

Matthew 25—The Parables of Christ

The context of the parables that Christ told His disciples in Matthew 25 was the teaching from the Olivet Discourse concerning His second coming. Jesus had been very clear that He would be crucified, but be resurrected and ascend to heaven. Sometime in the future, Jesus promised to return as the conquering King to set up the Kingdom of God. In the meantime His followers were to live as stewards of the ministry Jesus was entrusting to them until His return. The issue for our living then becomes, “If I believe that at any moment history could come to an end, and I could find myself standing before Christ, would it not affect the way I live now?” Therefore, Jesus told three parables that Matthew recorded in Matt.25 illustrating the necessity of being faithful to that stewardship, and being ready for Christ’s return. These parables are a call to Jesus’ followers to be ready for a time which no one can predict. In your planning for your business and your family, you plan ahead and are prepared for the future, yet the high stakes nature of being ready for Christ make it even more important.

The Ten Virgins

The first parable can be found in verse 1-13 in which Jesus compares the coming of the kingdom to ten virgins waiting for their duties as bridesmaids in a wedding to be held at an unknown time. While they were waiting they fell asleep, but at midnight when they least expected it, the bridegroom showed up. Part of their job was to bring lights to the wedding procession. In verses 2-4 there is a contrast between five bridesmaids who were prudent, and five who were foolish. The five who were foolish were not prepared with the oil for the lamps, but the five prudent bridesmaids were prepared. There is an emphasis in v.5 on a delay in the wedding because of the groom’s coming which cannot help but remind us of the delay in Jesus coming back. Jesus emphasizes the delay, but life goes on and becomes a distraction. We tend to get drowsy and fall asleep on our responsibilities to serve Him. Then at midnight when everyone is asleep, He shows up, and the question for the bridesmaids is—Can you recover from a lack of preparation? In the parable it is too late. The principle of the parable is that being prepared should be a way of life for the Christian. Christianity is not fire insurance. Christ is the Lord of your life that you faithfully serve and pursue.

The Parable of the Talents

This parable found in Matt.25:14-30, takes the “live faithfully and be prepared” theme a step further showing that being ready means to respond to opportunities to serve, and being faithful to the stewardships given. We are expected to work diligently for the Lord in our service opportunities and produce results. This parable also employs the “delay motif” in which the master goes away for an extended time, and the servants have no idea when He will return. This delay is a period of opportunity for His servants to use their gifts and talents that they are given for the benefit of the master. The delay shouldn’t produce passivity or distraction, but is a time to develop God given resources. The man in the journey is no doubt Jesus leaving and entrusting the gospel to His disciples—leaving

them in charge of His interests here on earth. Each of us is given a different amount of resources, ability, and responsibility. It is the prerogative of God to distribute gifts as He pleases, but everyone gets something and has a resultant responsibility. He gives no specific instructions, but gives them freedom while expecting initiative. There is an unknown time until accounts will be settled which tends to cause many to be distracted, lazy, and selfish. In the end, God will commend His faithful servants, and reward them graciously.

Notice in v.15 that the master gave each one a different number of talents. At this point it is important to the story to understand what a “talent” was in first century Israel. A talent was a measure of weight used to measure gold or silver. In the time of Jesus, a talent was valued at about 6000 denarii, and one denarii was equal to a day’s wage for a laborer. Therefore it was a great deal of money. We are told that the master gave to each servant according to his own ability. In verses 16-17 we see that the diligent servants got to work immediately and produced results, but in v.18 the third servant played it safe avoiding any work or risk. In v.19 the master returned to settle accounts, and some may ask why, but it is clear that the talents are His, and were not to be used for the servants’ own purposes.

In verses 20-23, the formula is repeated by the master of commendation, then reward, and the reward is an expanded opportunity for a life of joy and fulfillment in further service. Each of the first two servants did the best they could with what was entrusted to them so the master commended them with a “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master.” The unexpected pivot in the story comes in verse 24 when the third servant told the master, “I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not plant...I hid your talent in the ground.”

We are amazed that the excuse of this worthless servant is to actually blame it on the master! Let’s examine his claims: “I knew you to be a hard man”. Can he be considered “hard” because he gave gifts? No, he was a gracious man giving rewards. “Reaping where you didn’t sow” That’s wrong, it was the master’s stuff. We the students know that the lazy servant did not know the master at all, nor did he understand the master or the master’s grace. I can see the atheists’ argument today in this worthless servant’s defense. The typical argument begins with, “I can’t believe in a God who would ____.” Just fill in the blank in attacking God for what is wrong with the person’s life, and what is wrong with their view of the world, when in fact the fault lies with the human race.

In verse 26, the master’s (and God’s) condemnation of the lazy servant gives a new revolutionary definition for the word “wicked”. This man murdered no one, neither did he steal, commit adultery, or any major criminal offense. The definition of wicked here is that he did not know or understand God, and by not knowing or obeying God, he lived entirely for himself. In verses 28-30 Jesus directed some very harsh language towards that servant to emphasize the fate of those who refuse to believe and fail to obey.

The Sheep and the Goats

The last story found in Matthew 25:31-46, is not so much a parable as it is an allegory concerning the judgment of Christ upon all the people still alive when Jesus returns to earth. In v.32, all the people of all the nations will be gathered before Christ to be separated into two categories “as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats”. Mixed flocks were common then because it was economical, and the more restless goats would lead the herd to more and different grazing areas. At certain times the shepherd would divide up the more valuable sheep to be sheered of their wool or to be taken to market. Jesus used this imagery that His audience was aware of to illustrate how He will divide people at His second coming.

Jesus will put the believers on His right and the unbelievers (goats) on His left. The believers will be blessed with the grace of God, and will “inherit the kingdom”. The basis of judgment is somewhat surprising in verses 35-40. As Jesus had taught in the Sermon on the Mount, “you shall know them by their fruits” (Matt.7:20), and here at the judgment Jesus commends them by saying they fed the hungry, gave hospitality to the needy, clothed the naked, helped the sick, etc. Amazingly Jesus said that they did all these good deeds for Him. Naturally they will ask when did they do these things for Jesus, but Jesus will reply “when you did them for these brothers of mine, you did it for Me.” You could call this the spiritual principle of transference. We all feel a certain gratitude to Christ for His atoning work on the cross on our behalf, and we would like an opportunity to show Him that gratitude and our love for Him. Here we see that He expects that love to be transferred to fellow believers through good deeds. In this allegory the proof that we are believers is in the “pudding” of our love shown to others. This story of the sheep and the goats makes more sense when you study it in the context of the Olivet Discourse concerning the “great tribulation” Jesus mentioned in Matt.24:21. The terrible last days of the end times just before Jesus comes back will be marked by hunger, thirst, sickness, persecution, and a general need for help of every kind. In 25:36, Jesus said, “I was in prison, and you came to Me.” At first that seemed strange to me, but in the great tribulation when persecution of God’s people will be the order of the day, it makes sense.

In Matt.25:41-46, Jesus gives the opposite judgment to the “goats” because they did not help all those who were suffering and being persecuted for believing in Christ. They were either participating in being persecutors or just standing by approving of the persecution. All this reveals their rejection of Christ and participation either knowingly or unknowingly with the adversary. Therefore they will get to spend eternity with the adversary.

Now the sheep and the goats are all mixed up just as the wheat and the tares are in the parable in Matt.13:24-30, so it is not up to us to separate them or even figure out who is who. Nevertheless, it is our job now to be alert, ready, and faithful knowing that Jesus is coming soon.

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