

The Parable of the Faithful or Unfaithful Servant

Parables are teaching devices that are not merely didactic but rhetorical as well. Parables have historical roots. The Jews were accustomed to storytelling, in the Old Testament, and the prophets relied on parables to explain situations; 2Sam.12:1-7, 2 Sam. 11. The contemporary rabbis of Jesus' time, as well as scholars and teachers of his day, also used parables in order to get their messages across. "In the New Testament... 'parable' is used of many different figures of speech. A parable may be in the form of a simile, which is stated likeness. Jesus said I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." (Matt.10:16).¹ Each parable has a principle and a moral behind it, in essence, parables convey a transcendental message.

Jesus was the master teacher, approximately one third of his teachings in the Gospel are in parables. His parables pertained to not only real life situations, but to theological situations. Jesus used figures of speech, proverbs and stories to deliver his messages, while keeping them sublime. Jesus' work was more than a literary work of art. "It is often overlooked that the primary purpose of the parables to instruct those to whom the parables were originally spoken."²

After Jesus was asked "...Why speakest thou unto them in parables?" (Matt.13:10) He responded "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given." (Matt. 13:11) The idea that Jesus taught in parables to reveal truth to some and to hide truth from others is not substantiated in scripture. Jesus used parables as a teaching tool and the multitude understood his messages "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Parables of Jesus: Lessons in Life from the Master Teacher*. Kregel Publication, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982 (7-8).

² *Ibid* (6).

sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine. For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes, (Matt.7:28-29), and the religious authorities understood his teaching “And when the chief priest and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spoke about them. (Matt. 21:45).

The teaching in parables was for a mixed audience. The implications of the parables differed based on who the hearers were, and within the context of the social, political, religious, historical, and cultural events or circumstances of the time. The interpretation of the parable was based on the perspective of the different groups of hearers: Those who believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God; those who saw him as a charismatic leader; those who admired him for his literary rhetorical power; and those who needed no explanation. However, all hearers of the message needed to have great introspection, and reflect deeply on Jesus’ words.

The Parable of the Faithful Servant and the Unfaithful Servant is the first in a series of parables that Jesus delivered toward the end of the Gospel according to Matthew. This particular parable also called the Parable of the Doorkeeper, addresses three specific themes: the Coming Kingdom, Salvation and Judgment. The series of parables was given after Jesus had answered three questions that his disciples had asked him concerning the end of the world and his return. What shall be the sign of the coming? What shall be the sign of the end of the world? When shall these things be? Jesus used the Parable of the Faithful and the Unfaithful Servant to teach the importance of being ready for his return. In this parable, the Master represents God, the servant represents all those who are God’s children and the household represents the kingdom of God. God is the owner of everything: the house, the land, the world. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein.”(Ps. 24:1) In the Parable of the Faithful

Servant, the Master (God) observes his slaves, and he asked himself the question: Who is a faithful and wise servant that I can leave to manage my household? The Master was not concerned about who was the most talented, who was the strongest, who was the most liked among his servants, but he was concerned with who was a faithful and a wise servant. God's interest was and still is a faithful and wise servant who would carry out his duties. He honors faithfulness above talent, strength and popularity.

The servant represents all believers and the pastor or minister is the servant who is left to manage the household which is the kingdom of God. The ministers of Christ are his servants and they are called to be faithful in their duties. Servants are stewards and the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth to remind the believers that as stewards they are required to be faithful. A faithful servant of Jesus Christ will seek to honor Christ rather than his own honor. Servants of God must be faithful in what has been entrusted to them as servants. They are expected to perform their duties faithfully whether the Master is present or not. Warren W. Wiersbe writes, "God's people on earth are called a household (Gal.6:10.Eph.2:19). God has put servants over each household to feed the members. This suggests to us the local church family with its spiritual leaders."³ Pastors and ministers who are placed in the household of God are therefore to tend to the needs of the servants. Faithfulness is therefore a requirement of all servants. Lockyer writes, "The Pharisees had failed as servants, now true spiritual guides are described. They must be faithful, living and laboring in the master's absence in exactly the same way as if beneath his eye."⁴ A faithful servant conducts the affairs of his Master's household in a state of readiness, he expects his lord to appear at any moment. The servant understands that he is also a servant and he will

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament Volume* (Published by David Cook, Colorado Springs, CO 0918 U.S.A. 1989),91

⁴ Dr. Herbert Lockyer. *All the Parables of the Bible*, Zondervan Publishing House , Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1963. (237).

have to give an account of his stewardship when his lord returns. Therefore, he must continue to faithfully discharge his duties. He must also treat his fellow servants with love, respect and equality, just as he would like to be treated. Keener writes, “Often a well- to- do house hold had a slave who was a ‘manager, ’or ‘steward,’ managing the estate. Such a high level slave could be in charge of giving rations to other servants and could abuse his authority only if his master were not present.”⁵ God’s servants must be wise and conduct themselves in a manner as if the master is present. They are entrusted with the care of their fellow servants therefore they must ensure to take care the needs of their fellow servants. Servants who are faithful in the service to the master will be rewarded greatly when the Lord returns.

The Parable of the Faithful and Wise Servant is known as the parable of the Doorkeeper (Mark 13:32-37). The door keeper is expected to be watchful, is expected to stay awake, and must be alert since no one knows the day, the time or the hour when the Lord will return for his Kingdom. It is therefore important to remain faithful and to remain watchful. Those who are ready and are prepared will feast at the Master’s table and will have sweet fellowship. They will enter into his gates since the city gates will be unlocked (Rev. 21:25).

