

Chapter 101: Preparing for Christ's Coming

Matthew 25:14–46

In the previous section, Jesus had warned his disciples that they would not know the day or the hour of his eventual return, but that they must be ready for his coming at any time (Matt. 24:36–51). Further, he illustrated that warning with the parable of the ten virgins, emphasizing the wisdom of preparedness: “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matt. 25:13). What, though, would it mean to prepare for Jesus’ final coming, especially when Jesus’ disciples will not know the time of his arrival? In Matthew 25:14–46, Jesus teaches his disciples to *prepare for Christ’s coming by fruitful labor and faithful love*.

Fruitful Labor (Matt. 25:14–30)

As Jesus transitions into this next section, he uses the explanatory conjunction “for” to show that he tells the following parable in order to explain more fully what it would mean to “watch” in preparation for his coming: “Thus grace which kindles faith and a new life that entitle us to enter the heavenly marriage [i.e., the meaning of the oil from the parable of the virgins] is for this very reason to be followed by the fruits of grace and faith and a new life in good works.”¹ That is, the *readiness* to which Jesus calls his disciples “is not a matter of passively ‘waiting’, but of responsible activity, producing results which the coming ‘master’ can see and approve. For the period of waiting was not intended to be an empty, meaningless ‘delay’, but a period of opportunity to put to good use the ‘talents’ entrusted to his ‘slaves.’”² That is, the emphasis here is not focused on “the surprise of his sudden return but more directly to the servants’ conduct during the time he has been away.”³

Jesus, then, symbolically portrays his own lengthy departure by the description of “a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property” (v. 14). To these servants, the man entrusts incredible sums of money: five talents, two talents, and one talent (v. 15). A “talent” is a unit of measurement, specifically a measurement of a precious metal (possibly gold, silver, or copper).⁴ As France notes, a talent of money was the equivalent of “what a laborer might hope to earn in half a lifetime.”⁵ Thus, even the slave to whom the man entrusted the smallest amount of money was working with an incredible amount of capital, while the man entrusted with five talents had almost unimaginable wealth under his oversight. The differences between the sums are

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 971.

² R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 355.

³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 732–33.

⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 627.

⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 953–54.

important in this parable, as Calvin notes: “God, as he has assigned to every one his place, and has bestowed on him natural gifts, gives him also this or the other injunction, employs him in the management of affairs, raises him to various offices, furnishes him with abundant means of eminent usefulness, and presents to him the opportunity.”⁶ Notably, this marks this parable as significantly different from the similar parable in the Gospel of Luke, where each servant receives the same amount of money, but all make different returns on that investment (Luke 19:11–27).⁷ This parable emphasizes watchfulness as faithfulness, rather than emphasizing different degrees of returns and rewards: “‘Readiness’ therefore, consists in having already faithfully discharged our responsibilities as disciples, whether they have been small or great. It is the master who allocates the scale of responsibility; the slave’s duty is merely to carry out faithfully the role entrusted to him.”⁸

Thus, those entrusted with five talents and with two talents each begin trading immediately, and both double the initial investment (vv. 16–17). On the other hand, “he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money” (v. 18). Where as the first two servants “made” (or, perhaps, “gained/won”) additional talents for a 100% return on investment, this third servant “made/gained/won” nothing for the master.⁹ The faithful servants are like the five wise virgins in the sense that they make the proper preparations for the return of their master. The unfaithful servant, on the other hand, are like the five foolish virgins who did nothing to prepare for the bridegroom’s arrival.

Further, like the bridegroom who “was delayed” (Matt. 25:5), the master returns only “after a long time” (v. 19a). Upon his arrival, he “settled accounts” with his servants” (v. 19b). For the master’s interaction with the first two servants, Matthew carefully records the reports of the servants and the response of the master with near-verbatim similarity, only adjusting for the initial investment and return (five vs. two). After each report of what these two faithful servants have earned for their master, the master responds with three comments: (1) “Well done, good and faithful servant,” a statement of commendation and praise. (2) “You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much,” conferring a reward of increased responsibility in light of the faithfulness over what was first entrusted to each servant.¹⁰ We should remember that the initial investments were extraordinarily large, and now the master suggests that he has far more to entrust to the servants: “Clearly Jesus wants his hearers to understand that the master was a very rich man.”¹¹ (3) “Enter into

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:442.

⁷ “In the Lucan version of this parable the point is made by the different trading results of slaves who are given the same initial capital; here the principle of individuality is built into the initial distribution. It will be the slaves’ responsibility not to look with envy at the different hand which has been dealt to their colleagues, but to make the most of what they have, and it will be important to note that the first two slaves will receive identical commendations in vv. 21 and 23 even though the sums they have gained differ, since each has succeeded in proportion to his initial endowment.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 953–54.)

