

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE POUNDS

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Luke 19:11-27

The kingdom of God exists in the present, but is also in a state of expectant fulfillment. It is therefore 'now', but at the same time 'not yet'. Because the Jews struggled to understand this two-stage view of the kingdom, Jesus told the parable of the pounds. He did this by indirectly referring to events that had taken place more than thirty years ago and which were still in the memory of His listeners. This passage is found in Luke 19:11-27.

### A stewardship parable

The parable begins with a man of noble birth who was about to go to a far country to have himself appointed king. Before he left, he gave some money to ten of his servants. The servants were given one mina each and they were asked to do business for their master in his absence. The sum is not a large one. One mina, or one pound, was equivalent to one hundred drachmas, and one drachma was a laborer's wage for a day's work. Thus each servant received about four month's worth of wages. Because the ruler's plan was to come back, the servants knew that in due course, they will have to give account of themselves.

Now, the people subject to the nobleman did not like him. So they sent a delegation to oppose the confirmation of his kingdom, saying, *We do not want this man to rule over us* (v. 14). It did not work. The nobleman got his kingdom and came back home.

He then called his servants to give an accounting for what they have done with the mina they received from him. He anticipated that they had made some profits with his money.

The first servant brought an encouraging report: He earned ten minas, ten times the original amount. The master praised him for his diligence. He called him 'good', and he rewarded him by putting him in charge of ten cities. The second servant also reported a significant gain: Five minas. He, too, received a reward. He was placed in charge of five cities.

The third servant, however, had no profit to report. He said, 'Master, here is your money. I kept it in a napkin'. Then he explained why he did that. 'I was afraid of you because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow'.

The master was not happy. He rebuked the servant and told him that the money should have been put in a bank while he was gone so that upon his return he could collect it with interest. There were of course no banks in our sense of the term. In Greek, the word 'bank' means 'table', i.e. the table of the money-lender. According to Deuteronomy 23:19-20, money could be lent at interest to

Gentiles but not to fellow Israelites. He then passed judgment on the bad servant. The money was taken from him and given to the one who earned ten minas.

The parable ends with a note of frightening severity. Those who rejected the nobleman and sent an embassy after him are not forgotten. The master called them *these enemies of mine* (v. 27) because they have set themselves in opposition to him. He had them appear in his presence and then he ordered their execution.

### **The historical background**

The story of this aspiring king would have rung very loud bells with Jesus' listeners because the son of Herod the Great, Archelaus, did almost exactly what the parable describes. Herod the Great, the man who tried to eliminate the infant Jesus, died in 4 BC. In his will, he left his mini-kingdom to three of his sons. He gave Judea and Samaria to his son Archelaus. He also gave him the title of king. Of course, Archelaus could not be king just because his father had appointed him to be king. In the world of the Roman Empire, when a man was going to become king, he had to go to Rome to receive the appointment. Herod the Great had followed this. Archelaus had to do the same. So Archelaus traveled to Rome, a very long journey, to receive confirmation of his position as king over Judea and Samaria.

The Jews hated Herod the Great because he was a ruthless ruler. This was a person who, at the end of his life, rounded up Jewish leaders with the order that at the moment of his death, they should all be killed. He was afraid that when he died, there was going to be celebration on the streets instead of mourning. So by killing the leaders, he would force the Jews to mourn, even if the people were not doing it for him. Such was the cruelty of Herod. And the Jews knew Archelaus to be just as bad. So when Archelaus went off to Rome, they sent a delegation to plead for him not to be made king. As a result, the emperor gave him the authority to rule, but did not give him the title of 'king' until he proved himself worthy, which he never did. Within ten years, he was removed from office because of his bad administration.

Verse 11 tells us the reason that motivated Jesus to teach the parable of the pounds. *Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately.* Many people in Israel still hoped for a political leader who would set up an earthly kingdom and get rid of the Roman domination. Even the disciples had this in mind. In Acts 1:6, after following Jesus for a few years, they still asked, *Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?* Jesus taught the parable of the pounds to correct this misconception of the kingdom of God.

### **The interpretation**

In explaining its meaning, we have to be careful not to press all the details of the story because it would lead, in some cases, to absurd conclusions. We will focus on what most commentators agree.