The important role of the earthly gatekeeper or doorkeeper was evidence since the olden days of the Old Testament. Their assignments were crucial and they needed to be loyal and have integrity since they acted as tax collectors and collected money from the people. (2Kings 22:4). Also noted in the book of Chronicles, 1Chronicles 15:2-2, door keepers (gatekeepers) were designated for the Ark. In the New Testament (Matt. 7:7-8) speaks of the doorkeeper opening the door for those who knock.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, The IVP bible Background Commentary, New Testament. IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. 2013,110.

The Parable of the Faithful Servant and the Unfaithful Servant recorded in Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:2-48 are similar in many ways. In each parable the lord of the household is away and he leaves the management of the household to a faithful and wise servant in Matthew, and to a faithful steward in Luke. In Matthew, when the lord of the house returns, if the servant remains faithful he will make the servant ruler over all his goods. In Luke, if the servant remains faithful he will be made ruler over all the lord has. However, if the lord delays his return and the servant abandons his duties and no longer manages the lord's household as when the master was present, but now smites and abuses his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunkards, that servant has become unfaithful.

Luke described the servant as beating his fellow man servants and maidservants, and is drunk. In Luke the servant is drinking heavily, but it is not stated that he is drinking with drunkard. In Matthew, when the Lord returns, the unfaithful servant who did not manage the lord's household properly will be cut into pieces and will be placed with the hypocrites. In Luke's Gospel when the lord returns, the servant who did the lord's will, will be cut into pieces, will join the unbelievers and will be beaten with many stripes. There is a vast difference in the attitude of the lord in Matthew's Gospel. Lockyer writes, "For those evil servants who scorn the truth of His coming and arrogantly smite others and indulge with the gluttonous, there is judgment, sudden and swift. For them there is no reward-only a portion with the hypocrites."⁶ Luke shows also a lord who administers punishment for the slave who did not prepare himself for his lord's return this servant will be cut asunder. This means that the lord of the house will cut them into pieces as

⁶ Dr. Herbert Lockyer. All the Parables of the Bible, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1963. (237).

the Jews did with sacrifices; this means that ultimately, upon death their souls will be separated from their bodies.

In Luke's Gospel there appears to be three servants addressed. Those who knew the will of the lord and did not do the will of the lord and went even further and abused his fellow servants, and wasted the lord's possessions. When the Lord returns suddenly, that unfaithful servant will be cut into pieces and will join the unbelievers. The second type of servant is one who knows the lord's will but did not prepare himself by doing the lord's will, therefore he shall be beaten with many stripes. The third servant is the one who did not know the will of his lord, and did many things worthy of stripes but shall be beaten with few stripes because he did not know the Lord's will.

By looking at these parallel gospels, there are many unanswered questions. How can we account for the many differences in the two accounts of the parables? Is it because Matthew is addressing his Gospel to a Jewish audience and Luke to a Gentile audience? One thing is certain however, both evangelists are addressing the importance of preparedness for the return of the Lord. The return of the Lord will be a glorious day for those are prepared and are watching and waiting for him. It will be one of pain and sorrow for those who are unprepared. "Blessed is that servant, whom his lord shall, when he cometh, shall find so doing." (Matt. 24:46, Luke 12:43) In Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel, blessings are pronounced on those servants who remain faithful and watchful until the Lord returns. The faithful servant will be made ruler over all the goods of the master.

The faithful servant who was responsible and managed the household of his lord, and faithfully did the will of his lord even when his lord was away, that servant is declared to be blessed. That servant is therefore rewarded with the privilege of being ruler over all the goods of the lord. He

who is faithful in little, will be faithful in much, and is given greater responsibility. The faithful servant in Luke is given rule over all his possession. In Matthew 19:27-29. Peter said to Jesus we have forsaken all and followed you. What shall we have therefore? Jesus answered the disciples that when he sits on his throne of his glory, they shall sit upon twelve thrones, and judge the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Lord will reward his servants with positions of honor. Joseph was a servant in Egypt but he remained faithful to God, and God promoted him from the prison to become the second in charge of all Egypt, he was placed in charge of the storehouse, and the food distribution in Egypt (Gen. 41: 40-44). Those who remain faithful will reign with over the earth. Jesus promised that those who have overcome he will grant them the honor of sitting with him on his throne.

In contrast, those servants who were unfaithful and did not managed his lord's household, but wasted the possessions of the lord with riotous living, and abused their fellow servants; when the Lord returns the unfaithful servant, will receive neither blessing nor reward, but will suffer loss and not enter into the Kingdom.

The message of the Parable of the Faithful and the Wise Servant is a reminder that to whom much is given, much is required. This applies to both lay men and to those who are leaders in ministry. All must remain faithful, watchful and dutiful, in stewardship, irrespective of their role. One must use their gifts in whatever capacity they are in, to bring others to the Lord, and prepare them for entry into his kingdom.

At the core of the Parable's message, is that the kingdom is at hand, no one knows the day or the time, but sacrifices must be made whether great or small. In reality, there must be willingness for believers to surrender all in the present for what awaits them in the future. One must not renege

on their earthly duties but must love one another if they are to enter God's kingdom and feast with him and his saints at his table (Rev.21:5), or the end result will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

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