⁸ France, *Matthew*, 356.

⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 735.

¹⁰ “Is it reading too much into the parable to envisage heaven as a state not of indolent pleasure for of active cooperation with the purpose of God as well as enjoyment of his favor?” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 955.)

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 629.

the joy of your master,” promoting the servant out of mere labor for the master, and inviting the servant to partake of personal fellowship with the master. The fact that the master responded in the exact same way to both servants is important for the interpretation of this parable: “They had both doubled the sum entrusted to them, and they were both congratulated for doing so. The actual size of their gain was not as important as the fact that each had doubled the amount entrusted to him.”¹²

Then, however, the man who had been entrusted with one talent came forward to give a very different report. Indeed, he does not so much give a report as to bring accusations against the master: “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” (vv. 24–25). There is much about the actions and statements of this servant that do not make sense. As Lenski notes, this man professes to fear his master, but he is “not afraid to call his good master hard names and to bring back the talent without having put forth the least effort to make it produce at least something. No; he did not fear to insult his kind and generous master.”¹³ Further, he claims to fear the master as a hard man because of how the master demands gains even where he did not invest, but in response to that fear, he made no investment whatsoever by burying the talent in the ground: “This made him certain of losing nothing, but it also meant that when he was face to face with his master he could say nothing better than ‘look, you have your own.’”¹⁴

Just as the report of the third servant is different, the master’s response is different. The master begins by rebuking the man for the real reason that he did not bring a return on the investment: “You wicked and slothful servant!” (v. 26a). Then, the master shows that the servant’s actions do not match his own reasoning:¹⁵ “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” (vv. 26a–27). If the servant was truly worried about risk, then there was, in fact, “a virtually risk-free alternative.”¹⁶ The servant’s complaints are exposed as hollow excuses. Ultimately, his failure to invest his master’s money was a result of despising the master, and not from any real concerns about the master.

Then, the master insists that the uninvested talent be given to the one with ten talents, since “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” (v. 29). Then, the master condemns the wicked servant to judgment: “And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 30). Ultimately, the picture that Jesus gives us in this parable is of a master who is super-abundantly generous with servants who were faithful, and who directs his harshness only against those who refuse to serve the master at all.

¹² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 630.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 982.

¹⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 630–31.

¹⁵ “So this slave was afraid of losing the talent and knew what a harsh man his master was? These are the premises. But see the lying conclusion: he buries the talent! That is exactly what does *not* follow from those premises. Wickedness always argues like a fool when it dares to open its mouth.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 983.)

¹⁶ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1018.

Faithful Love (Matt. 25:31–46)

With only a brief transitional phrase (δέ; *de*: “but”; untranslated in ESV), Jesus suddenly shifts from the parable of the talents into a scene at the end of time: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne” (v. 31). Nolland rightly observes that there are strong connections between this language and Matthew 24:30–31: “the Son of Man,” “comes/coming,” “glory,” and “the angels.”¹⁷ We should note, however, that in Matthew 24:31, the Son of Man had sent “out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” Earlier, I argued for an interpretation that sees these angels as engaged in the work of spreading the gospel throughout the whole world (cf. Matt. 24:14). Now, these angels have returned from their mission, and they surround the Son of Man as he sits on his glorious throne.¹⁸ More than that, “all nations” are now gathered before the Son of Man: “πάντα τὰ ἔθνη [*panta ta ethnē*], “all the nations,” are gathered before him. This comprehensiveness matches that of the commission to spread the gospel (cf. 24:14; 28:19).¹⁹ The angels have returned to present the full company of God’s elect before the Son of Man.

From his throne, the Son of Man “will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,” with the sheep on the right and the goats on the left (vv. 32–33). The imagery of the separation of sheep and goats have led people to call this a parable; however, as many commentators note, Jesus himself does not call this a parable, and this simple point of comparison about separating sheep and goats does not extend the imagery as far as a parable usually might. The point of the sheep and goats imagery seems to be merely illustrative: “In the countryside, sheep and goats mingled during the day. At night they were often separated. Sheep tolerate the cool air, but goats have to be herded together for warmth. In sparse grazing areas the animals might be separated during the day as well. But now these well-known, simple, pastoral details are freighted with symbolism. The right hand is the place of power and honor.”²⁰ The point, then, seems to be that, in this life, the regenerate and unregenerate are mingled together, “so that they live together in the same flock of God.”²¹ (Both, indeed, call Jesus “Lord” (vv. 37, 44). Just as sheep and goats are separated at night, though, so also Christ’s elect will be separated from the reprobates. After that initial illustration, Jesus does not pick up the sheep and goats language again.

As in the parable of the talents, the Son of Man speaks first to those who will receive blessing: “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

¹⁷ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1024.

