

Matthew 25:1-30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 21 March 2020

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 25 verses 1 to 30 Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise.

For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, Here is the bridegroom, come out to meet him.

Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps, and the foolish said to the wise, Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out. But the wise answered, saying, Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.

And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

But he answered, Truly I say to you, I do not know you. Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property.

[1 : 08] To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more.

So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, Master, you delivered to me five talents. Here I have made five talents more.

His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, Master, you delivered to me two talents.

Here I have made two talents more. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.

[2 : 16] He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed.

So I was afraid. And I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours. But his master answered him, You wicked and slothful servant.

You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I have scattered no seed. Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers. And at my coming, I should have received what was my own with interest.

So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew chapter 25 contains three great judgment scenes.

[3 : 15] The first one is the parable of the ten virgins. Why virgins? Well, maybe because this is a marital event. The bridegroom is coming. He's going to return for his bride.

And the virgins would be associated with the bride. They would be the sort of bridesmaid. And here I think they symbolize those associated with the bride of Jerusalem. And the five and five pattern continues the one taken and another left pattern that immediately precedes it.

It underlines the binary division that Matthew often draws our attention to. Why are there ten of them? Perhaps we could think of it in terms of the ten lampstands of Solomon's temple.

There's five on the right. There's five on the left. And the virgins represent the bridal character of the people, which is represented by the temple itself. They bear their lamps out to meet the bridegroom as a sort of unveiling of the bridal glory within the temple.

It's a presentation of that glory to the bridegroom who's arrived. And it might be connected also with the previous parable of the wise and faithful servant, which might be the faithful high priest who has to act within the house of his master.

[4 : 23] And there's a cry at midnight. And there's a shut door. That reminds us of Passover. It's the event where God delivers his people in the middle of the night. And there's this terrible judgment upon those who are not faithful.

And those who are left outside of the door suffer a terrible fate, whereas those within the house who are safe are blessed. We should also have in mind Exodus chapter 27 verses 20 to 21.

Keeping oil for the lamps was the continual duty of the Israelites. And it was like the fourth day associated with the heavenly lights, but paralleled with the first day when the lamp stand itself was fashioned.

The lamp going out was associated with loss of vision, prophetic and the eyes of judgment. And we've seen this in 1 Samuel chapter 3 verses 1 to 3. That parallelism between the eyes of the high priest, the light of the word of the Lord being heard, and then also the lamp in the temple.

Oil is light-bearing liquid. It's associated with anointing, which is associated in turn with light-bearing in places like Zechariah chapter 4. And elsewhere in scripture we see oil associated with the spirit who produces faith in us, which prepares the people of God to bear God's light.

[5 : 35] We might also think about the contrast between the characters that's drawn here. We should pay attention to the adjectives that are used. It's faithful and wise versus wicked.

Wise versus foolish. Faithful versus wicked and slothful. Each description accents something different about the aspects of character that we should be attending to.

It's not just good and bad. It's wise and foolish. It's people who are prepared, people who are ready and people who are not. People who have gotten the resources that they need in the time for the judgment and those who are taken by surprise and unawares and unprepared.

The foolish versus wise opposition should also be explored deeper. We can see that in places like Proverbs chapter 9 with the contrast between the woman folly and lady wisdom.

Here we can also maybe think back to the wise and foolish builders in the Sermon on the Mount. And the way that many of the same themes come up there, the way that they will be inspected.

[6 : 34] I never knew you. For those who say, Lord, Lord, we did all these things in your name. And yet they are workers of wickedness. Here, being prepared for Christ requires faithfulness, diligence, vigilance, but also wisdom.

The wise person sees what lies ahead and makes provision and preparation for it. And this is one of the things that the disciples of Christ are challenged to do by this parable.

They do not know what time the Lord will return in judgment upon them. And so they must be prepared at all times. They must be ready to leave at a moment. And that will be a matter of keeping their lamps prepared, tending the lamp of the Spirit within them.

This could be connected to the life of the church more directly by recognizing that Christians are lamps and the church is a lampstand. This is one of the significances of the tongues of flame at Pentecost and the vision that we see in Revelation chapter 1.

