

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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THE PARABLES OF THE SECOND COMING

Matthew 24-25

In the last two lessons, we studied the Parable of the Talents and the Parable of Ten Virgins. These two parables are found in Matthew 25, from v. 1 to v. 30, and they share the common theme of the Second Coming of Christ. At the end of Matthew 24, we find another parable which is also concerned with the Second Coming of Christ. It is the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants in Matthew 24:45-51. So these three parables, the Parable of the Talents, the Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants, have one subject in common: the return of Christ. But they have more in common than that, and in this lesson, I would like to highlight seven points that these parables share together.

Seven things in common

Let's begin. For the first point, I will repeat what I just said, that is, in each case, the main character (whether it is the master or the bridegroom) is away, and we are told that he will come back. And he does come back. The main character represents Christ, who is now at the right hand of His Father, but He will surely come back on earth one day.

The second point is that in each case, there is a delay in the master's return. In fact, in Matthew 25:19, it is specifically stated that the delay will be for a long time. *After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.* In the other two passages, we find the word 'delay': 1) *My master is **delaying** his coming* (Matthew 24:48); 2) *The bridegroom was **delayed*** (Matthew 25:5). So it will take some considerable time before the Lord's return. How long? Nobody knows. Jesus does not say anything about it. The emphasis of His teaching is on the fact that His return will be unexpected.

The third point is the importance, the crucial importance of a person's conduct in the story of each of these parables. More specifically, the conduct of those awaiting the master's return will determine whether they are considered to be faithful or wicked (as in the first parable), or wise or foolish (as in the second parable). Or whether they will enter into the joy of their Lord or be cast out (as in the third parable). In the first parable, conduct has to do with the servant faithfully carrying out his duties, or bullying others and indulging himself. In the second parable, conduct has to do with virgins taking extra oil with them, or taking no oil. In the third parable, conduct has to do with the servant producing extra talents, or producing nothing at all. In each case, conduct is the deciding factor. Very important to notice.

The fourth point is that the notion of faithfulness is central to all the stories. It is explicitly spelled out in the first parable when it describes the 'faithful and wise servant' (Matthew 24:45). It is

pictured as something ‘extra’ in the other parables: the extra oil that is brought along by the wise virgins and the extra talents that have been produced by the faithful servants. Faithfulness is what characterizes those who have the master’s favor.

The fifth point is that this faithfulness is rewarded. In each case, the faithful servant is rewarded and indeed, richly rewarded. In Matthew 24:47, we read that the faithful servant will be put in charge of all the master’s possessions. This means that the master has total confidence in the servant who has proven himself worthy, who has been found faithful. God has complete confidence in such a person and because of that, He will entrust much to him. In Luke 19:12ff, the servant who brought back ten pounds is made to rule over ten cities. The servant who brought back five pounds is made ruler over five cities. Faithfulness is honored again. And in proportion to the servant’s faithfulness, to that degree he will be put in charge of the administration in God’s kingdom.

Notice also the following parallel in connection with the rewards. Like the wise virgins who entered into the feast (Matthew 25:10), so also the faithful servants in the Parable of the Talents ‘entered into the joy of their Lord’ (Matthew 25:21, 23). You share in the joy of the Lord because you have given Him much joy. It is quite something to think that we could give God some joy, that through the faithfulness of our conduct, we are actually pleasing to Him. We give Him joy. And in doing so, we share in His joy.

Sent to hell

The sixth point is this: just as there are rewards for the faithful, there will be a punishment for the unfaithful. In each case, the unfaithful servant is punished. In fact, not just punished, but severely punished. In Matthew 24:51, we read that the unfaithful servant will be ‘cut to pieces.’ There is not much left of a person who is ‘cut to pieces.’ Metaphorically speaking, this means that he will be totally destroyed. He will be with the hypocrites, as we read in the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants (Matthew 24:51), weeping and gnashing his teeth – in hell. This is where the hypocrites go. In the Parable of the Talents, the unfaithful servant is sent ‘into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (Matthew 25:30). In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the punishment is seen in the door being locked and in the words ‘I do not know you.’ Together, they express the idea of ultimate exclusion, the exclusion of a person who is sent to hell.