¹⁸ See Nolland, however, who argues that “All the angels with him’ fills in a logical lacuna in 24:30–31, where the Son of Man sends out his angels in v. 31, but their presence has not been mentioned in v. 30 (perhaps we are to imagine them bundled with ‘great power and glory’). As the angels play no actual role in 25:31–46 (at most angels as attendants heighten the sense of grandeur, as in 16:27), their mention is likely to be primarily for the sake of the connection with 24:30–31 (and partly via that also with 13:41; 16:27).” (Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1024.)

¹⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 742.

²⁰ Carson, “Matthew,” 585.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:176.

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” (vv. 34–36). The righteous, however, are confused by this commendation, since they do not know when exactly they did these things (vv. 37–38). The King, though, declares, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (v. 40).

Critical to the interpretation of this passage is to define “the least of these my brothers.” The fact that Jesus speaks of “my brothers” cuts against the idea that Jesus is speaking about all those who are poor everywhere. Instead, these have a special connection to Jesus, so that the good that the righteous have done to “the least of these” is something that Jesus receives as a personal service to him. Thus, it is most likely that Jesus has in mind his persecuted church.²² Many commentators point to a similar idea when Jesus himself confronts Saul (later, Paul), who is moving from one event of persecution of the church to another, by asking, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). As Lenski writes, “So close is the union between true believers and Christ, but its glorious nature will not appear until the King declares this his identification with his brethren before the whole universe.”²³ Furthermore, Nolland argues that the “underlying logic of the account here depends on an assumption that the value of service is dependent on the status of the one being served. Therefore, service to the least will instinctively be considered as of little consequence, while service to the king will be seen as something that obviously matters.”²⁴ What this suggests is that, while the righteous instinctively served the lowly who were associated with the King (without realizing that any benefits would accrue to them because of that service), so also the wicked did not feel compelled to serve those associated with the King, although they would have jumped at serving the King directly.

Lenski also makes two key observations about this interaction. First, the King does not bring any charge of sin against the righteous.²⁵ Second, while the King commends the righteous for their works, they are entirely unaware of their works, suggesting that they “trusted solely in grace and forgot all their works.”²⁶ Although many have read this as a passage commending the necessity of works to enter into heaven, Jesus does not seem to speak of these good works in that way. The good works have been present, but the righteous are not pleading their works as their hope when they stand before the King. Like the master in the parable of the talents, the righteous are invited to enjoy something that extends beyond mere remuneration for their efforts: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (v. 34). While they are indeed receiving a reward, we should see that even their reward is based on grace rather than merit.²⁷

On the other hand, the King’s rebuke to the wicked is entirely based on their works (or, here, their lack of works): “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

²² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 377–78.

²³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 994.

²⁴ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1031.

²⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 989.

²⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 994.

²⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:178–79.

stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me” (vv. 41–43). Once again, those on the left are not aware of when they had missed serving the King in this way (v. 44). Then, once again, the King explains that, “as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (v. 45). Just as it was notable that the King did not mention any of the sins of the righteous, but only their good works, we should also note that the King only mentions the sins of these wicked, and does not factor in any positive things that they may have done.²⁸ As a final summary, Jesus warns, “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (v. 46). If the parable of the talents called believers to ready themselves for Christ’s coming by fruitful labor in the kingdom, this last section calls believers to ready themselves by caring for the least of Jesus’ brothers in the church.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the man leaving for a journey symbolize (v. 14)? What do the talents entrusted to the servants symbolize (v. 15)? What do you think it suggests that the master entrusts varying amounts of talents to different servants? What do the prompt, industrious responses of the servants entrusted with five and two talents suggest (vv. 16–17)? What should we learn from the negative example of the servant who buried his only talent (v. 18)?
2. When the master returns, what does he say to the two servants who were fruitful in their labor (vv. 21, 23)? What does this teach us about how our Lord looks at our stewardship of the things that he has entrusted to us? What has the Lord entrusted to you? How are you stewarding those relationships and resources of time, talents, and treasures fruitfully? What role does the pleasure and praise of your Master play in motivating your life?
3. What is the difference between the scenes in Matthew 24:30–31 in comparison to 25:31–32 in this passage? What does this suggest about the time that has passed since the Son of Man first received his throne before the Ancient of Days (see Dan. 7:13–14)? Why did shepherds separate sheep from the goats at night? Why does the King separate the sheep from the goats in this passage? What are the results of that separation?
4. What kind of faithful love for “the least of these my brothers” does the King require (v. 40)? Have you recognized that your works cannot merit a righteous standing before the righteous King? Has Christ begun to transform your heart so that you love those whom King Jesus loves? What is one way that you can serve the least of Christ’s brethren? Why might that seem insignificant and unimportant? How can you serve the least of these in a way befitting of Christ himself?

²⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 989.