

ELEVENTH HOUR PARABLE OR THE PARABLE OF THE PENNY

(A Suggested Interpretation—Nothing Dogmatic Intended)

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We wish to discuss Brother Russell's remarks in the Third Volume (which is dated 1890), and then we wish to examine his answer to a question found in the Question Book (which is dated in 1911), and finally we wish to consider the Pastor's remarks in a 1914 Tower article which was written 24 years after Volume Three was written. Our purpose in doing this is to call attention to the fact that Brother Russell apparently revised his thought, and the interpretation found in Volume Three does not represent his final thinking on the subject.

We will now quote from Volume Three (pages 223 to 225) and we preface this with the remark that there is the thought of uncertainty regarding the receiving of the Penny. That is, his interpretation is that there is uncertainty on the part of the Eleventh Hour workers as to the receiving of the Penny. If we note this carefully we may then make a comparison with his thoughts in the Question book and in the 1914 Tower article.

We quote now from Volume Three: "This parable seems to have been given specially to teach a lesson for this time. The laborers are those earnest, consecrated children of God who throughout this Gospel Age—the 'day' of the parable—are faithfully spending their time and energy, not in the service of self, the service of mammon, but in the service of God. Only the faithful therefore are represented by the laborers, all of whom get the same reward, the Kingdom honors represented in the parable by the 'Penny.'

"The generality of the call and the need of laborers are represented by the four calls—early in the morning, at nine o'clock, at noon, and at three o'clock in the afternoon. Yet the exact, clear understanding of what the wages should be was mentioned only at the beginning: the householder 'agreed' to give them a penny for the service. So the promise of the Kingdom was clearly understood by the early Church, but afterward was in the main lost sight of and not clearly enunciated. The living members of Christ's Church laboring in his vineyard at any time during this Gospel age represent all the laborers. And the parable shows, as its particular feature, a class who enter this service of the Lord when the day's work is about done, at the 'eleventh [the last] hour.' They are represented as some desirous of engaging in the Master's service, but too late, the general call having ended. They say, 'No man hath hired us,' we were too late to get into the service under the call.

"The Master responds by pointing to the door of opportunity for doing and suffering in his service not yet 'shut,' the close of which will be indicated by the coming of 'the night in which no man can work.' But he says nothing about what the reward will be; though

in employing the others under this general call, he said, ‘Whatsoever is right I will give you’* a portion of the pay at first ‘agreed’ upon. (*Footnote—The oldest Greek Manuscripts, the Sinaitic and the Vatican, omit from Matt. 20:7 the words, ‘and whatsoever is right that shall ye receive.’)

“So, during the Gospel age, our Lord has continually, through his mouthpieces in the Church, invited all believers to enter into his service. The full reward, the divine nature and Kingdom glory, was clearly stated and well understood at first; but, although repeated throughout the age, it has not since been clearly understood because of the great falling away from the truth. But now we have come to the close of the Gospel day of service—to the ‘eleventh hour.’ It is past the time for calling laborers for this day. Yet, some are now standing by and saying, We have not been called into the work; ‘no man hath hired us’; we have no promise of labor, nor of a reward if we should find work; the call is ended, the day’s work is nearly done; there are enough laborers without us. But to these the Master would have us say, as his mouthpieces, ‘Go ye also into my vineyard’—I promise nothing, the general call is ended, the time is short, the time for labor is nearly ended, ‘The night cometh wherein no man can work’; but go in, show your love and zeal, and leave the rewarding to my generosity.

“And this is all we can say; the only hope we can hold out is that no man ever labored for our Master who will not receive abundantly more than he could ask or expect. And then we know that some of the places in the work will be vacated by reason of some not continuing faithful, and that the crowns of reward set apart for such will be given to others who, by faithfulness and self-sacrifice, prove themselves worthy of the work and the reward.

“So, then, if any have but recently come to know and love our Lord, and desire to serve him and his truth, let not such be discouraged because the general call ended in 1881. If you see the ‘door’ of opportunity for sacrifice and service open before you, enter in. But enter quickly; for the night of darkness and of intense opposition to the truth will ere long be upon us and will hinder you from engaging in the service. ‘The morning cometh, and also the night.’ ‘The night cometh in which no man can work.’ When that is true you may know that ‘the door is shut,’ that all the wise virgins have entered in, that all have been proved, and that all vacancies have been acceptably filled. All the special ‘servants of God’ having by that time been ‘sealed in their foreheads’ (given an intellectual appreciation of God’s plan), the four winds will be loosed (Rev. 7:1-3) and will produce the great ‘whirlwind’ of trouble in the midst of which the remnant of the Elijah class will be ‘changed,’ and exalted to Kingdom glory.

