

## **Series Kingdom Parables**

### **This Message Be Prepared, He's Coming**

#### **Scripture Matthew 24:45-51; 25:1-13**

There are three remaining kingdom parables in Matthew for us to cover. These three parables illustrate the themes of watchfulness and preparedness. These two words summarize the major emphasis in Jesus' explanation of the end of the age.

The key verse of the previous message was: "Keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (*Matthew 24:42*). Another important verse was: "You must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (*Matthew 24:44*). Watchfulness and preparedness.

The new verses we are now going to read are closely linked to these two key exhortations. You will immediately recognize how the themes of "keeping watch" and "being prepared" are illustrated in the following parable.

#### **Read Matthew 24:45-51**

Many years ago one of my mentors stated "the truth about a person is revealed in how that person acts when he/she thinks no one is looking." The truth of that statement is illustrated by the two servants in the parable. The faithful servant did what the master wanted even though the master was absent. He did not change the way he carried out his responsibilities even though there was no one physically present to hold him accountable. This servant was identified as both "wise" and "faithful."

The second servant in the parable was a person of deluded thinking. He assumed that he could get by with his improper behavior, and that he would not get caught in his abuse of his fellow servants and in his self-indulgent lifestyle.

Verse 45 is a question. Jesus wanted His listeners to think about the attributes of the disciple who is ready and prepared for the reappearance of Jesus on earth. What is necessary for a person to be recognized a "faithful and wise servant?"

The answer to that question is in the parable. The servants were placed in positions of authority over all the other servants. As authoritative leaders, they needed to be good examples for others. Notice in verse 45 that the servant in charge was to “give food to the others at the proper time.” In other words, they were to be responsible for the well-being of others. “Faithful and wise servants” would, therefore, need to have compassionate, protective, and nurturing attitudes toward those under their authority. By fulfilling the wishes of their masters through faithful and obedient actions, the servants would be showing respect for their masters.

The first servant was commended for his faithful service when the master returned. Because this servant had proven himself dependable and trustworthy in the care of the master’s house, he was given expanded responsibilities — he was put in charge of all the master’s possessions.

The second servant did not act in an acceptable way. He abused his fellow servants, engaged in selfish, self-indulgent behavior, and did not look after the master’s interests. Rather, he used his position for personal advantage and gratification. In his wicked, deluded, and ignorant state of mind, he made an assumption about the master’s travel plans which turned out to be incorrect. He didn’t intend to be caught, and he was surprised by, and unprepared for, the master’s return.

The master held him accountable for his behavior. The servant was severely punished because he had not lived up to the expectations of the master. Verse 51 seems to indicate that he suffered a double kind of punishment. He was first “cut to pieces” and then “assigned to the place ... where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” These statements represent physical and then spiritual death. The wicked servant was identified as a “hypocrite” because he had betrayed the confidence placed in him by his master.

This parable was a perfect follow up to Jesus’ previous teaching. Jesus first exhorted the disciples to “keep watch” and to always be prepared for His coming. Then He used this parable to impress upon them their need to be faithful and obedient to Him while He was absent from their midst. In the same way, Jesus wants us to be busy doing what He has called us to do until His return. He wants us to live in such a manner that we will have no cause for shame when He suddenly appears.

The mentor I mentioned earlier also said, on another occasion, “We should live our lives prepared for the Lord to come at any moment but eager to continue to be fruitful and faithful if He should not.” That’s what Jesus was saying to His disciples. The first lesson of the parable is this: The disciples of Jesus must be consistently loyal to Him, and must always be active in service to Him until He returns, whenever that will be.

There is another important point in this parable. It concerns the kind of service to be rendered by disciples. It is service on behalf of other people. In the parable, the master put the servants “in charge” of their fellow servants in his household. They were to minister to others — to be focused on the well-being of others. This has been the primary responsibility of believers through the centuries. The Apostle Paul picked up on this thought when he wrote in one of his letters, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look out not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (*Philippians 2:3-4*).

In his letter to the believers in Rome, Paul wrote, “Love must be sincere. ... Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves” (*Romans 12:9-10*).

The Apostle John wrote many things about the love that believers must have for others. For example, he wrote, “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. ... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (*I John 3:14, 16-18*). And, in a later chapter, he wrote, “Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment. ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (*I John 4:16b-18*).

From these verses, we can understand why the master, who represented Jesus in the parable, was so displeased with the second servant.

In verses 45-51 the underlying thought was that duties and responsibilities must be faithfully carried out because the return might come sooner than expected. In the next parable, chapter 25, verses 1-13, the thought is that foresight and planning are important because the return of Jesus might be later than expected.

### **Read Matthew 25:1-13**

The first words of the parable, “at that time,” connect back to and illustrate what Jesus said previously: “Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come,” and, “You must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (*Matthew 24:42, 44*).

This parable compares the kingdom of heaven to the activities associated with a wedding. The principle characters are the groom and the bridesmaids, rather than the bride herself. The exact sequence of activities are not explained in the parable, but, typically, in the villages of Israel, the bridegroom with some of his close friends would go to the bride’s house, where she would be waiting with a number of her unmarried friends. In this parable, ten women were assisting the bride in her preparations for the arrival of the groom. After he arrived, the bride and her entourage, together with the groom and his friends, would then parade through the streets on their way back to the groom’s house where festivities might continue for several days.

