard work. It is hot in September, and this day in particular was a scorcher (20:12), a day when wind blew in heat from the eastern desert. Also, the

work day was long, from 6 AM to 6 PM. Even so, when the owner went out, he found workers ready (20:2). They agreed to work all day for a denarius, which was the normal pay for a day's work. Then the story gets interesting. The owner got more workers at 9 AM, at noon, at 3 PM, and finally at 5 PM. These workers were in no position to discuss their wage, since they had no other work. They could only be thankful for the job and trust that the owner would pay a fair price (20:4).

Imagine the surprise of the last workers to receive a whole denarius! They had only worked one hour, yet they were paid the price for twelve hours (20:9)! When the first workers saw this, they began calculating: if one hour earned one denarius, then they could expect a whopping twelve denarii for their twelve hours of work. How disappointed they were when they also received exactly one denarius (20:11–12)!



THINK ABOUT IT

No believer is more saved than another.

The owner's wages were fair (20:13), but also equal (20:14) and generous (20:15). He chose to pay not just what the workers had earned, but more according to His own gen-

erosity. In fact, even the first group of workers should have been thankful, for the owner came and found them when they had nothing. When they "begrudge" his "generosity" (20:15), they are literally looking with a "bad" eye upon his "goodness."

And that is Jesus' point. A disciple who serves Christ while calculating what God owes him has a bad eye. He is looking at the whole thing the wrong way. He should not want what is fair (Rom 6:23a). God is fair, for He keeps His promises. But God is generous on top of being fair. He rewards all who follow Jesus, not according to what we deserve, but according to the riches of His grace (Eph 1:7). There will be no difference between first and last (Matt 20:16), for the reward is not really a reward at all. It is **grace**. It is a gift. It is unearned.

But what about the reward Jesus promises His saints at His coming? These are not about getting extra prizes in heaven, as if Christians were competing with each other

to get the biggest pile of jewels. Rather, most of these promises—including the crown of life, righteousness, and glory—are promises of salvation itself (1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4; Rev 22:12). Still, there are some promises of greater or lesser reward (1 Cor 3:14), but the reward here is that we will share in God's joy over the work we have done for Him (4:5; Matt 25:21). He delights in every true believer, but the more faithfully we serve Him, the more He is pleased and the more we rejoice in His pleasure. He will reward every believer with His praise, but there may be varying degrees of praise. This is what Jesus is telling the disciples: do not be envious for some special reward besides God Himself. If you love Him, His greater delight will be your greater reward. Do not calculate, compete, and compare, but instead follow Jesus with joy forever, no matter the cost. Whether you came to Jesus early or late, you will one day receive the greatest joy imaginable: living with Jesus forever.

THINK ABOUT IT

God is more than fair.



Lesson Outline

All believers will enjoy the full blessings of eternal life.

AGES 3–5 LESSON OUTLINE



1. Follow Jesus because the reward is great (19:27–29).
2. Stop being jealous because the reward is equal and generous (19:30–20:16).

AGES 6–11 LESSON OUTLINE



1. Jesus encourages: the prize is worth the cost (19:27–29).
 - Peter asked if his prize was worth his sacrifice (19:27).
 - The twelve will have a specific job in the kingdom (19:28).
 - The real prize is generous and given to all believers (19:29).
2. Jesus corrects: the prize is not something earned (19:30–20:16).
 - The first and the last all receive the same prize (19:30).
 - Some come first and do more work (20:1–7).
 - Some come last and do less work (20:8–10).
 - The reward is fair, equal, and generous (20:11–16).



TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

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Lesson Questions

Use these questions to teach or to review this week's lesson.



Ages 3–5 Lesson Questions

1. **What did Peter ask Jesus?**
What do we get for leaving everything to follow you?
2. **What is the prize believers get?**
Eternal life—living forever with Jesus.
3. **Did the workers all work the same? Did they get paid the same?**
No. Yes.
4. **Was the owner fair? Was he generous?**
Yes. The owner was both fair and generous.



