



Wages, Rewards, & Recompense
in Matthew's Gospel

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Summary

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Throughout Matthew's Gospel Jesus repeatedly uses the terminology of **heavenly treasure, wages, rewards, and recompense**. **Wages** and **rewards** typically translate the same one word. This terminology is significantly more common in Matthew's Gospel than the other Gospels.

The various passages that employ this terminology are often read independently from one another. Some readers focus on those passages that seem to support the idea of hierarchy and graded rewards in the life to come. Other readers preference passages in which Jesus seems to be ruling out the notion of spiritual merit.

The passages covering treasure, wages and rewards are laid out in the extended table in this document. The key take away points are summarised below...

- 1) It is **the poor in spirit who possess** the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 5:3). The poor in spirit are those with no visible spiritual credit or reason to expect reward from God. (*See also Matthew's repeated comments on children in Matt 18:1-5, 19:13-14, 21:15-16*)

- 2) It is not those the world acknowledges as having spiritual merit (such as the Pharisees) **who are rewarded** with entry into the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 5:20, 6:1-6). The Pharisees, who claimed to be expert guides to the Kingdom of Heaven, were actually failing to enter it themselves and were preventing others from entering as well (Matt 23:13).

- 3) Rather, it is those disciples who are not ashamed to acknowledge that the Kingdom of Heaven is dawning in Jesus ministry (Matt 4:16-17) who receive **peace** (Matt 10:8, 13-14) and who will themselves **be rewarded with acknowledgement** by Jesus before the Heavenly Father (compare Matt 5:10-12 with 10:32-33).

- 4) Jesus says anyone who welcomes the message the disciples are preaching (with even just a glass of water!) welcome Jesus as well. Such people will **receive the very same reward** the disciples/prophets themselves receive (Matt 10:40-42).

- 5) The above points are negatively illustrated in the rich man who comes to Jesus asking what he must do to get eternal life; to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 19:16-24). Tragically, he declines to follow Jesus since it requires abandoning his wealth; a merely earthly kind of "reward".

- 6) Peter points out they have not only acknowledged Jesus, but have left everything to follow him. Peter therefore asks, "what do we get?" - what kind of **reward or recompense** is in store for us? Jesus answers that they will receive precisely the eternal life the rich man was after. (Matt 19:27-29)

- 7) **BUT**, Jesus goes on to immediately warn the disciples that they should not expect to receive any **greater reward/wage** just because they followed him first! (Matt 19:30-20:16)

8) The mother of Zebedee's sons obviously thinks her sons do deserve some ***extra* reward or acknowledgement** for what they have left in order to follow Jesus, and for having done so first (Matt 20:20-28).

9) In the parable of the servants (Matt 25:14-30) Jesus says that those workers who are faithful with the message of the kingdom will be entrusted with more responsibility. This promise is fulfilled in Matt 28:18-19. However those who have not been faithful (Pharisees & teachers of the law) will have even what was entrusted to them taken away.

10) Matt 25:31-46 is basically a reaffirmation of Matthew 10:40-42. Those who welcome and receive the disciple's/prophet's teaching **will also share equally in their reward** - which is nothing less than inheriting the Kingdom of Heaven itself. This is what's already promised to the poor in spirit (those with no spiritual credit) back at the start of Jesus' teaching in Matt 5:3.

In Matthew's Gospel **the heavenly reward Jesus speaks of is eternal life, possession of the kingdom, and Jesus' acknowledgement before God the Father.** This reward belongs in full measure to...

- i) those who are poor in spirit,
- ii) those disciples who are persecuted (like the prophets) for acknowledging Jesus before others, and
- iii) any/all who welcome the disciples and the good news they proclaim in Jesus' name.

Though "FIRST" in line, the disciples will not receive any **greater reward** than those who come later. Even the person who welcomes the disciples with a "mere" glass of water will receive the same reward as those who preached the message of the Kingdom to them!

Given this wider context, it is a mistake to read Matthew's passages as being about "individual" or "ranked" rewards that distinguish members of the Kingdom of Heaven from one another. God's "economy" is one that turns all notions of merit upside-down (Matt 20:20-28), and one that proved unpalatable even to Jesus' own closest disciples (Matt 19:30-20:16 and 20:20-28). This is the same so-called "economy" by which Jesus himself operated (Matt 19:17-18 + 28).

