

The Parables of Matthew Chapter 25

Our daily Bible readings have brought us to consider 3 of the Master's parables recorded in Matthew chapter 25, and we propose to consider each one in turn, by way of exhortation:

THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS

The first of these three parables concerns ten virgins, and their state of readiness for the return of a Bridegroom. Whilst all ten slept and slumbered, upon hearing the news that the Bridegroom has arrived, they all awoke and tended to their lamps. They all had lamps shining, but because they had not taken additional oil to keep their lamps topped up, the lamps of the foolish virgins grew dim, and ready to go out. The wise, on the other hand, were prepared: they took additional oil to feed their lamps, and so were ready to go forth and meet their Lord.

In seeking to discern the spiritual principles that lie behind the fabric of this story, we need to consider the use of lamps elsewhere in Scripture. Exodus chapter 25 describes the lampstand of the Tabernacle system of things:

“... and thou shalt make the lampstand of pure gold: of beaten work shall the lampstand be made
... and thou shalt make the seven lamps thereof: and they shall light the lamps thereof, that they
may give light over against it” (see Exo. 25:31-37)

This lampstand contained seven lamps, and was formed out of beaten gold. Gold, we are told by Peter is a symbol of perfected faith, as he speaks of “the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:7). The preparation of gold as it passes through the furnace is likened to the passing of the believers through affliction, to prepare them for acceptable service. The beating of the Gold into it's appropriate shape likewise brings to mind the affliction of the saints, without which they could never see the kingdom of God. The beating and fiery trials are needed to mould and prepare the saints to be part of the great lampstand of the Age to Come, as described by the fourth chapter of the prophecy of Zechariah.

But those who are wise also cause their light to shine in the midst of an otherwise darkened world. Hence the Apostle describes the true believers as “the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain” (Phil. 2:5-16).

Just as in Old Testament times, the lightstands held out the light of burning oil, even so in our day, the Ecclesiastes must be found “holding forth the word of life”. This is why in the Apocalypse, the seven lampstands are used to represent the Ecclesiastes: “the seven lampstands which thou sawest are the seven Ecclesiastes” (Rev. 1:20). This is a present-day situation: we must hold out the word of life in order that those who currently walk in darkness might be given the opportunity to repent of their sins, and take hold of life.

As we have described, in this parable, the wise virgins too oil with them to keep their lamps burning, whereas the foolish virgins did not. This situation appears to be based on the Proverb:

“there is treasure to be desired and oil in the dwelling of the wise; but a foolish man spendeth it up” (Prov. 21:20).

The wise are those who had the foresight to provide for the continual burning of their lamps, whereas the foolish were negligent in this matter. It is all very well to shine brightly in these days of Gentile darkness, but what matters is whether we are continuing to shine when Messiah comes. There is a class of men who have a name that they live, but yet are dead in reality (Rev. 3:1). Before men, they appear to be burning brightly, but when they appear before Christ, the lamps will go out, and they have nothing to offer, except darkness. They assume that they could purchase oil from their wise counterparts, but it is a principle of Scripture that no man can by any means redeem his brother (Psa. 49:7), and so their attempt to purchase oil was rejected. Going away to obtain oil, they were absent when their Lord came, and were shut out of the proceedings. Once the Bridegroom had arrived, and entered into the house, “the door was shut” and all opportunity had ended. They besought him to open the door that they might enter in, but were told in no uncertain terms: “I know you not”.

Evidently, the main lesson of this parable is to do with *preparation*. When Christ comes, there will be no time to go off and make belated preparations: the day of opportunity is now, and when he comes, the door will be closed. There will be no debate or remonstration, simply the chilling words: “I never knew you”.

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

The parable of the Talents is also a call to be prepared for the Master at his return. In this parable, a man went into a far country, to return at an appointed time. He gave various sums of money to his servants according to their abilities, with the requirement that they would use their abilities to bring about an increase of what they had been granted. At his return, his servants were called upon to demonstrate what they had done to increase the funds entrusted to them: two doubled the money, and one hid it in the ground instead, and did nothing to bring about an increase. The two were commended, the and the third was condemned.