Ages 6–11 Lesson Questions

1. **Why did Peter ask about the reward?**
He heard Jesus promise the rich man a reward, and Peter wondered if he and the other disciples would get an extra special reward for following Jesus from the beginning.
2. **What will the disciples do in the new world?**
They will reign with Jesus over the nation of Israel.
3. **Will the reward be worth everything they gave up?**
It will be worth far, far more—like getting 100 times more.
4. **What does it mean for the first to be last and the last to be first?**
It means that all finish the same. There is no difference between one who comes to Jesus sooner and serves longer and one who comes later and serves shorter.
5. **What is the parable of the vineyard owner about?**
It is about the kingdom of heaven. It is about how God (the vineyard owner) rewards His workers (followers of Jesus) in the new world.
6. **Why were the workers in the first group upset?**
They worked more than the others, but they got paid the same.
7. **Did they have a right to be upset?**
No. They got what the owner promised. Also, the owner came and found them when they had nothing.
8. **So how will God reward everyone who follows Jesus**
He will reward them fairly (as promised), equally, and generously—eternal life is more valuable than anyone deserves.

Lesson Activities

Choose from the following ideas to introduce, illustrate, and apply this week's lesson.

AGES 3–5



INTRODUCE

THE FIRST LAST AND THE LAST FIRST

As the children come into class, give them different jobs to do. Assign both jobs that will take a long time and jobs that will take less time. After the jobs are complete, give each child a small treat as a thank-you for their work. Some children may be upset that they all receive the same treat even though some of them worked much longer than others. During your lesson you will be able to use this pre-lesson exercise to help the children understand why the laborers who worked all day were angry that they received the same wage as those who only worked for one hour.

WHAT'S A DENARIUS?

Bring a dollar bill into class. Ask the children what it is that you are holding. Ask them how many dollar bills someone is paid for working a whole day. Tell them how many dollar bills an entry-level worker makes in your city for a full day's work. Explain that when Jesus was alive they did not use dollar bills but they used denarii to buy things. In Jesus' day, one denarius equaled a full day's wage.



ILLUSTRATE

PHEW, THIS IS HARD WORK

Younger children may not immediately relate to the hard work of the laborers. Ask the children to list some things that are hard for them or which they do not enjoy doing. Do they ever get a reward for doing these jobs? What is their favorite reward? How would they feel if, after having worked hard on something, their parents gave both them and their sibling the same reward even though their sibling had just been playing the whole time? Continue with the parable, making the connection to God's undeserved blessing of salvation.

A DAY'S WAGES

Divide a vertical line into twelve evenly spaced sections. These represent the twelve hours in a Jewish workday. During the lesson, tape a man at the bottom of the line to represent the first group of laborers who started working early in the morning. Then tape other men above it, corresponding to the time they began working (third hour, sixth hour, etc.). At the end of the lesson, have the children count with you how many hours each group worked. What did the land owner pay each group? Use this to activity to show God's generosity in salvation.



APPLY

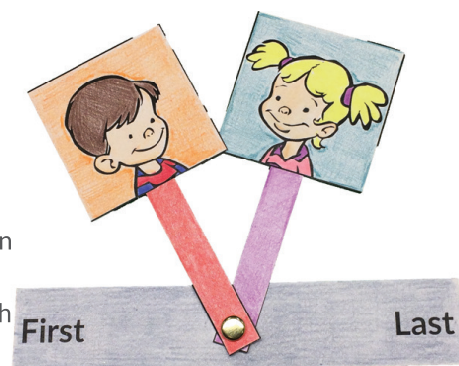
FIRST AND LAST

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1.

Materials: Craft sheets, scissors, cardstock, crayons, brad, scissors.

Directions: Photocopy the craft page on cardstock. Color every image and cut them. Fix the extremity of the "boy" and "girl" to the base with a brad.

First and Last
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1



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AGES 6–8



EQUAL REWARDS

Scatter numerous small objects around the room. Tell the children to collect as many as possible. Those who find ten or more objects will get a prize. After the objects have been found, sort the children into three groups: those with ten or more, those with five to nine, and those with less than five. Give each group the same prize. See how those who collected ten or more react. If they react like the disciples, wishing for a greater prize, explain that the story today will challenge that attitude. If they are happy with their prize, commend them.