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	Key idea	Key verses	wage / reward / recompense terminology	Further notes
5:3	THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN BELONGS TO...	"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ."	The kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor	The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the poor ; those who have NO spiritual credit to their account; nothing to boast in. See also Matthew's repeated comments on children in... Matt 18:1-5, 19:13-14, 21:15-16
5:11-12	THE REWARD OF THE PROPHETS & PERSECUTED	"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."	Great is your reward... <i>(See comments on 10:32-33 for confirmation as to what this reward is)</i>	Although those persecuted for following Jesus seem to have nothing in this world, they will share the same reward as the prophets who testified to God's work in the past. This Beatitude is expanded in Matthew 10 (see below) where we discover the person who receives a prophet's message will receive the same reward that a prophet themselves.
6:1-18	EARTHLY REWARD (No reward from heavenly Father)	"to be seen by others" (6:1) "to be honoured by others" (6:2) "to be seen by others" (6:5) "to show others" (6:16)	The "earthly" reward consists in being acknowledged by others. It is to "be seen/honoured". Where someone acts in order to win the acknowledgement of others , God will not acknowledge (see/honour) such actions as being done for him.	Those who hunger and thirst for the acknowledgement of other people, will receive only the fleeting reward of being seen and honoured by those who will soon forget them.
	REWARD FROM HEAVENLY FATHER (Not seen by others)	"Who sees what is done" (6:4) "Who sees what is done" (6:6) "Who sees what is done" (6:18)	However God will acknowledge those righteous acts that have been done for his sake . In this passage reward = acknowledgement (either from other people or from God)	Those who hunger and thirst for the kind of righteousness that God delights in, will be rewarded with the acknowledgement of their heavenly Father .
10:5-14	YOU HAVE FREELY RECEIVED; FREELY GIVE.	"Freely you have received; freely give." (Matt 10:8) "As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it ; if it is not, let your peace return to you; if anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words..." (Matt 10:13-14)	Peace	The disciples are to leave the peace they have received from Jesus with whoever receives and welcomes them and their message (see 10: 11-15). This peace that the disciples have received and share with others is the good news & assurances of the dawning Kingdom of Heaven. (see also the beatitudes in Matt 4:17 & 5:3-10)

10:32-33	ACKNOWLEDGE -MENT (before heavenly Father)	"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven..."	Acknowledgement that one belongs to Jesus, before the Heavenly Father (When we read 5:10-12 and 10:32 together it is clear that reward = acknowledgement)	Jesus is speaking here to his 12 disciples who he sends out to preach. They are not to be unwilling to acknowledge Jesus before those who may persecute them for their witness to Jesus (see Matthew 10:26-30). Matthew 5:10-12 also mentioned a reward for those who are persecuted on account of Jesus' name. Matthew 10:32 makes clear that this reward consists in being likewise acknowledged as belonging to Jesus , before their heavenly father.
	NO ACKNOWLEDGE -MENT (before heavenly Father)	"But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven..."	N/A	Even the language of "disown" makes clear that the reward consists in acknowledgment that one "belongs to Jesus". Note: it's not a comparative reward that denotes any hierarchy of status between believers in the kingdom of heaven.
10:40-42	A PROPHET'S OR RIGHTEOUS PERSON'S REWARD (No reward from heavenly Father)	"Whoever welcomes a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward..."	Those who welcome the disciples, will receive the same reward that the disciples themselves have received for acknowledging Jesus. (ie. they too will be acknowledged by Jesus before their heavenly Father - 10:32)	The disciples (the little ones of v42) are the "prophets" in this passage (see also Jesus' comparing the disciples and prophets in Matthew 5:12). Like the prophets the disciples are the ones proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven. Any person performing even the least significant possible act of welcome (offering a glass of water) towards the disciples will receive the same reward that the disciples themselves have received from Jesus.
19:16-20	ETERNAL LIFE	"...what good thing must I do to get eternal life"	eternal life	The rich man recognises in 19:20 that even after keeping the law fully (in its external sense) he's still lacking the peace he is after. He wants to know *what else* he must do. This is ironic given the little children who Jesus has just declared already possess the kingdom (19:13-15)! The man's unwillingness to give up wealth is what stops him following Jesus, and receiving the eternal life he seeks, just as the children have.

19:21-24	TREASURE IN HEAVEN	"...and you will have treasure in heaven."	The treasure in heaven is the eternal life that is kept securely for him in heaven until the Kingdom fully dawns on earth.	Jesus is assuring the man that he need not fear abandoning earthly wealth, since he'll have eternal life stored securely for him in heaven, where moth and rust can't destroy it (Matthew 6:19-21).
	ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN	"...it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven ."	(see above)	<p>When push comes to shove, the rich will choose their wealth over the eternal life/treasure that Jesus offers those who will follow him.</p> <p>It is exactly the same "economics" on view in 6:1-6 where the hypocrites value being seen and honoured by others, more than they value being seen and acknowledged by God.</p> <p>It is the same "economics" on view in 6:33 where chasing after a future stockpile of sustenance is valued more than seeking first the Kingdom of Heaven.</p>
19:27	WHAT REWARD?	"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us? "	Peter is asking what will be the nature of their reward	<p>The rich man was unwilling to sell and give away his possessions. As a result he won't follow Jesus, and receive the eternal life Jesus secures for us (see in contrast Matt 13:44-46).</p> <p>Peter says, we've left everything, not only our money! What do we get!?</p>
19:28-29	A SEAT ON A THRONE	"...at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones... "	They will share in Jesus' authority to judge the nation of Israel	<p>Note: this reward of getting to sit on a throne and share in Jesus' judgement of the world is equally available for all those who follow Jesus (see Revelation 3:21 and Ephesians 1:20 + 2:6)</p> <p>This passage is not describing a reward "of higher rank" for the disciples over other believers in the kingdom of heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven actually belongs to children (19:14), the poor in spirit (5:3) and the meek (5:5).</p>
	100X AS MUCH AS WHAT IS LOST BY CHOOSING TO FOLLOW JESUS	"...houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields..."	the things of daily living, our daily bread	Mark's gospel qualifies this as being what believers receive in this age . It is not prosperity gospel, but really just another way of restating what Jesus declared back in Matthew 6:32-32. The Pagans run anxiously after these things. But our heavenly Father knows we need them. Seek first the Kingdom of God, because God has all these other mundane needs covered for us.