“What a lesson is here for those who have covenanted with the Lord to serve him first and chiefly, and who are neglecting his work to strive with time and thought and means for the transient joys and prizes which the world offers. These the Lord urges, saying,

‘Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.’ ‘He that overcometh [who conquers in himself the spirit of the world], the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father and before his holy servants.’ ‘Hold fast that which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.’—Rev. 2:10; 3:5, 11.” (End of quote from Volume Three.)

And now we turn to the Question book, page 258, ELEVENTH HOUR—Its Illustration. This shows a different train of thought from that which is found in Volume Three just quoted; and we do well to carefully note what the Pastor said, and the spirit he showed. He was doing some careful reasoning and was cautious. It is important, we believe, that we adopt the same spirit and not speak dogmatically, when the Lord has not provided us with an interpretation. Here is the question (1911)—“Please explain the eleventh hour parable mentioned in Matt. 20. Answer.—This parable is given to illustrate something that will occur toward the end of this age. The parable goes on to tell that there were various calls at various times for laborers in the vineyard. Now, some might say that this call for laborers in the vineyard began way back in the days of Jesus and the apostles, and that these various calls belong to various periods of the Gospel age, and we would see no argument against that; that seems sound enough. Others again would claim that this sending forth of laborers in the vineyard was not at the beginning of the age, because the Lord and the apostles planted the vine and attended to it in the beginning, and this call of the laborers in the vineyard was in the harvest time, at the end of the age, when the fruit was ripe and when they were to go in and gather, and receive wages for gathering the clusters. This interpretation also has some reasonable qualities. In any event, the eleventh hour represents the very closing time of this Gospel age, and the presentation is that at that time some will be standing waiting for an opportunity to enter into the harvest work—the reaping work, the vineyard work, and that some who would be in a proper condition of mind and heart would be acceptable there to do harvest work, even though the harvest work was nearly finished. As, for instance today, someone would perhaps say, ‘Well, Bro. Russell, I suppose that the harvest work is nearly over, and that if I would want to go out into the harvest field it would hardly be worth while now, would it?’ Well, I would say that if I were in your place, my dear brother, even though it be as it were in the eleventh hour, I would go at once to the Lord and say—if it were possible to arrange my affairs so—‘Lord here is so much time I can properly give to you and the service of the harvest work. I entreat that I may be sent into the harvest, that I may be one of those who will get a special blessing by virtue of association with the reapers, and that order of service.

“There are some things about this parable that are not so easy of interpretation; we might give some guesses and they might be all wrong; we do not like to give any guesses that might be wrong. As to what the penny will be, and what the servant will be that gets the penny, and as to what it will mean that some will murmur and say they are not satisfied with the penny, and say they should have had more, I do not know. I am not sure.

Perhaps we will see more clearly by and by; but we do believe this: that none of our murmuring will be beyond the veil; that therefore, the giving of the penny and the murmuring, whatever it shall signify, will be something that will yet be in the church before we pass beyond the veil. I do not think that any of those who murmur are going to have any pennies in the sense of eternal life and immortality. The Lord is not going to have any murmurers in the bride class; if I understand it right, they will all be so thankful they will appreciate the fact they have got more than they deserve, and so glad to get what the Lord will give.” (End of quote from Question Book.)

We will quote now from the 1914 Tower article (Reprint page 5473), and we believe a careful analysis of the Pastor’s expressions reveals that he is making a general application—that the parable seems to teach a lesson of generosity toward new ones. Here is what he wrote: “This parable is difficult of interpretation so as to make all of its facts find fulfillment. The Great Teacher gave it as a parable of the Kingdom; hence we know that it applies to the experiences of the church during this Gospel age. If we were to apply the different intervals mentioned to different epochs in this age, we would have difficulty; for the apostles and others, called early in the age, did not live and labor throughout the entire age, did not live and labor throughout the entire period. Again, in so applying it, we would face the proposition that only those at the beginning of the age had definite promise as respects a reward—that all others got merely the assurance that they would receive what would be right.