There are a number of important features about this parable. A Talent was a measurement of weight, and not a particular ability as we would use the word today. It is used in the parable as an amount of money, but the principles involved can find an application in many areas of life. The Lord did not require a man to do that which was beyond him. He gave out the money and expectation of what was to be done with it “to every man **according to his several ability**” (Mat. 25:15). He recognised that the third man did not have anywhere near the ability of his fellow servants, and did not require as much from him. Nevertheless, the emphasis is that all three men were required to do something. They were to labour to bring forth an increase for their Lord.

One of the points which come out of this, is that in our service to Christ, to try and avoid sinning by itself is not enough. We will be judged not so much by what we haven’t done (as sin is dealt with through the sacrifice of Christ), but what we actually do: in other words, our faith must be manifest through works (Jas. 2:18). This is the mistake that the third servant made: he did no work, and made no effort to try and at least do something, however small.

In our circumstance, what is the work that we must set our hands to? In the first instance, it is to attend to the Word of God, to learn what His Will is for us:

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, **a workman** that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of Truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

“let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially **they who labour** in the word and doctrine” (1 Tim. 5:17).

To use another metaphor, we also must devote our energies to the sowing of the Word, to bring an increase of fruit:

“Be not deceived, God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but **he that soweth to the Spirit** shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting” (Gal. 6:7-8).

It is required of our Lord that we do not simply strive to do no unrighteousness – i.e. not sowing to the flesh - but we must also labour by way of positive action in sowing to the spirit. Then, when the rewards are given out, we shall be rewarded according to our deeds, and find favour in the sight of our Lord.

The first two servants laboured according to their abilities, and doubled that which was entrusted to them. So, when the Lord returned, he commended them:

“his lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Mat. 25:21 & 23).

The third servant was evidently recognised by the Lord as having little ability, for when he distributed the money, to the servants “according to his several ability” he only gave him one talent. The Lord therefore did not require as much from him as with the others. But this servant did nothing with his talent. He simply buried it in the ground, and made no effort to increase it. It could be that he himself felt inadequate to the task: he did not have the confidence or ability to do the necessary work. This seems to be implied by the Lord’s rebuke:

“Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury” (Mat. 25:27).

There are times when perhaps, we find ourselves unable to perform the task in hand. We might feel sometimes that we are not good enough to do the Lord’s will, that we just don’t have the confidence to do the work. But the example of the unfaithful servant is relevant to us here: if he couldn’t do the work himself – for whatever reason – he should have utilised the abilities of others: those who were able to bring forth the increase. This is the lesson for us: if a particular work needs doing in ecclesial life that we feel that we just cannot do, we must give our support to those who can. We must utilise that which the Lord has given us – however small it may seem – to further the work of others. Then, when our Master returns, he will receive that which he gave, plus the increase of brethren working together with a common goal. It is written that “... every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour” (1 Cor. 3:8), words which seem to summarise the parable in hand. We must then labour in some way, even if it is only giving quiet support to those who are engaged in their service to the Lord.

PARABLE OF THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

This parable depicts the Lord Jesus Christ as the great Judge, sat upon his judgment throne to determine the fate of those who were brought before him. The righteous were symbolised by the sheep, and the unrighteous by the goats. The judgment was made for each party according to how they had treated Messiah’s brethren, or not as the case may be. The righteous were permitted to enter life eternal, and the unrighteous into age-lasting punishment.

There is some discussion as to whether or not the sheep and the goats represent nations appearing before the great Judge, or whether or not they represent individuals. One suggestion is that this parable depicts nations being brought before the judgment throne and allowed to exist during the kingdom age, whereas the other is that the parable depicts the ultimate end of individuals, according to their personal deeds. The present writer holds to the latter view, for several reasons:

1. The “righteous” are said to “inherit the kingdom” (vs 34), and according to 1 Corinthians 15:50, “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”. Hence inheriting the kingdom can only be for those who are immortalised, being no longer flesh and blood.
2. The class of men who are accepted constitute “the righteous”. Yet, righteousness can only be given upon the basis of faith: righteousness is imputed to the faithful (Rom. 4:5).
3. The “righteous” are said to enter “into life eternal”, and whilst this expression can have the sense of the age-long life, i.e. life during the millennium, when used in connection with righteousness and an inheritance, it seems more likely to refer to the immortal nature of the saints who enter into the joy of their Lord.

