

March 21, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

How to Wait For the Son

Part 2

Matthew 25:14 – 46

The Bible has a great deal to say about waiting. All throughout the Scriptures we encounter this sense of waiting. Before Christ came the first time, those who had staked their hope and claim on His promised appearing, were waiting for the Messiah. No doubt there were many besides Anna and Simeon, of whom we read in the gospels, who spent their lives anticipating and expecting the Consolation of Israel in their lifetime. And in the fullness of time, Jesus came. One day the waiting was over – Christ came, and was crucified and died and was resurrected on the third day. And then in Acts we read where He left this earth in a cloud, and the Scriptures record that one day all the earth *'...will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory'*. And so we are waiting once again.

And the Bible has a lot to say about how we wait in this present age. In 1 Corinthians, Paul reminded them that *'...you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,* 1 Corinthians 1:7 And to the Philippians he wrote: *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,* Philippians 3:20 And to Titus he said: *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus,* Titus 2:11-13 And the writer to the Hebrews declared: *so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.* Hebrews 9:28

So it is clear that what we are doing at this present time is waiting for the Son to come again. And it is waiting with purpose and planning. We are not just passing the time until Christ returns – we are not just filling the days with meaningless pursuits and amusements waiting for Jesus to come back and take us to heaven. **How we wait is crucial in the end.** Last week we began looking at the instructions Jesus gave His disciples on how to wait for His return. In the first part of Matthew chapter 24 Jesus talks about the signs of His return and what sort of events will occur. But from verse 36 in chapter 24, on through the end of chapter 25, the focus is on how to wait for His return. In part one we looked at the first three groups of parables and saw that Jesus means us to wait first of all with a kind of eager **anticipation** of His return in Matthew 24:36 – 44. **The emphasis in these stories is not that we can't tell when He's coming, but rather we can't tell when He's not.** It may be today, it may be tomorrow, it may be before we finish this message. In fact the normality of everyday life is stressed here in these parables and for those who do not anticipate the Lord's return, that day will be sudden, unexpected and tragic.

And then we saw that our waiting needs to be filled with **faithfulness and wisdom** in 24:44-51. That is we take our responsibilities as Christ's slaves seriously, expecting our master's return as we are fulfilling them. We are not to play the hypocrite – playing the part of His slave; because the day of His coming will reveal our deception. And finally, we must **persevere** in our waiting in the parable about the bridegroom in 25:1-13. That is that although we anticipate His coming at any moment, **we need to embrace the possibility that it could be a long time**; and not be found unready because He seems to delay.

Waiting with Diligence 14 – 30

The thought here goes beyond anticipation – the first set of instructions; or being faithful in carrying out the responsibilities given by the master, the second set; or even being prepared for a long delay, the third set. Here the thought is that our waiting is filled with diligence. Being diligent implies that you understand the master will check on your work to see that you've done it right – you anticipate that. It also implies a level of wisdom and faithfulness in your work and it implies that even if it is gone a long time you would have carried out his instructions to the best of your ability. Diligence is the constant and earnest effort to accomplish what is undertaken – a persistent exertion of body and mind. Diligence in this parable also means that you invest what the master has given you for His benefit – not yours. So let's read this parable with this in mind.

*"For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. **Now after a long time** the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'"*

We call this the Parable of the Talents and very often we explain that talents here mean certain gifts and abilities of spirit or character that have been given to us by God. And that may very well play a part in this. But we need to understand that the word talent here is simply a unit of measure – a measure of weight, and in this case a certain weight of money. One talent here represented about 6,000 denarii in the unit of money of Jesus' day, or to put it in terms we might understand, if this were silver coinage, about 20 years worth of wages for an ordinary worker. And the master distributed this money according to each slave's ability. In other words, according to the master's estimation of that particular slave's ability to handle the responsibility. And so to the first he gave five bags of silver, to the second, two and to the third, just one. **One of the points this parable makes is that we all are not equal in abilities or gifting and that is not a negative thing.** All our abilities come from God and all our gifting comes from Him as well. It is His good pleasure to give us different abilities and giftings, and we shouldn't cry because we don't have the ability or gifting so and so has.