We have been anointed with the oil of the Spirit and set alight by that Spirit. With tongues of flame, we are burning as a candlestick, as a lampstand, as individual lamps within the temple of God.

[7 : 44] And it's important that we tend to the life of the Spirit within us. We do not quench the Holy Spirit. We seek to tend the flame of the Spirit by regularly returning to the replenishing oil of the Word and the sacraments.

The next parable is a story of a man who departs for a long journey and he entrusts a great deal of his property to his servants. Talent should not be presumed to mean talents in the sense that we often use that term.

We often think of talents in terms of our skills and abilities and it's not unrelated to that, but that's not what the term means here. It's a large sum of money and it's to be used for trade.

They seem to be given these gifts of talents on the basis of their ability. The more competent and able, the more we'll be entrusted to their hands. And God-given responsibilities and opportunities for service are important and we must make the most of these.

That's one of the points of this parable. The importance is to be found ready for judgment. The time of testing will reveal the work of people. This is something that's discussed on various occasions within the New Testament where we see that people who are unfaithful find that their work in the day of testing is destroyed and things for which they may have been responsible fall to other more able and responsible and faithful parties.

[9 : 04] Those who are faithful share in the joy of their master and we should remember a talent is an immense sum of money. Two talents might be an entire lifetime's wages for a regular worker.

Modern equivalent would be something maybe two or three million dollars. This man is leaving an immense treasure in the hands of his servants and expecting them to have something to show for it at the other end.

He's expecting them to prove themselves faithful and diligent and capable of using his resources well. Luke's parable is different. It's a story of a returning king.

The king leaves these great treasures with people and then goes off for a long journey where he defeats people who were not willing to be reigned over by him and then he returns having gained the kingdom and then gives these gifts to his faithful servants.

Luke also has an equal distribution at the beginning but very different results from their trading.

Matthew has different distribution at the outset. When the man in Matthew's parable returns it's after a long time.

[10 : 07] For some this suggests that this parable relates not to AD 70 but to the end of all things. I'm not sure that's the case though. The extra responsibility seems to be within this world and the long time could relate to the 40 years.

40 years can be a very long time to live through especially when you might be spending almost the entirety of your life waiting for this thing to be fulfilled. Here we might see parallels between the faithful servants and the faithful and wise servant of chapter 24 verse 45.

The unfaithful servant, the final servant however, is lazy and indolent. He doesn't think that there's anything personally that he has to gain from acting as a faithful steward of his master's wealth. He ventures nothing. He is merely concerned not to lose what has been entrusted to him. And importantly, his behaviour was based upon a particular perception of his master.

He sees his master as a hard man. A man who is more concerned with judgement. Not a generous master. A master who wants to get whatever he can. A master who's concerned with condemnation.

[11 : 15] A master who's concerned with penny pinching and all these sorts of things. A miserly master. While the faithful servants ventured and took risks on the basis of a belief in their master that he was someone who was a good master who would entrust responsibility to those who were faithful, the unfaithful servant, on account of his false perception of his master, did not venture anything.

He did not put the money to use as a faithful steward and so it's taken from him and given to someone who will make use of it. The wealth entrusted to the sterile service of the unfaithful servant is handed over to the most fruitful and faithful servant.

And the language of final judgement occurs here again. As God judges in history, I think we should also see that related to final judgement. Judgements in such things as the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah, the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the ways that individuals could be caught up in these things relate not just to historical events but also to eternal destinies.

The historical judgement is, as it were, bringing forward an anticipation of that greater judgement that awaits us. And being alert for these specific judgments in history prepares us for that final judgement at the very end.

In the same way as being prepared for our death prepares us for a greater death that belongs beyond that. A question to consider. The unfaithful servant in the parable of the talents seems to have a religion merely concerned with preserving what he has rather than doing anything with what has been entrusted to him.

[12 : 51] It's also related to a vision of his master, a vision of God. How might we fill out this portrait of the unfaithful servant and how might we avoid following his example?