Hell is also described as a furnace of fire, i.e., a place of destruction. Fire destroys what it burns. Have you ever thought about the purpose of hell? Why does a God of love want to have a hell in His creation? Why does He need a place of destruction? Well, for the simple reason that if there is to be ‘a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells’, as Peter says in 2Peter 3:13, a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness and only righteousness dwells, then there must be a place or a way in which all unrighteousness has to be absent. If it was there before, it has to be destroyed. And that is what hell is for. Hell is a place where all wickedness and all unrighteousness are destroyed and eliminated.

Condemned believers

Now here is an observation that we cannot overlook, as shocking as it may be. And the observation is this: those who go to hell, in each parable, are people who are waiting for the master’s return. They are all people who are waiting for the Lord’s return. And who are the people who are waiting for the Lord’s return? Are they the non-Christians? No. Non-Christians are not expecting Christ to return. They are not expecting any savior. It is the Christians who are looking for the return of Christ! And this is the seventh point. All three parables are speaking to and about Christians. Not about unbelievers. This means that it is the believers who go to hell. The believers go to hell. As disturbing as this statement may be, I honestly do not know how else we can interpret this point of the parables. All three parables are speaking about people who are waiting for the master’s return, about

people who are believers. And in each parable, some of these people are condemned to go to a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 24:51; 25:30). This is another way of talking about hell. The expression ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ describes the bitterness of remorse of a person who realizes that he had been rejected by God and that he had lost forever the opportunity of salvation.

Some people might say, ‘The people who fail in these parables, they were not true believers. They never really believed in God.’ People who say that are people who think that a person who looks like a Christian, who behaves like a Christian and who talks like a Christian, and who gets lost in the end, well that so called ‘Christian’ was not a Christian and he was never saved in the first place. In of itself, this is not really an argument. But it is often used by people who believe in the theology which states that a believer cannot lose his salvation. It would be like saying that the unfaithful servant was never a servant in the first place. Was he a servant or was he not? Are we going to say that he was not a true servant in the first place because he was unfaithful and sentenced to hell in the end? The fact that he was not a faithful servant does not automatically mean that he was not a true servant. These are two different issues. We cannot use unfaithfulness to deny that a servant was a true servant. So to say that if a person fails in the end, this person was never a Christian in the first place, this kind of reasoning is based on a faulty logic. In the parables, the servant was presented as a true servant even though he was not a faithful servant, even though he ended up being thrown out. *Throw this useless servant into the darkness outside*, the master says in Matthew 25:30. Yes, he was useless, but he was a servant nevertheless.

Speaking about this expression ‘throwing out,’ do you know who this is applied to in the Lord’s teaching? To the sons of the kingdom. The sons of the kingdom.

In Matthew 8:12, Jesus says this: *The sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.* ‘Thrown into the outer darkness.’ It was the common belief among the Jews that no descendant of Abraham could be lost. And here, Jesus makes the shocking statement that the Jews are not necessarily assured of a place at the Messianic banquet. Membership in the kingdom of heaven is not based on who your ancestors are.

The sons of the kingdom are those who belong to the kingdom of God. In the OT, it refers to the Jewish nation, to the descendants of Abraham. In the NT, it refers to the church, those who responded to the proclamation of Christ. Look at this description that we find in the Parable of the Tares: *The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom* (Matthew 13:38). The good seed stands for the believers.

This means that Jesus’ warning in Matthew 8:12 about the sons of the kingdom who will be thrown into the outer darkness is not just for the Jews, but also for the Christians. The ‘sons of the kingdom’ refer not only to Israel, but also to the church. Christians too can be thrown into the outer darkness.

Notice this. The unfaithful servant of Matthew 25, if he were not inside, inside the kingdom, how can he be thrown out? You have to be in first before you can be thrown out. If he had been outside of the kingdom all the time, what then would be the meaning of throwing him out?