#### **(-) The nobleman**

The nobleman represents Jesus. Like this ruler, Jesus would go away to a distant country (heaven) and would be gone for an undetermined period of time. This means that the kingdom was not going to come until He himself went away to receive the kingdom and then came back. There will be a time interval between His presence with the disciples and the time when He will fully bring His kingdom to realization. This return is what Christians call the Second Coming.

There is another point that we can draw from the historical background. We saw that the authority in Palestine was not derived locally. The final authority was with the emperor of Rome. The

Lord Jesus is saying in this parable, 'I'm going away to the Father to receive the kingdom'. By this, He implies that all the affairs on earth are not controlled by the kings of the earth. The fundamental place of authority regarding the events in this world is in heaven with God, the King of kings. That is where everything is decided. This means that whatever is done on earth is going to be accountable in heaven. Herod could be called to account at anytime by the Roman emperor. Archelaus was actually dismissed by Rome because he did not rule properly. In the same way, every human being is ultimately accountable to God. He is the Supreme Emperor who has the authority over all the things of the earth.

#### (-) The minas

The nobleman put his business affair into the hands of the servants while he was gone. Jesus illustrated this with money, i.e. the minas given to the servants. So the minas represent responsibilities undertaken by the believers because of their association with Jesus. They are given responsibilities to handle.

When the master said, *Do business till I come*, he expected them to make money in his absence. On his return, he will evaluate the results. The Greek word for 'do business' (*pragmateuomai*) is a word of diligent action. It is from the root word meaning 'to walk, to set in motion and to continue in motion'. As Christians wait for their King to come back, they are to carry out their responsibilities diligently, effectively and profitably, using all God has given them to look after.

The point is that every disciple is given gifts and opportunities of service. No one can say that since he does not have this ability or that ability, thus he cannot serve the Lord. In the story, all the servants received one mina each, and each servant was held accountable for the money he had. Likewise, everyone who follows Jesus has been entrusted with gifts and is given opportunities to put these gifts to work. Each is expected to make the most of the various avenues of service.

#### (-) The rebel subjects

In the same way that the Jews hated Archelaus and protested his appointment as king, the citizens in the parable sent a delegation to protest the king's coming rule. They did not want him to rule over them.

The citizens and their actions represent Israel's rejection of Christ. For after all, Jesus has come to be a king to the Jews (Matthew 27:11) but the Jews rejected Him. In John 1:11, we read that *He (Jesus) came to His own, and those who were His own (the citizens/the Jews) did not receive Him.*

This can also apply to the unbeliever who refuses to acknowledge Christ and surrender his life to the rule of Christ. The citizens of the world do not let Jesus rule over them. They want to control their own lives, do their own things as they wish.

This is the group of people that was identified as the king's enemies at the end of the story and which was slaughtered. V. 27: *But bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me.* Those who reject Jesus will, in the end, be put to death, i.e. they will be judged and separated from God eternally.

#### (-) The rewards

There is to be a day of accounting for all believers. It will arrive when the Lord returns. Every servant will then be called to report on what he has done with the gifts Christ had given him.

In the parable, two classes of servants are described: Those who are faithful and those who are not faithful. The two faithful servants have made ten and five minas more respectively, and they were rewarded in proportion to their profits with rule over ten and five cities. The noble man said to the first servant, *Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, be in authority over ten cities.* And to the second one, he said, *And you are to be over five cities.*

Moneymaking was not of course the purpose of the servants. The dominant idea is that of testing. Notice these words. *Because you have been faithful in a very little thing, be in authority over ten cities.* This statement parallels Jesus' words in Luke 16:10: *He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much.* Jesus implied that we are all being tested in little things. The servants were being tested with a mina to see if they could be trusted with responsibilities. And if they prove themselves faithful, they will have bigger responsibilities later.

Here we see that God will grant believers positions of authority over others in the future kingdom. Elsewhere in the Bible, we read that they will reign with Christ over the world (Revelation 20:6) and they will even rule over angels (1 Corinthians 6:3). The people who are going to rule God's universe in the coming world order must be faithful. These are the people that God is looking for and will reward with the privilege of greater service in the consummation. And it is apparent from this parable that the areas of responsibility will be based upon how trustworthy they have proven themselves to be during their life on earth.

