

## 12. The Wise & Foolish Servants

"It's like a man going away: He leaves his house **and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task**, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. **Therefore keep watch** because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. **If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.** What I say to you, **I say to everyone: 'Watch!'**"

(Mark 13:34-37 NIV)

Peter asked, "Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?"

The Lord answered, "**Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants** to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, **he will put him in charge of all his possessions.**

But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. **The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of.** He will cut him to pieces (*as in lashes from a whip*) **and assign him a place with the unbelievers.**

"That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants **will be beaten with many blows** (or *lashes*; Greek *der'ō*). But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment **will be beaten with few blows** (or *lashes*; Greek *der'ō*). From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

(Luke 12:41-48 NIV; see also Matthew 24:45-51)

This parable of The Wise and Foolish Servants could also be called The Wise or Foolish Manager. It is intimately linked to the previous parable of The Wise and Foolish Virgins, and it therefore carries a similar message.

In Mark 13 & Matthew 24, this parable is given to us within the context of Christ's Olivet discourse; and in Luke 12 the context is also the theme of 'the coming of the Son of Man' (i.e. the Second Advent). The discourse recorded in these passages had to do with the eschatological coming of the Son of Man *within that generation*, along with the prophetic signs and events of that era; an era which was to be the end of the age (e.g. Matthew 24:1-3, 33-34). Therefore, this parable clearly belongs to the prophetic details of Christ's Olivet discourse in Matthew 24 & Mark 13, though in Luke's gospel it is placed elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

Luke gives us this parable in greater detail than Matthew or Mark, but when we put all of these accounts together we get the complete picture. Jesus is the wealthy Nobleman, the Master or Lord who is going away (and the parable later implies that his absence would be for a long time<sup>2</sup>) and he is leaving his household in the hands of his various servants who have been given various tasks. Yet even among the

servants there is a structure of authority, as shown through the mention of the manager who is placed in charge over the other servants. That is to say, there was also a strong and sobering word for those who were leaders in the Church of God, those who were spiritual elders and overseers, the shepherds of the Flock of God.

Using the analogy of a wealthy nobleman to refer to Christ is not indicating that Jesus was wealthy in any worldly sense, for there are many texts in the NT that reveal that Jesus was born into a poor family, along with the fact that he became a travelling Jewish Rabbi, and these rabbis relied heavily upon the generosity of their disciples to help with their daily provisions. Of course, Jesus' true wealth is primarily spiritual and heavenly, and it is these things that are the true riches, which he will share with his brothers, the many sons of God. Yet ultimately, even the whole world, the whole universe, belongs to Christ as the true King of all kings - and those who faithfully serve him will get to share in the inheritance of his kingdom as well (expressed in the parable as, "*he will put him in charge of all his possessions*").

### The Wise Servants

The manager (or administrator) represents the Apostles and Prophets who were given the highest authority over the others as deputised Overseers, and their authority is contained in the writings of the New Testament. The other servants include those who are called to be Evangelists, and Shepherd/Teachers - those who are to feed the sheep of God as servant-shepherds. A true servant of God and of Christ must show complete loyalty and dedication to his or her Divine Master with all humility and love. See for example the following texts (e.g. Matthew 20:25-28; 23:8-12; John 12:26; Galatians 1:10; Luke 9:62). Even discipleship itself has a high cost (e.g. Luke 14:25-33; Matthew 10:37-39).

Paul spoke of this spiritual authority structure in a number of places, as did Peter, yet this spiritual authority was not to be used to lord it over others.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. **And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers...**

(1 Corinthians 12:27-28 NIV)

**It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service,** so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

(Ephesians 4:11-13 NIV)

**To the elders among you,** I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory ('about'; Greek *mello*) to be revealed: **Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers**—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, **but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you,** but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

(1 Peter 5:1-4 NIV; see also 1 Timothy 3:15 & Ephesians 2:19-20)

Those who are faithful and wise are the ones who continue to serve God and His Son, being led by his Spirit, working out their faith with fear and trembling, enduring till the end (either the end of one's life or for those in the first century, the end of the age, whichever would come first), doing the job that they were called to do by faithfully feeding the other servants in the household so that they get their daily food at the appointed times. These are the ones who would be ready to face Christ if he should return suddenly, and to stand before him shamelessly, with all glory and honour (Luke 21:36). These are the Overcomers, the true sons of the Father, and the Day of the Lord would not surprise them like a thief in the night (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11).

The result of all of this at the Judgment would be that these faithful servants would inherit full sonship as the children of God, and they would enter into their inheritance of sharing ALL THINGS that belong to Christ. This would begin immediately after the Judgment, in the establishing of a New Creation, at the commencement of the Restoration of all things (Matthew 19:28-29). Then they would co-rule the nations as royal priests along with Christ himself! Ultimately, this inheritance is eternal life in the heavenly Kingdom of God, in a state of immortality and incorruption.

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—**heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ**, if indeed we share in his sufferings **in order that we may also share in his glory**.

(Romans 8:17 NIV)

**To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—**

'He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery'— just as I have received authority from my Father...'

**To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.**

(Revelation 2:26-27 & 3:21 NIV; see also 2 Timothy 2:10-13)

### The Foolish Servants

A well known parable taught by Jesus about being wise or foolish is The Wise and Foolish Builders in Matthew 7:24-27. I remember well the catchy song from my Sunday School days, "The wise man built his house upon the rock..." etc. Those who are truly wise will build their lives upon the teachings of Jesus and will seek to live those teachings out in obedience to his commands. This is like building a house on a solid foundation (like rock) that cannot fall when it is battered by the trials of life.

