

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXXVIII

by Thomas Ice

“For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves, and entrusted his possessions to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. But he who received the one talent went away and dug in the ground, and hid his master’s money. Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. And the one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you entrusted five talents to me; see, I have gained five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master.’ The one also who had received the two talents came up and said, ‘Master, you entrusted to me two talents; see, I have gained two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed. ‘And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground; see, you have what is yours.’ But his master answered and said to him, ‘You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I scattered no seed. ‘Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. ‘Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.’ For to everyone who has shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. And cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

—Matthew 25:14–30

The second section of Matthew 25 is one of the most well-known parables of Jesus. The parable of the faithful and unfaithful stewards continues lessons for the nation of Israel in light of Christ’s return, which was noted in Matthew 24. This parable is often preached on today without notation of its context relating to Israel and Christ’s return. When we examine parallel accounts of this parable (Mark 13:34 and Luke 19:11–27) they both are also in the context of the second coming and judgment. The account in Matthew contains the most extensive version.

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

In keeping with previous parables in Christ's Discourse, this one deals with the issue of faithfulness. How will a true son of the kingdom act during the time of his master's absence? Will he be faithful to his lord or will he be a worthless servant? The servants were evaluated for how they dispensed their responsibilities during the absence of their master. Upon the return of the master, those servants that were faithful in the execution of their duties were rewarded with greater responsibility and wealth during the future reign of the king. "So here the heirs of the kingdom will receive greater blessing, while the ones who do not inherit it will be shut off from even an opportunity for entrance," notes Dr. Toussaint. "Those who do receive rewards will be rewarded according to their faithfulness and not the measure of their work."¹

This parable relates to Israel's accountability before God for their stewardship that will occur in conjunction with Christ's second coming. Dr. Toussaint tells us:

The last three parables give practical instructions in the light of the King's coming to judge and to reign. The principle which underlies each is the same one which was given in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:16–21). The fruit of faithfulness and preparedness would indicate the character of those living in the days before His coming. In each parable, character is manifested by works. This thought forms the key to the following passage which deals with the judgment of the nations. (Matthew 25:31–46).²

Thus, we see that the parables of the ten virgins (25:1–13) and the talents (25:14–30) deal with Israel's faithfulness in light of her responsibility, while the remainder of Matthew 25 (31–46) deals with Messiah's judgments of the nations, which will relate to how they treat the Jewish remnant during the tribulation. In both instances, Israel and the nations, there will be a mixed response. Some will be prepared and faithful, while others (most likely most) will not.

DISPENSATIONAL TRUTH PICTURED

In this parable Jesus portrays Himself as the Master of a house who is set to embark on a journey and He gives various responsibilities to His servants. This parable contains all of the basic elements dispensationalists³ teach are related to the testing of the various ages within God's plan for history.⁴

A leading spokesman for dispensationalism is Charles Ryrie, who notes that *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a theological dispensation as "a stage in a progressive revelation, expressly adapted to the needs of a particular nation or period of time . . . also, the age or period during which a system has prevailed."⁵ The English word "dispensation" translates the Greek noun *oikonomía*, often rendered "administration" in modern translations. The verb *oikonoméō* refers to a manager of a household.⁶ "In the New Testament," notes Ryrie, "dispensation means to manage or administer the affairs of a household, as, for example, in the Lord's story of the unfaithful steward in Luke 16:1-13."⁷

The Greek word *oikonomía* is a compound of *oikos* meaning "house" and *nómos* meaning "law." Taken together "the central idea in the word *dispensation* is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household."⁸

The various forms of the word *dispensation* appears in the New Testament twenty times. The verb *oikonoméō* is used once in Luke 16:2, where it is translated “to be a steward.” The noun *oikónomos* appears ten times (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; Gal. 4:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:10), and is usually translated “steward” or “manager” (but “treasurer” in Rom. 16:23). The noun *oikonomía* is used nine times (Luke 16:2, 3, 4; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4). In these instances it is translated variously (“stewardship,” “dispensation,” “administration,” “job,” “commission”).⁹

Dr. Ryrie formulates the following description and definition of dispensationalism:

Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.¹⁰

Dr. Ryrie notes the following characteristics of a dispensation as viewed by dispensationalist:

- two parties are always involved
- specific responsibilities
- accountability as well as responsibility
- a change may be made at any time unfaithfulness is found in the existing administration
- God is the one to whom men are responsible
- faithfulness is required of the subordinate party
- a stewardship may end at any time
- dispensations are connected with the mysteries of God
- dispensations and ages are connected ideas
- there are at least three dispensation (likely seven).¹¹

When we compare the dispensations with the specific characteristics of this parable we note the following: Each dispensation begins with a responsibility given to the steward. In this parable the stewards are the slaves (25:14) and their responsibility is faithful stewardship (25:19). While this parable pictures some who were faithful, each dispensation within God’s plan ends in failure, as depicted by the unfaithful servant (25:18, 26). Thus, each age ends in judgment, as God holds his stewards responsible for their actions, which is seen in the unfaithful slave who is cast “into outer darkness” (25:30).

The scenario in this parable provides a paradigm for how God manages human history based upon His revelation (the Bible). In spite of Satan and the unbelieving world, God knows what He is doing throughout history. He is in control and even though we currently live in a time when God is allowing mankind to go their own way and do their own thing, judgment day is coming when He will hold mankind accountable for their stewardship towards God.

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 287.

² Toussaint, *Behold The King*, p. 288.

³ For an explanation of what we mean by dispensationalism see the chapter “What is Dispensationalism?” in Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, *The Truth Behind Left Behind: A Biblical View of the End Times* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), pp. 178–90.

⁴ See our chart on “The Dispensations” in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting The End Times: A Visual Guide to Understanding Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2001), pp. 81–83.

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *What Is Dispensationalism?* (Pamphlet published by Dallas Theological Seminary, [1980], 1986), p. 1.

⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, a translation and adaptation by William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 562.

⁷ Ryrie, *What Is Dispensationalism?* p. 1.

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995). p.25.

⁹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p.25.

¹⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 29.

¹¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 26-27.