But I don't believe that this is one of the main points of this parable. **I believe one of the main points Jesus was making was about money.** Notice that the talents corresponded to **money** and that money was **invested** with the **bankers** and two of the slaves made a great **return** on their **investments**. Jesus spoke more about money than almost anything else in the gospels. He talked about money more than He did about heaven or hell – I believe in part because **there seems to be a fundamental connection between our spiritual lives and how we think about and handle money.** And the point He seems to be making about money is that **we need to invest what we receive from Him in kingdom stuff.** I say kingdom stuff because the return on the investment is out of this world. With the first two slaves it was a return of one hundred percent. Where are you going to go to get that kind of return on earth? And furthermore, when our Lord returns, we will not hand Him \$10,000 and say, 'Look Lord, that \$5,000 you gave me has become \$10,000. Here you go'. Nothing of this world will make it into the next. Only what is done in Christ's name will endure.

He tells us in Matthew 6:19-21 *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* The only way you can do that is to invest in the kingdom. And make no mistake, Jesus **is** talking about the money He has given you. These slaves were stewards of the master. That is they had control of His wallet. He gave them the money to invest and take care of His concerns while He was gone. And two of them carried out their charge diligently. They invested the money where it would do the most good and watched over it to see that the Master got the best return for His money. The question each of us must answer is what have we done with the money God has given us? How are you investing that money? Are you spending it on yourself? Are you wasting it on trivial things? Or worse, are you simply hoarding what you have? Because one day, the Master will return to settle accounts with us.

And the lesson of this parable is that it doesn't matter how much we've been given, it only matters what we've done with what we have. You can almost hear the joy and gladness in the hearts of those first two slaves as they present the Master with his initial investment plus one hundred percent return. And you can imagine the sweet sound of those words of the Master to their ears as He says, *'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master'.* **The reward for diligence is added responsibilities.** And we don't get the sense that added responsibilities made these guys groan. Rather it is accompanied by joy. Somehow we have gotten the idea that heaven is sort of a grand and glorious retirement home for good people. But the Bible makes it clear that our work here on earth is only a dim and distant shadow of what God has in store for us in the consummation of the kingdom. The God who created us for good works won't cancel this purpose in the resurrection. We will rule and reign with Christ, exercising leadership and authority; we'll be given responsibilities to handle and tasks to perform. The best day of work here below, when everything goes as planned, when we are filled with a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment, is just a hint, a whisper of suggestion of the joy our work will bring us in the kingdom.

I think too, that this parable must also be viewed in the light of the one main task the Lord Jesus gave us when He ascended back into heaven – the proclamation of the gospel. That is **we need to handle the gospel with diligence**. The parable itself captures the scene as Jesus was about to ascend back into heaven (*like a man going on a journey*). He gathers His disciples around for some last instructions ([He] *called his servants*) and charges them to carry out the work He gave them (*and entrusted to them his property*). We read this in Matthew 28: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" Matthew 28:18-20 As Christ's slaves, we have been commissioned with the gospel. To neglect this is to bury the gift where it does no one any good, like the last slave. We need to invest the good news by telling everyone we can about God's gracious provision in salvation.

And now the last slave makes his appearance. *He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'* This guy indulged in classic blame shifting. He slanders the character and person of the master, accusing him of being unfair and capricious and money-hungry, and puts the blame for his failure on his master instead of where it properly belonged. **This points up the fact that whenever someone has a wrong concept of the character and nature of God he will end up with wrong concepts about his responsibilities and blame God for everything under the sun.** He may have felt cheated because the other two got more than he did – he may have felt inadequate for the task – nevertheless, the master's assessment of his abilities was proved in the end – he couldn't trust him with more.

Another thing this highlights is the fact that real slaves – real Christians are risk-takers. This guy was paralyzed by his fear of failure – he says it - *'I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground'*. If a person cannot do what is great, and will not do what is small, he will probably do nothing at all. It was William Carey, the so-called father of missions who said, **'Expect great things from God – attempt great things for God.'** And the irony is, when you view this from the master's perspective – there really is no risk at all. You see, **it is the grace of God from start to finish**. He is the one who gives us any ability at all in the first place. And then He gives us what we need to do the work; and then He blesses the work and makes it fruitful; and when we stand before Him at the end, He says **'Well done good and faithful slave'**. This parable is not saying that somehow if you try hard enough, you will get in. Nor is it saying because it is all grace we need do nothing. Paul put it differently but said the same thing – *'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, because it is God who is working in you'*.

