

## 4) PARABLES FROM MATTHEW

Matthew 24. 45-51

### The Faithful or the Unfaithful Slave

45 'Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? 46 Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. 47 Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. 48 But if that wicked slave says to himself, "My master is delayed", 49 and he begins to beat his fellow-slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, 50 the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. 51 He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 25. 1-13

### The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." 9 But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." 12 But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Matthew 25. 31-46  
The Judgement of the Nations

31 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." 37 Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" 40 And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." 44 Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" 45 Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

# THE KINGDOM OF GOD COMES WHEN AND HOW YOU LEAST EXPECT IT

## Matthew 24: 45-51 - The Faithful and Wicked Slave

The parables at the end of Matthew are intended to give disciples counsel on how to live in the interim between Christ's death/resurrection and his coming again in glory. Matthew is also concerned about the last judgment and how people will fare when they are held to account for what they have done with what they've been given.

In this parable, the one slave, representing the disciple, is entrusted with a certain responsibility. They must do the work of Christ until he comes again. Even if we don't think about the second coming as something imminent within our life-times, we can relate to the problem of being given certain responsibilities, certain opportunities, and having a certain window of time to fulfill what we can and should. The faithful slave does a good job doing the work of the master in his absence. When the master returns the slave is rewarded by being entrusted with even greater responsibility. This is an honour and a recognition of faithfulness. The wicked slave, however, thinks he has a lot of time before the master comes. And so, he not only delays doing what he knows he should, he abuses the privileges of being entrusted with the master's work. He abuses other people for personal gain and surrounds himself with lowlifes. The master returns when the slave least expects it, and he is punished.

The image of hell in Matthew is repeatedly depicted as a "weeping and gnashing of teeth." Every Jew in Jesus' day believed in hell. It was the common worldview. This gospel is written within this world and so, it incorporates 'hell' as Jesus must have done in his teaching. The twist, however, is that Jesus applies "hell" against those who most use it as a club to beat the masses into fearful and servile obedience to their vision. Jesus applies "hell" against all those in positions of responsibility and power who abuse the people under their care. No wonder the religious authorities took great offence.

But did Jesus, himself, believe in hell? Certainly, in the other gospels it is much less emphasized. If Jesus is presenting a vision of a God of inclusive love, whose judgement is meant to awaken people to their need for grace and mercy, then the concept of 'hell' has little place. People need to be held accountable, yes. Justice and truth must never be compromised. But without forgiveness and the constant possibility of reform, justice easily becomes vengeance. On the cross, Jesus forgives the very people he could consign to hell in the parables, the very people who engineered his torture and death. Such magnanimous love is consistent with his teaching in the sermon on the mount (God is merciful even to the ungrateful and the wicked in the end, while standing always with the victims shining a light on injustice). Jesus lived out on the cross what he taught in his ministry. This teaching and action from the cross totally contradict the concept of hell as eternal torture beyond any forgiveness as being of God. It's for us to decide whether we want to hold on to hell because we can't handle the infinity of God's mercy. Some of us would rather make mercy more conditional than God. What do you think?

## Matthew 25: 1-13 - The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids.

In this parable we are also dealing with how we ought to live as we await Christ's coming. In this case it is about bridesmaids awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom. In 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian wedding celebrations, it was customary for the wedding party to await the bridegroom's coming. The arrival of the bridegroom at midnight, however, and the idea that oil for lamps could be purchased at that late hour is not so realistic. Jesus' concern, however, is to stress that being unprepared may prevent a person from entering the kingdom of heaven when it arrives on earth as it is in heaven.

Unlike the previous parable, the bridegroom doesn't come quicker than expected. Quite the opposite. He is unusually delayed. Those bridesmaids who were prepared for a long wait were ready to meet the bridegroom with lamps lit. Light, in the gospel, represents the works of God - "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven." (Matthew 5: 14-16). The foolish maids were unprepared and so they lost their light, their passion and purpose, their focus and identity as disciples in faithful waiting for their Lord. By the time they got their act together it was too late.

Isn't this true in life? Sometimes there's a window of opportunity, an obligation or responsibility that must be undertaken at the right time before it's too late. Sometimes we postpone or procrastinate doing what we know we should. We always believe we'll have the chance to deal with it later. It's tragic when the time is not allowed us. Other times, we run out of steam and burn out doing good. We lose a sense of the reason and purpose for who we are before God and why we ought to do what we ought to do. This, too, is tragic. These parables are intended to remind us that we must always renew our focus and act on our responsibility as Christians while we have the time. Dealing with relationships, sharing, giving, forgiving, committing... we need to act while we can... before it's too late. We need to cultivate the oil in our souls daily, weekly, through every season of life.

## Matthew 25: 31-46 - The Last Judgment

This last of Matthew's series of parables focuses on the standard of judgment God uses to determine who is on the right side and who is on the wrong side. The first thing to be said is that those who belong to God and are followers of Christ in spirit and in truth are committed to deeds of caring, generosity, friendship and compassion. They don't go around judging people and giving themselves an excuse for not caring, as if people deserve their lot and hence should be treated with contempt rather than compassion. The radical theology of this parable is that Jesus identifies with the lowest of the low in society. The way we act toward such people is equated with the way we act toward Christ.

The second thing to be said is that those who are not faithful try to justify themselves - "when did we see you..." They are focused on the kinds of things that make a bigger splash in the world, caring for people who "count", giving where it could be accounted to their favour, etc. Those who are truly faithful, however, act in such a way that they do

what they do with no thought of reward, acknowledgement or recognition. This is not about being used and abused. Rather, it's about caring for people in such a way where you don't make them feel obligated. You treat them with dignity and are open to friendship. Their faith and their life are so seamlessly interwoven, that they are surprised when they are acknowledged as faithful. They never imagine that their little works of kindness would be noted so immensely by Christ. They are serving Christ without thinking about it as some great or unusual service, and because they do it in such a way, their actions are seen as pure and authentic (not for reward or recognition). Clearly, we are admonished to follow this pattern in our own lives.

How hard it is to serve other people, and especially when we feel an insufficient gratitude or recognition from the recipients of our caring and generosity. We need to develop a spirituality where we find our joy and fullness in God irrespective of the response or recognition of other people. This is a challenge, yes. But as Jesus also says elsewhere: What is impossible for us is possible for God.

In this season of Covid, where and how do you find your purpose and focus? Where is Christ calling you to go. What is Christ calling you to do? How do you cultivate the oil of compassion in your heart so that it doesn't burn out?

For next week: Luke 12: 13-21; 16: 1-13