ALL FALL SHORT

Tape a piece of candy high on the ceiling where no one can come close to reaching it. Explain that if any child can jump and touch it that the whole class will get a piece of candy. After all the children try and fail, give each child a piece of candy. Point out the child that got closest to the candy. Was it fair that everyone received the same candy, even though some children jumped higher than others? Yes. It was more than fair. Everyone failed, but because of the teacher's generosity, all received candy.



IS IT FAIR?

There were two brothers who failed to clean their room. Their mother instructed the older brother to clean up the room. When he was almost finished, the younger brother came in and helped him finish up. Their mom was so pleased that she gave the older brother a special toy. The younger brother immediately got excited because he helped clean the room and so expected a toy. Should both brothers get the same reward or not? In today's lesson, Jesus taught that those who are saved later in life will receive the same reward of salvation as those who faithfully served God much of their lives.

BIRTHDAY TREAT

Pretend it is your birthday. Bring in a birthday treat to share with half the class. If the children begin to complain about not receiving a birthday treat, ask them if they deserve one. Is it their birthday? Just because you chose to share your treat with some does not mean you have to share your treat with everyone. Since it is your birthday, you are the only one who deserves a treat.



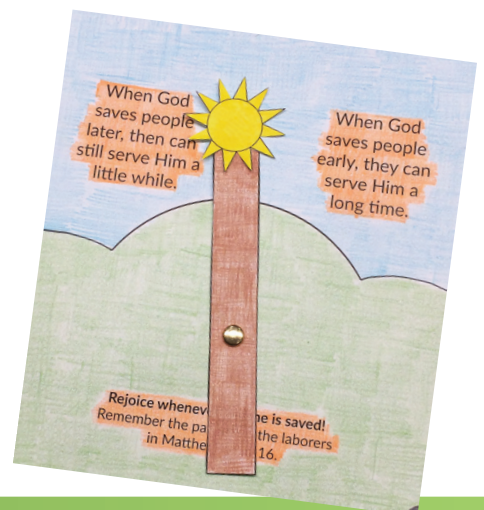
GOD SAVES EARLY AND LATER

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1.

Materials: Craft sheets, cardstock, crayons, brad, glue stick.

Directions: Photocopy the craft page on cardstock. Color it with crayons. Glue the sun on the long strip, fix it to the craft page with a brad.

God Saves Early and Later
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1



AGES 9–11



INTRODUCE

EQUAL REWARDS

Have the children compete in a predetermined challenge. After congratulating the winner, give the rest of the class the same reward. In today's lesson, Jesus ends the parable by telling His disciples that the last will be first and the first will be last. What Jesus wanted His disciples to understand was that He sees all who respond obediently to His call of repentance as being equal.

CANCELLED TEST

Ask the children to imagine the following scenario: They studied diligently all week for a test only to have it cancelled and each student given an A+ on the exam. How would they feel? Would they be angry with the teacher for giving everyone the same grade, even those who did not prepare for the test? In today's lesson, we will hear a parable about a similar situation involving five groups of workers in a vineyard.



ILLUSTRATE

THIEF ON THE CROSS

The penitent thief (Luke 23:39–43) received the same salvation as the apostles. He was a criminal, and was justly punished for his crime, but he received the same reward as the disciples who were unjustly persecuted for their faithfulness to Christ. The dying thief had very little time to serve God, but the disciples served Jesus for the remainder of their lives. Yet both received the full blessings of eternal life.

SOVEREIGN

Tell the children that you will be giving out candy during the lesson, but give candy to only a fourth of the class. When the children who did not receive candy become disappointed, ask them to remind you who the candy belongs to. Explain that you are sovereign over the candy. You own it and you have the right to give it (or not give it) to whoever you want. In today's lesson, the landowner owned both the vineyard and the money which he used to pay his laborers. Since it was his to give, the landowner was completely justified in giving all the laborers the same amount of pay.



APPLY

HUDSON TAYLOR

Near the end of his life, Hudson Taylor said, "I've never made a sacrifice." Yet most of us would say he made incredible sacrifices. He spent his whole life as a missionary to China. He had suffered criticism from many. He suffered poor health most of his life. He lost a wife and four children. What did he mean that he had never made a sacrifice? He saw Jesus so clearly, and how desirable Jesus is, that nothing else could compare. Nothing seemed like a sacrifice compared to the joy of living with Jesus forever.