The wedding processions normally happened at night. Everyone in the procession would carry a device that would give light. The word “lamp” is used in the parable, but it is better to think of each person having a torch on the end of a pole which could be lifted high in the air. The light was provided by cloth rags which were set ablaze after being drenched with olive oil. It was necessary to add oil to the rags periodically to keep the flame going. For this reason, members of the wedding party had to carry flasks of oil. We have to use our imaginations to picture the context of these verses, but Jesus’ disciples would have had a clear understanding of what was being described.

This parable has a narrow focus — on the preparations of the attendants of the bride. Five of the women were identified as “wise” because, with foresight, they had brought abundant oil for the procession. They were prepared even if the groom might be delayed in his arrival. The other five women were “foolish” because they had insufficient oil to sustain their torches through both the long delay before the groom’s arrival and the procession which followed.

The ten women were alike in many ways. They were friends of the bride; they expected to be full participants in the celebrations. However, they were different in one crucial way: only five of them were fully prepared for the wedding celebrations. When the shout went out announcing the arrival of the groom, five of the women had to run off in order to secure oil, thereby removing themselves from participation in the joyous procession and in the wedding banquet and festivities. Pleading for entry into the banquet accomplished nothing. Their rejection was final and irrevocable. Their failure to make timely preparations meant that they were permanently excluded.

Let’s keep in mind that Jesus was not telling a story that actually happened. The purpose of the parable was to warn His followers about the dreadful fate of those who would be unprepared for His return to earth.

The theme of the parable is reiterated in verse 13. The word “therefore” introduces the application and repeats what Jesus said earlier, “Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” Jesus repeated this warning several times in the context of His interaction with His disciples. He accurately anticipated the problem that His followers would have in the present age. That was why, while answering the questions of His disciples, Jesus informed them that there would be many false teachers and deceivers, and that there would be so much wickedness and deception in the world that the “love of most will grow cold.” In view of such conditions, He repeated His exhortations several times, “He who stands firm to the end will be saved,” and, “It will be good for that servant,” to be busy doing things that are pleasing to Him until His return.

“Keeping watch” means to be ready and prepared. It has to do with spiritual alertness and preparedness. If we put that phrase, “keep watch,” into the overall teaching of the New Testament, we will conclude that phrases such as “watching,” “preparations,” and “being ready,” really mean “being born again,” “possessing new life,” “surrendering to Jesus,” and “becoming members of the kingdom of God.” “Being ready” demands an established relationship with God.

Like the disciples, we live in the age in which people must establish that relationship by committing themselves to God. When Jesus returns, it will be too late to do this. The door of opportunity will close when Jesus appears. There will no more be grace and forgiveness available. After Jesus appears, there will only be judgment and wrath for those left outside.

There are some important ancillary truths emphasized by this parable. The first of these truths is based on the fact that some of the women who were friends of the bride were not, in fact, prepared to celebrate with the bridal party. These individuals were like many people today who profess Christian faith but who have never taken the specific steps which prepare them for participation in God's kingdom. Professing Christians who do not live as kingdom people in this age are unprepared and unqualified to be with Jesus on the occasion of His end-of-the-age celebrations. When such people knock on the door and plead for entry into the banquet He will celebrate with His own people, Jesus will say, "I don't know you."

Both John the Baptizer and Jesus insisted on repentance as the first step for entering the kingdom of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (*Matthew 7:21*). In His teaching, Jesus explained the attitudes and behaviors required of kingdom people. The religious leaders thought that they were acceptable to God, but Jesus insisted that their righteousness was inadequate. He said that the life of a true believer in this present age had to be consistent with the person's claim to be one of His disciples.

Another truth from this parable is that a person cannot borrow and use another person's spiritual resources. After the foolish bridesmaids realized that they did not have an adequate supply of oil, they earnestly sought to borrow from the foresighted bridesmaids. Some commentators have written critically about the lack of kindness and generosity on the part of the wise women. However, their response to the foolish women was not unreasonable. They did not want to embarrass themselves and jeopardize their relationship with the groom by potentially running short of oil themselves and having to drop out of the possession.

The point here is that relationships with Jesus are individual and personal, as well as spiritual in nature. Each person is responsible for accepting the truth, the Good News, of the kingdom, and, thereafter, living under the influence of that truth. Regeneration, justification, forgiveness, adoption, sanctification — these are among the spiritual attributes provided by God to individuals in response to the faith of those individuals. They are attributes which cannot be loaned or traded or shared between individuals. God organized His method of salvation so that each person is individually dependent on the possession of spiritual benefits. A person cannot be saved by the life of Christ which lives in someone else.

Another lesson from this parable concerns the urgency of making preparations. The only opportunity that people have to hear, consider, and accept the truth revealed to mankind by God is in this age. The time for us to prepare for eternal life is now while we are physically alive and before the return of Jesus. The opportunity for salvation ends, the door is closed, when we die or when Jesus appears.

All of us will have a personal encounter with the Bridegroom, Jesus, in the future. We will either have made adequate preparations before that encounter, or we will be eternally excluded from His presence. Therefore, now is the time to make adequate preparations to insure that we will indeed be among those qualified to transition into the presence of the Bridegroom, Jesus.

### **Key Questions**

Have you prepared to meet Jesus, by trusting Him as Savior and Lord?

Are you ready to meet Him by following His ways each day?