Be that as it may, the same lessons are apparent whichever position we hold. Both the righteous and the unrighteous will be judged according to how they have treated Messiah’s brethren – and without even realising it:

“For I was an hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungry, and fed thee? Or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as he have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me ...” (Mat. 25:35-40).

Notice that here, those things which the servants were commended for were not the great dramatic things that attracts the praise of men. No, it was the little things in life that mattered. In the previous parable, the righteous are those who are faithful “over a few things” and in this parable, it is in the small things that true devotion is seen. To provide for brethren who are in need is second nature for the righteous to the extent that when they are commended for it, they don’t even remember what it was that they have done! But by contrast, for the unrighteous, they were so steeped in their self-serving affairs that they did not even recognise the opportunity to do good:

“Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Mat. 25:44-46).

This attitude of mind is very instructive when it comes to working in the ecclesia. Tending to the needs of the brethren and sisters is a very important job. Rather than focusing on our own affairs, we should be looking for ways that we can serve our brethren and sisters. Even as it is written: “look not every man on his own things, but every man *also on the things of others*” (Phil. 2:4). What is sobering about this parable, is that the Goat class didn’t even see those opportunities. Looking every man to his own things only, they did not even know the needs of others, let alone seek to minister to them. Sometimes we hear brethren (notably those who do not give talks etc) and sisters say that they wish that they could do more in the ecclesia, but don’t see what work needs to be done. Let them look to the needs of their fellowservants, for all will experience afflictions of one form or another, and all need both help and support to bear the burdens of life. If we cannot see this, then that places us in the Goat category, a grave situation which we must seek to rectify.

One old Testament background to this parable is Ezekiel chapter 34, where Yahweh is portrayed as judging between his people (another indication that this parable is regarding individuals in the ecclesia, not nations generally). There we read as follows:

“And as for you, O my flock, thus saith the Lord Yahweh; Behold, I judge between cattle and cattle, *between the rams and the he-goats* ...

... therefore thus saith the Lord Yahweh unto them: Behold, I, even I, will judge *between the fat cattle and between the lean cattle* ...

... Therefore will I save my flock, and they shall no more be a prey: and I will judge *between cattle and cattle*. And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd” (Ezek. 34:16-23).

Just as in the parable, the great Shepherd is established as a judge between the people: rams, and he-goats. And the context (see the whole chapter) is to do with those who oppress the poor and afflicted, being a Goat class, with the others being sheep (i.e. rams). The point here is that not only did the Goats not see the opportunities to do good for their brethren, they actually sought out ways to oppress them. Hence their judgment was to come, and the Great Shepherd would gather his people and feed them as a shepherd does his flock.

CONCLUSION

In considering each of these three parables of Messiah, we are brought to consider various aspects of our preparation for the coming day of judgment. The parable of the 10 Virgins exhorts us to have spiritual oil in our lamps to continue burning before the presence of the Bridegroom. There is no use in depending upon others to supply us with their oil: each person is accountable for their own actions or inactions as the case may be. The second parable, describes how we must prepare for the return of our Lord, who will require that we have brought forth an increase of that which is committed to our trust, according to our various abilities. And if we feel that we don’t have the necessary ability, we must use what we have to support the work of others, that they will bring forth the increase. And in the third parable, we have seen the importance of ministering to the need of Messiah’s brethren, recognising that what we do to them is seen as doing it to Messiah himself.

Each of these parables then, display different aspects of our preparation for the coming judgment of Christ. The world at large is ignorant of these things, for they do not have eyes to see, nor ears to hear. We, on the other hand, have the privilege to look at these spiritual things with understanding. But understanding brings responsibility for action, and we must therefore attend to the things of the Spirit, so that when our Lord comes, it might be granted to us that we might inherit the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world.