Once in, now out

In several places in the Bible, we find this idea of being inside at the beginning, and then to be thrown out later on. In Matthew 22:13, the man without a wedding garment, though he had already got into the feast, is still thrown out at the end. *Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’*

In the Parable of the Dragnet, the fish which are already in the net of the kingdom are thrown out. Matthew 13:49-50: *The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

In the Parable of the Tares, the tares are in the field, growing among the wheat. Not around the wheat or outside of the wheat, but in or among the wheat. They are also thrown out. Matthew 13:30: *First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up* (which is basically the same as being ‘thrown into the fiery furnace’).

In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the servant had already been forgiven. Later he failed to forgive and therefore his forgiveness was revoked. He was thrown into the hands of *the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him* (Matthew 18:34).

So the sons of the kingdom will be thrown out, *ekballo*. That is the Greek word for ‘throwing or casting out of a place.’ In the Septuagint, the Greek OT, *ekballo* is applied to Adam. Genesis 3:24: *So He (God) drove out (ekballo) the man*. As a consequence of their disobedience, Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden of Eden by God. They were supposed to live in the garden forever. But in choosing to sin, they were not allowed to stay there anymore.

The same thing happened to Cain. God had to drive Cain out because of his sin, the murder of his brother Abel. Genesis 4:14: *Surely You have driven me out (ekballo) this day from the face of the ground.*

The same thing happened to the Jews as a nation. Let us read Deuteronomy 29:28. *And the Lord uprooted them from their land in anger and fury and great wrath, and cast (ekballo) them into another land, as at this day*. They were being cast out of a land which the Lord had already given them. Even though they had the promised land, even though they were living in the promised land, because of their idolatry, they lost their land.

Whether it is in the OT or in the NT, the Scriptural teaching is very clear: no one can sin and get away with it. No one. And in this respect, these three parables of the talents, of the virgins and of the servants are teaching us that at His Second Coming, the Lord Jesus will determine once and for all who will be in, and who will be out.

The labor of love

You know, when I reflect on these parables, I am thinking that nobody turns five talents into another five talents by being lazy. And we find everywhere in the NT that in those who live with eternity in view, there is a powerful drive to serve, to work, to do something for the kingdom. You don’t have to tell them to be active. When we read the NT, particularly the writings of Paul, we are struck by words like ‘work,’ ‘strive,’ ‘press on.’

Let us spend some time discussing the case of Paul. In 1Corinthians 15:10, Paul says, *No, I worked harder than all of them*. The apostles worked hard. Paul worked even harder. He did not want to be outrun by anybody. He describes the Christian life as a race. In a race, there is only one winner, and he intends to be that person. We call that spiritual ambition. ‘You run fast. Well, I’m going to run faster than you.’ *Let us not become weary in doing good*, he says in Galatians 6:9. ‘Outdo one another in good works.’ We see that there is a kind of holy competition in the words of Paul.

In 1Corinthians 4:12, we find the same type of language. *We work hard with our own hands*. That is, we work very hard to supply our needs.

In 1Thessalonians 2:9, we read, *Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.*

2Thessalonians 3:8. *Nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.*

Colossians 1:29. *For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.*

In the Scriptures, we find this dynamic of labor. There is this toiling and striving for godliness, for the conveying of God's love. In 1Thessalonians 1:3, Paul speaks of the 'work of faith' and the 'labor of love.' Where there is love, there will be labor. There will be a willingness to serve, to do something.

Often Paul's writings derive from the Lord's own teaching. He describes the Christian as a soldier who endures hardship for Christ in 2Timothy 2:3-4. He compares the Christian life to that of a farmer who waters and plants in 1Corinthians 3:7-8. He uses the picture of a builder in 1Corinthians 3:10.

All these pictures of soldier, farmer and builder come from the teaching of Jesus Himself. The Lord Jesus speaks of the disciples as soldiers in Luke 14:31: *Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?* He speaks of the Christian as a farmer in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). He speaks of the Christian as a builder who builds his house on the rock in Matthew 7:24ff.

So there is always this notion of spiritual activity. Fighting. Sowing. Building. The true disciple lives with eternity in view and therefore he seizes every opportunity to contribute to the edification of God's kingdom. The parables of the Second Coming teach us also that those who are 'useless' (as expressed in Matthew 25:30) will be cast out.