	ETERNAL LIFE	"...and will inherit eternal life"	eternal life	Note the language of "inherit" that was there in 5:5 where the meek will inherit the earth; everything!
19:30	BUT! MANY WHO ARE FIRST WILL BE LAST	"But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."	No reward mentioned!	<p>Here Jesus warns the disciples against misinterpreting his words in 19:27-29.</p> <p>Peter asked what they would receive as a reward for leaving everything. But Jesus warns against them thinking that this will make them "First" or greatest in the kingdom; of imagining that their "leaving everything" qualifies them for a position of greater reward.</p> <p>This is another instance where the "economics" of the kingdom will turn the "economics" of this world absolutely inside out.</p> <p>In fact. The disciples, though now first, will be last!</p>
20:1-15	SAME (GENEROUS) WAGE/REWARD FOR ALL	"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard..."	A denarius (for both those who worked the whole day and for those who only worked the last bit of the day)	<p>This parable follows on directly after Peter's question about what the disciples will receive for being the first to follow Jesus (19:27). Jesus affirms there will be reward (19:28-29). However warns, that the first will be last (19:30).</p> <p>In this parable the disciples are the first labourers to be hired. In fact Jesus urges his own disciples to pray for more workers to join them (Matthew 9:37-38).</p> <p>Jesus is warning them against expecting to receive favoured treatment or greater status!</p>
20:16	SO! MANY WHO ARE FIRST WILL BE LAST	"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."		Jesus' warning to Peter in 19:30 is repeated even more emphatically after the parable. Their reward/wage will not elevate them above others in the kingdom!

20:20-28	GREATNESS IN THE KINGDOM?	<p>Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him...</p> <p>"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."</p>	Status over others in the kingdom?	<p>Here it seems the Mother of Zebedee's sons either didn't hear Jesus' words in 19:30-20:16.</p> <p>Either that, or Zebedee's sons didn't like what they heard in 19:30-20:16 and called in their mum for backup.</p> <p>It seems like all the other disciples were thinking the same thing (20:24-28).</p> <p>There is to be no expectation of elevated status over each other in the Kingdom of Heaven. In fact, whatever might lead us to expect status according to an earthly "economy" of rewards, should actually lead us to expect to be "servants" in the economy of the Kingdom of Heaven.</p>
25:14-30	WHOEVER HAS, TO THEM MORE WILL BE GIVEN...	<p>"...For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."</p>	Recognition & responsibility	<p>This is not a parable about earning rewards to be individually possessed or enjoyed in the life to come.</p> <p>Note: this is a parable about the "present" of Heaven's dawning Kingdom upon earth. The wealth all belongs to the master. The wealth is the knowledge/message of the Kingdom of Heaven which has been entrusted to the workers of the Kingdom to put to good use (see also 10:5-15 + 13:11-12).</p> <p>The greater share that the faithful servants receive is not a "personal reward". Rather God will entrust them with greater responsibility/authority in proclaiming the kingdom (see Matthew 28:18-19).</p> <p>Those who claim to be teachers of God's kingdom, but who prevent people from entering (see Matthew 23:13-15), will be thrown out of the kingdom.</p> <p>See also 7:15-23 which is likewise directed against Israel's false teachers. They correspond to the unfaithful servant in 25:14-30.</p> <p>Note also Matthew 24:45-51 which equates the Hypocrites (the pharisees in Matt 6:1-6) with the unfaithful servants here in 25:26-30. In both passages the unfaithful servant receives the same judgement.</p>

25:31-46	THE INHERITANCE OF THE KINGDOM	"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."	<p>The Kingdom prepared for you (25:34)</p> <p>Eternal life (25:46)</p>	<p>This parable is basically an extension of Matthew 10:40-42 that describes those who welcome/receive the teaching of the disciples (the little ones) as sharing in their reward!</p> <p>Those who have received, cared for, even given just a glass of water to "the least" will not lose their reward. The least are the disciples, who are the "little ones" in 10:40-42, and the "Last" in 19:30, 20:16.</p> <p>Those who welcome, receive, acknowledge the teacher/preacher of the kingdom, will also gain the same reward as the teacher/preacher of the kingdom. (See also 10:5-8, 10:40-42)</p>
28:18-19	ALL AUTHORITY IN HEAVEN & ON EARTH	"Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you..." (Matt. 28:18-20)	Recognition & responsibility (see Matthew 25:14-30)	Jesus has received "all" authority in heaven and earth. Jesus (the master) entrusts the disciples with his authority to proclaiming the Kingdom (see Matthew 25:14-30).