This slave's problem was fear and laziness. Both his fear of risk and his innate laziness worked to make him ineffective and idle and proved in the end that he was not a true slave of his master: *But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* Matthew 25:14-30

Waiting with Love 31 – 46

Finally, we end with this last parable in 25:31-46. I think most people have understood this parable in the following way: If you help anyone who is hungry to be fed, help the thirsty to find something to drink, help the naked to be clothed; if you've welcomed a stranger or visited the sick or those in prison, you were somehow doing that as unto Christ and on the last day you would be rewarded appropriately and would enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who don't do this go to hell and those who do this go to heaven. In fact they would say, the fundamental difference between those on the left and those on the right, between the sheep and the goats, between those who obtain eternal life and those who receive eternal punishment is what you have done with the disadvantaged in this world. I don't think that is what Jesus is saying here at all. But don't make the mistake of thinking that I am somehow discounting the fact that the Bible says that we as Christians are to be involved in all these things. We should have compassion on the poor and disadvantaged – the gospel mandates it. We should be concerned and help the orphan and the widow – in fact James says that this is how you know that you've got true religion. Hearts that have been impacted by the gospel ought to be large enough to embrace the world as Christ has done. Scripture is filled with strong admonitions to go out of your way to help those in need and there are strong denunciations against those who have the money and the power and do nothing to help. The New Testament tells us to do good to **all** people, especially to those of the household of faith.

But that is not what is going on here. Let's read this parable again:

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And He will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and You came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger and welcome You, or naked and clothe You? And when did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me.'"

And here is the first thing to notice. **Waiting with love means an unconscious overflow of the gospel.** Did you see the sheep's response? ***'When did we do these things'?*** They were not even aware that they were doing anything special, much less that they were ministering to Christ. ***The unconscious overflow of the love of God that had been poured out in their hearts through the gospel was evidenced in a spontaneous generosity of spirit toward those in need.*** And this has been the history of the gospel for 2,000 years. Everywhere the gospel of Jesus Christ has gone, good works have followed. The gospel gives us the compassion that God has for the world and we cannot say that we are followers of Christ and yet overlook the desperate situations of the needy in the world. These people were not saying to themselves, ***'If I just help this orphan over here or give that poor person a bit of meat or donate some clothes to the Salvation Army I will be rewarded and get to heaven'***. No, the gospel had spontaneously opened their hearts to those around them to overflow in practical love ways.

The second thing to notice is to whom did they render this love? And Jesus makes it clear that it was to those who were His brothers. You cannot take from this passage the thought that Jesus was talking about those who were not His brothers. Contrary to popular belief, we are not all God's chillen'. Only those who have in Jesus Christ as the Son of God are God's children and consequently, Jesus' brothers. We don't have time here to go into this but if you would like to read through the New Testament, particularly the gospels, you will notice that every reference to brothers that does not mean genetic brothers, always refers to Jesus' disciples. The point is that what Jesus was saying was that whatever you do to the least of His disciples, His brothers or sisters, or Christians, you do to Christ. The language of this parable cannot mean anything else.

And love of the brethren, love for those who belong to the family of God is the one indisputable evidence of the power of the gospel to change lives. It is the litmus test of authenticity of Christians – do you love one another, even as Christ loved you? Jesus told His disciples: ***A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*** John 13:34 – 35 **Waiting with love means that you love other Christians.** The reason the sheep got in and the goats didn't, was not ultimately because they did or didn't help the disadvantaged, ***but rather because the sheep were brothers and the goats were not.*** The sheep's works of love toward other Christians was evidence that they were part of the family of God and conversely, the goat's lack of care toward God's people was conclusive evidence that they were not.

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matthew 25:31-46 The apostle John tells us that we know that we have passed out of death and into life because we love the brethren.

How do we wait for the Son? We wait with eager anticipation, as those who will not be surprised at His coming. We wait with faithfulness and wisdom, carrying out our responsibilities as Christ's slaves seriously, expecting our master's return as we are fulfilling them. We wait with perseverance, anticipating His coming at any moment, and yet embracing the possibility that it could be a long time; and not being found unready because He seems to delay. We wait with diligence, investing all that the master has entrusted to our care in kingdom work. And we wait in love; as those whose lives have been so transformed by the gospel that there is a spontaneous overflow of love toward the household of faith.

Our gracious Father,

Grant us the grace to wait for Your Son's soon return with eager anticipation, with faithfulness and wisdom, with perseverance and diligence and love. Forbid Lord that we should be counted among those prove in the end unready, unfaithful lazy servants who either hoard or squander Your possessions. May we joyfully invest all that you have entrusted into our hands in kingdom work. May Your soon return inspire us to be courageous risk-takers for the sake of the gospel and encourage our hearts to bold, fruitful witness of the grace of Christ in the world. May our lives be so transformed by the gospel that they overflow in love toward the least of those who are Yours and may we daily delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.