“Another difficulty which we would encounter in interpreting the parable is how to apply the murmuring of those who were first called and last rewarded. Other Scriptures show us that the apostles and others first called in the Gospel age will experience their resurrection change before those who will be living at the second coming of Christ. St. Paul declares that the dead in Christ shall rise first, and that then those of us who are alive shall be changed. Furthermore, it would be unthinkable that the apostles and others of the early church would murmur at the reward given them.

“All of these difficulties must be borne in mind when we attempt to find a solution of this parable that would fit the experiences of the church as a whole during the Gospel Age.

“If we attempt to apply the parable to the individual experiences of God’s people, we have trouble also. Applying it thus, we might say that those who begin a Christian life early, and are found faithful in the Lord’s service at the evening-time of life, would be the ones first called and promised a reward. Others coming in later, and serving the Lord’s cause with only a portion of their time, strength and talent, would correspond to those who heard the later call—some even at the eleventh hour. If we interpret the parable, as meaning that all these will get a similar reward regardless of the time spent in the Master’s service, we would still have difficulty with the fact that those called earliest murmured, complained, were dissatisfied.

“On the contrary, we are surely convinced that any who would murmur against the Lord’s will and his just and loving arrangements for his people, will never obtain the kingdom reward beyond the veil. We may feel assured that any who receive the Master’s ‘Well done’ and the resurrection change will be far from murmuring. They will rejoice and be glad, and feel more than rewarded for every little service and sacrifice. How then can we apply this parable consistently, in harmony with the teachings of other Scriptures respecting the reward of the kingdom class? We can think of only one way, and that is to apply the parable entirely to present-life experiences of the kingdom class, especially of those who will be living at the close of this Gospel Age...

“The general lesson of the parable would seem to be that we should appreciate the fact that whatever God has to offer is a gift. We should enter his service with loving loyalty to principle, to righteousness. If we have served many years, that privilege of service should be esteemed; and our interest in the Lord’s cause should make us happy. From such a standpoint of appreciation of the privilege of service, we should be glad to see the Lord’s work carried on, glad to see others enter the service and glad to see them get the same reward that we hope for ourselves. Only those who have such a broad spirit, such an appreciation of the privileges of the vineyard, such a sympathy for ‘as many as the Lord our God shall call’—only these will be fit for the kingdom proper and in readiness to receive the special privileges of knowledge and opportunity when the kingdom is ready to be announced.

“As the typical kingdom was offered to the Jews in Jesus’ day and as those who were newest in divine service received the same opportunities for a share in the kingdom with those who had been long engaged, so apparently it is to be in the end, or harvest time of this Gospel age. Those who have all their lives been seeking to be faithful to the Lord and to serve his cause should remember that they have had that much more of privilege and blessing. If some shall enter the divine service later, they should be rejoiced with as fellow-servants.

“Indeed, all who are servants, according to the Word of the Lord, should be praying the Master to send other laborers into the vineyard, instead of feeling jealous of any others who might come. And as greater knowledge of present truth is now coming as a reward to all who labor at all in the vineyard of the Lord, let us not be surprised if this shall be equally distributed to those who have come in recently and to those who have been a long time in the Master’s service.

“Let us rather rejoice in the Lord’s ways. Let not our hearts be angry because of his graciousness to those who have come into the service even during the eleventh hour. Are they not brethren? Under the terms of the Golden Rule should we not wish them to have the same blessings that we enjoy? Any aloofness on the part of those who have been

longer in the Lord's service—any feeling on the part of such that they must have more manifestation of the Lord's favor now—is evidently wrong. The Lord would have us more like unto himself.” (End of quote from the Reprint.)

Looking over the three quotes from the Pastor foregoing, we are impressed with the fact that the Pastor's mind was open—he did not suggest a particular interpretation that appealed to him as entirely satisfactory. But now, since the Pastor's death, is there any reason for believing that there is an interpretation that reasonably fits the framework of the parable? Yes, we believe there is an interpretation. And it appeals to us as entirely possible that there was no positive interpretation that could appeal to the Pastor during his lifetime, for the reason that the circumstances that would fit the parable did not come into being until AFTER the Pastor had died.

