

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXXVI

by Thomas Ice

“Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that evil slave says in his heart, ‘my master is not coming for a long time,’ and shall begin to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and shall cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth.”

—Matthew 24:45–51

Christ’s final parable of Matthew 24 teaches lessons of faithfulness in service to our Lord in light of His return as mentioned in verses 27–31. This parable, like all of the other parables of Christ, relates to Israel, especially in light of her rejection of the Messiahship of Jesus. Since all of these parables are focused upon the return of Christ, this one emphasizes proper behavior in light of the absence of Jesus between the two comings. Mark does not record this parable, but Luke does in a different context (12:41–46).

WHO IS THE SENSIBLE SERVANT?

The “faithful and sensible” (24:45) servant is related to Israel, who did not discharge her responsibilities in a faithful and sensible manner, as noted in a number of other parables uttered by Christ. Of course, this standard that Christ expected of Israel can certainly be applied to a servant of Christ, but the context for this parable is clearly national Israel. The faithful and sensible servant was not the nation of Israel.

The Greek word that is translated “sensible” (*phronimos*) is from the root word for wise. It is used in reference “to understanding associated with insight and wisdom, sensible, thoughtful, prudent, wise.”¹ Of the fourteen times that this adjective is used in the Greek New Testament, half of them are found in Matthew (four times in Matthew 25:2, 4, 8, 9). Two of the remaining seven instances are found in Luke in parallel passages to Matthew (Luke 12:42; 16:8). Paul uses this word five times in Romans and Corinthians (Rom. 11:25; 12:16; 1 Cor. 4:10; 10:15; 2 Cor. 11:19). All of the Pauline nuances connote a false human wisdom. However, in this passage, Christ uses the word positively of a servant who is skillful in managing his master’s household.

Within this parable, the household is Israel. The faithful and sensible servant references the leadership of Israel. To give them food at the proper time is a responsibility cited concerning the leadership of Israel. The emphasis in this verse is placed upon doing something “at the proper time.” What is the responsibility with which Israel’s leadership was entrusted with? They were entrusted with knowing that the time of the Messiah had arrived. Randolph Yeager notes: “the inferential conjunction used here in direct question. On the basis of vs. 42–44 with their admonition to watch the time signals on God’s prophetic clock, who will be judged faithful and wise, as a servant of the Lord.”² Yet, the leadership of Israel led the people astray by not knowing much about what their own Scriptures taught about the

expected Jewish Messiah. Hence, the comparison to the evil steward who says, “my master is not coming for a long time.”

MY MASTER DELAYS HIS COMING

The emphasis in this parable is upon the fact that Christ has forewarned His servants concerning these matters. He had sent the prophets and others to warn the nation that their Messiah was coming, yet, most did not pay attention to these matters because they did not fit into their personal agendas. They were not good stewards and it had consequences, bad consequences for the nation of Israel. This is why there will be consequences allotted when the Master returns and evaluates the faithfulness of his servants who witness the signs. Rewards of higher authority and rule are given to the faithful servant (24:46–47), while severe judgment upon the derelict servant (24:51). “The reward of faithfulness is to be trusted with higher responsibilities; cf. xxv.21, 23 Lk. xvi.10a,” notes A. H. M’Neile. “Since the parable deals with the Parousia, the words apply to higher activities in the age to come.”³ That age to come is the millennial kingdom.

A focus of this parable is upon the wrong attitude of the faithless servant who says, “My master is not coming for a long time” (24:48). Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost says,

Christ was revealing that if people are unfaithful to the stewardship entrusted to them, and if they ignore the signs that will be given of the return of the Lord, they will be kept from the kingdom to be established at His coming. In these parables the servants represent the people of the nation of Israel who will be god’s stewards during the Tribulation. At Christ’s return the nation will be judged, the faithful will be received into the kingdom, and the unfaithful will be excluded from the kingdom. Here again the faithfulness is that which springs from faith in Christ, while the unfaithfulness is produced because of lack of faith in Christ. Thus in view of the signs given to Israel, the people are exhorted to be watchful, prepared, and faithful.⁴

This parable looks back to the unfaithfulness of Israel (perhaps focusing upon her leadership) but looks ahead to His coming again. The unfaithful steward “employs his authority for tyranny over those who will not support him in his evil ways, and for self-indulgence with those who will.”⁵ How will the nation respond to a second opportunity during the tribulation to demonstrate faithfulness and wisdom? This is an emphasis found in this parable: “Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes” (24:46).

FUTURE ORIENTATION

This parable provides an instance in which what one thinks about the future will impact their behavior in the present. The servant who has a proper future orientation thinks that his master could return at any time. This is an important reason why he acts responsibly in the present. On the other hand, the servant who says, “my master is not coming for a long time,” acts irresponsibly. Therefore, it is very important what one thinks about the future since it impacts present behavior. Jesus is wanting Israel to think about the future and its impact upon them.

There are also consequences to how a servant dispenses his responsibilities. This likely relates to the role that Israel will have in the kingdom, or for those individuals within Israel who are unfaithful stewards, the role they will not have in the kingdom.

Clearly many will be outside of the kingdom since the passage says of the unfaithful stewards: “shall cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth” (24:51).

JUDGMENT UPON HYPOCRITES

The Greek verb (*dichotomeo*) is translated “shall cut him in pieces.” The Greek lexicon says, “cut in two of the dismemberment of a condemned person.”⁶ Its only two New Testament uses are in Matthew 24:51 and the parallel passage in Luke 12:46. The lexicon admits that it could be a figurative expression denoting to “cut him off,” but no exact linguistic support has been found for this rendering.⁷ Yeager admits that it literally means, “to cut into two, a reference to a most severe form of Hebrew punishment.” However, he notes that “the text, both in Mt. 24:51 and Lk. 12:46, represents the victim as remaining alive. Hence we suppose that the term is used in the same sense in which the western cowboy ‘cuts out of the herd’ a cow. A severing for the purpose of separation from others.”⁸ M’Neile, however, notes the following: “A punishment literally inflicted in ancient times; cf. I Chr. xx. 3, . . . In Exod. xxix. 17, the verb is used of dividing a sacrificial victim into pieces.”⁹ This word could be associated with covenantal unfaithfulness, which would be the case of those within Israel who did not properly dispense their stewardship.

Here is an instance where both the denotative (plain or literal) and connotative (figurative) uses both make sense in this context. However, I favor the literal use since it is used that way in the Old Testament and in secular literature, while the figurative use is nowhere attested in other literature. Also, when this phrase is coupled with the companion phrase, “weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth,” which it is, then it appears to support a literal, final judgment.

The phrase “weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth” speaks of the response of the hypocrite while experiencing judgment. That person will weep and gnash their teeth together in bitter anger for having been an unwise steward. Stanley Toussaint tells us: “Invariably throughout Matthew this phrase refers to the retribution of those who are judged before the millennial kingdom is established (Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 25:30).”¹⁰ This theme of faithful stewardship in relation to Israel will be continued in Matthew 25. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Walter Baur, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 1067. (hereafter BDAG)

² Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament*, 18 vols. (Bowling Green, KY: Renaissance Press, 1978), vol. 3. p. 340.

³ Alan Hugh M’Neile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: MacMillan, 1915), p. 358.

⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 151.

⁵ M’Neile, *Matthew*, p. 359.

⁶ BDAG, p. 254.

⁷ BDAG, p. 254.

⁸ Yeager, *Renaissance New Testament*, vol. 3, p. 346.

⁹ M’Neile, *Matthew*, p. 359.

¹⁰ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 282.