This rulership over different number of cities has a very sobering implication. And it is this. Our experiences in heaven will not be the same for all of us. While all true believers will be with Christ, not all of them will have the same position of authority in heaven. Some will get a more prominent role in the kingdom to come. Some will have less responsibility. All of this is presently being forged in the crucible of this life. And faithfulness is the determining factor. What I do now in this life with what God has given me will affect my participation in the exercise of the kingdom's authority in the next life.

#### (-) The unfaithful servant

Faithfulness will be rewarded but unfaithfulness will be judged. In fact, this parable should be viewed more as a warning since so much of the story is focused on the unfaithful third servant. Out of sixteen verses, five deal specifically with that servant (vv. 20, 21, 22, 23, 24).

The third servant was unfaithful because he did nothing with his mina. He simply placed it in a cloth. He explained that he was so paralyzed by his fear of the master that he could not act. This is how he described him. *You take up what you did not lay down, and reap what you did not sow* (v. 21). These are proverbial expressions for making gain through other people's efforts. Perhaps the servant's fear was based on his belief that he would incur severe punishment should he make a poor investment and lose his money.

The servant's excuse became the ground for the master's condemnation. He is told that the stern image that he has of the master, far from being an excuse for inactivity, should rather have motivated him to do something. The very least he could have done was to put the money on deposit with a bank. It would have produced a more modest return than that achieved by the other servants, but at least, he would have had something to offer a master who expected dividends. It would have involved the very minimum of effort on his part and would have exposed him to minimal financial risks. But even that, he did not do.

The master then passed judgment on the third servant. Speaking to those present, he said, *Take the mina away from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas* (v. 24). Jesus gave the principle behind that action. *To everyone who has shall more be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away* (v. 26). Every man who is faithful and improves what

God gives him, shall receive much more. The man whose lack shows that, like the third servant, he has made no use of his opportunities, will lose what little he has.

God is prepared to accept what is actually a minimum return on his investment, or even a failure, if there has been some sort of effort to advance His kingdom. What He will not accept, though, is passivity. He will reprimand the person who says he will serve God but does not make the necessary effort. He is harsh to those who are spiritually lazy. In the Christian life we do not stand still. Genuine faith is active. It makes maximum use of talents and opportunities, and enthusiastically pursues God's mission in the world.

Who then is the third servant? Like the others, this third servant referred to the nobleman as 'lord', signifying the nature of his allegiance and obligation to him. He is related to God in that he is associated with the community of faith and has responsibility in it. He is a person who professes faith in Christ. He is a church member. But by his own attitude, he shows that he has no real relationship with Him. This attitude is reflected in an absence of action to advance His kingdom. He may think that he knows the Lord, but in reality he does not know Him at all and certainly shows no trust in Him. Such a person is left with nothing at the judgment.

There are many resemblances between this story and the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. Some even see them as variants of one original. In both versions, the faithful servants increased significantly their original holdings. In both stories, the bad servant earns nothing, is condemned for not at least banking his coin, and has his coin taken away and given to the faithful servant who has earned the most. Actually, the wording of Matthew 25:29 is almost identical to Luke's.

*Matthew 25:29. For to everyone who has shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away.*

*Luke 19:26. I tell you, that to everyone who has shall more be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away.*

We notice that the strongest point of parallelism between the two parables is the description of the third servant. In this view, the fate of the third servant in Luke is associated with the judgment of the third slave in Matthew, who is cast into outer darkness to experience weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:30). This, to me, is more serious than the loss of rewards. It has to do with a state of banishment from the presence of the Lord.

Stewardship is the responsibility of all who are related to Christ. The parable of the pounds teaches that the Lord will be gone for some time and that on His return, He will assess people's faithfulness to Him. Three different groups of people are mentioned. Those who were faithful will be rewarded generously. Those who did not do Christ's work will be sent to outer darkness. Those who refused to recognize Jesus' kingship will receive severe judgment. When the Lord comes back, which category each person falls into will be decided and revealed.