But before we suggest the interpretation and the circumstances that seem to fit the framework of the parable, we must call attention to an important fact concerning the wording of the parable itself. In Matt. 20:10 and 11 we read, “But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house.” The thought seemingly contained in the wording in verse 10 is that the laborers wanted more than the penny and they were complaining (“murmuring”) because the eleventh-hour laborers received the same pay—the penny. And this is the precise thought the Pastor got from this as shown in the quote from the Question Book—see page 3 of this item, paragraph 1, line 6. However, in looking up the word “more” in Strong's Concordance we find one shade of meaning to be “major portion.” So the “murmurers” could be saying that they objected to the “eleventh-hour” laborers being made equal to them. In other words, they expected to receive a “penny” as that was what was agreed upon originally, BUT they thought the “eleventh-hour laborers” should receive LESS (than the penny). They thought they should receive the “major portion” and the eleventh-hour workers should receive a lesser portion. We shall continue our reasoning now and see if this fits the circumstances after the Pastor's death.

We call to mind now certain circumstances after our Pastor's death, and old-time Bible Students will remember them well. From the Society came the idea that “the harvest is over, and there was to be no more spirit begetting.” This idea was taken up by a number of leaders. The result was that those who came “into the truth” at that time were bluntly told that they could not have the hope of the high calling, as the time was past for that, and they must be satisfied with something LESS—the hope of restitution. Some brethren were so sure of their position in the matter that they used practically the same language of the parable—“do you think these new ones can have the same blessings from the Lord as we have who have labored IN THE HEAT OF THE DAY OF THE HARVEST?”

All of this is very striking and we have come to the conclusion that possibly we could interpret the “Penny” as the HOPE OF THE HIGH CALLING; for the “murmurers” were saying in effect that new ones could not have this hope, but must be satisfied with something LESS, viz. the hope of a future RESTITUTION.

Our Pastor had an opposite spirit as indicated in the wording of the quote from the Reprint article. (See page 5 of this item, paragraph 2.) We find a beautiful quote from Reprint page 5950 showing the gracious and loving spirit of the Pastor toward new ones in the truth, the very opposite to the spirit of the “murmurers” of the parable. We quote as it is so refreshing: “Some of us were quite strongly convinced that the Harvest would be ended by now, but our expectations must not be allowed to weigh anything as against the facts. The fact is that the Harvest work is going grandly on; it is not ended by any means. As far as our present judgment goes, it would appear that there is considerable Harvest Work yet to be done. This is not discouraging, but encouraging to us. We are glad to know of the grace of God reaching other heads and hearts and blessing them as ours have been blessed. We are glad to know that others are daily coming into the blessed relationship with the Lord under the Covenant of Sacrifice, and are giving evidence of having been begotten of the Holy Spirit. We are glad to note their zeal, and rejoice with them that they, as well as we, can share in this glorious opportunity of making our calling and election sure by the character development which we are daily learning to appreciate as the prime essential of the ‘more than conquers.’ All those must be copies of God’s dear son, our Lord Jesus. We would have been glad to have entered upon our work beyond the veil; but we are better pleased to continue our labors on this side the veil, because such is the Lord’s will for us.”

We should have quoted from Rotherham (Matt. 20:11 and 12) along with the fourth paragraph on page 5 of this item (#283), but we don’t like to pass it by so will quote it now: “And receiving (it), they were murmuring against the householder, saying, These last one hour wrought, and equal with us, thou didst make them—with (us) who bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

When speaking to new ones, we think it is happifying to be able to tell them that the trumpet does give a certain sound, and whatever the penny happens to be in reality, they will surely receive it. We cannot assure anyone that he will receive the prize; but we can assure anyone that if he is true to his covenant he will be rewarded accordingly. On page 94, paragraph 2, of Volume VI we read: “Consistency seems to demand that the Almighty shall not even seem to trifle with his creatures by extending a single invitation which could not be made good if accepted.” And on page 223 (top) of Volume III we read: “And the Lord is too loving and too just to authorize in the hearts of any, hopes which could never be realized.” And on Reprint page 1112, par. 5 we read: “None shall have to say that God invited him to run the race for the prize of the High calling and that after

running faithfully he could not receive the reward because too many had been called and the fore-ordained number was more than supplied.”