On the other hand, the foolish one will not follow Christ and his teachings, which amounts to one building a house on an unsure foundation (like sand), which will ultimately fall with a great crash when the house is tested. The torrential rain, flood and wind of this parable that tests each house could be understood as the

judgments of God that ultimately tests whether one is going to stand or fall before the Judge of all the earth. Only the one who has built his life on the rock of Christ's teachings will survive this judgment.

Nevertheless, in the parable we are considering above, the servant who is foolish and unfaithful is the one who would eventually fall asleep in spiritual apostasy and darkness, sliding into worldliness and the lusts of the flesh, abusing any spiritual position or knowledge he may have been given. He would begin to think that the Master was not coming back for a long time, and so he begins to mistreat and abuse those under his authority, getting drunk and disorderly on the doctrines and rules of men. He becomes a lawless rebel, a worthless servant who is not doing his job as he should. He continues to walk in blatant disobedience to the will of his Master, becoming ever less aware of his true spiritual state.

Yet the time would come when the day of the Master's return would arrive suddenly, during one of the watches of the night, and the foolish servant would be completely unaware that that Day & Hour of his Master's return had actually taken place. In fact, Jesus said that the foolish servant would *not* be aware of that Day or Hour, and that he would not be expecting it either. For those who would not be watching, it would be missed. The final outcome is one of severe judgment for the unfaithful servant, a judgment that involves being treated as an unbeliever! These are sobering words indeed from the lips of Jesus.

### Graded Punishment

In the Law of Moses, one of the punishments for breaking certain laws was to get a lashing with a whip. Yet it is interesting to note that even this flogging was limited to 40 lashes (the number 40 being symbolic of trial and probation), which emphasises the principle that *over-punishment* is just as unjust as no punishment at all.

When men have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty. If the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make him lie down **and have him flogged in his presence with the number of lashes his crime deserves, but he must not give him more than forty lashes.** If he is flogged more than that, your brother will be degraded in your eyes.

(Deuteronomy 25:1-3 NIV)

To make sure they didn't violate this command through miscounting, the Jews made this the '40 lashes minus 1,' which Paul received five times (unjustly) for preaching Jesus as the Messiah (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:24).

In the parable of the Wise & Foolish Servants (as recorded in Luke 12), Jesus was making it very clear that those who claimed to be his servants, particularly those in positions of leadership who had authority over others, would be judged most severely if they knowingly disobeyed his words and had not prepared themselves for his return.<sup>3</sup> In the judgment, following the master's return, the disobedient hypocritical servants would receive the same sentence as the unbelievers (cf. Luke 12:46). This indicates, in accordance with the rest of Jesus' teaching, that these 'hypocrites' and 'unbelievers' would not be granted eternal life but rather eternal

death or destruction instead, i.e. eternal punishment (e.g. Galatians 6:7-9; Romans 2:5-10, 16).

Nevertheless, the punishment that Jesus was alluding to in this parable was that of the lashes or scourging of a whip, which would 'cut to pieces' the one undergoing the punishment or beating. The graded punishment would be applied in accordance with the just decision of the Judge (i.e. God) in accordance with the relative knowledge or ignorance of the one receiving the punishment (verses 47-48). In other words, for those servants with greater knowledge and understanding there is greater accountability before the Master, Christ, particularly for those who, as disobedient servants, become religious hypocrites and workers of lawlessness.

Hence, according to this parable, those who are not truly God's servants (having been exposed by their works) will be punished in the same way as unbelievers through a process of graded punishment (figured as "many lashes" or "few lashes") ultimately leading to the Second Death (i.e. the ultimate punishment of eternal destruction – Romans 6:21, 23; 8:13; Revelation 2:11; 20:12-15; 21:8). Jesus pronounced these warnings of judgment as being especially severe upon religious hypocrisy and wickedness (cf. Luke 20:47; Matthew 12:36-37).

The letter of James also confirms this principle that those who are teachers of the Scriptures and who hold positions of leadership and spiritual authority (that is, those who have been given much) will be held more accountable than others and will receive greater judgment. For those who do not truly have the life of Christ within them, then even what they have will be taken away, for all is given by the grace of God. This was especially relevant to the Jewish people, who believed they belonged to Yahweh and therefore 'had something' of God, yet even what they had would be taken away due to their rejection of God's Son.

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, **because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.**

(James 3:1 NIV)

There are a number of other NT texts that support the idea of graded punishment for the unsaved, and graded rewards for the saved, as each of us will be judged in accordance with our acts (e.g. Matthew 16:27; Romans 2:5-10, 16; Revelation 20:11-15). Jesus also taught that the Day of Judgment would be more bearable for some than others, again indicating graded punishment; a punishment with more or less severity depending on one's acts (e.g. Matthew 11:22-24).

Even for saved believers who are the true disciples and servants of Christ, each will receive his or her due in accordance with one's actions in this life, whether good or bad, and this could lead to a loss of rewards or, more literally, not getting full wages for good service (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3:11-14; 2 John 8; Revelation 3:11).

That is to say, God's true people can still forfeit 'the prize' of God's best for them and suffer loss, while still being given eternal life (Philippians 3:12-16; Galatians 6:7-10; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 1 Corinthians 3:14-15). Even for believers in the kingdom of heaven there are indications that there are gradations of blessings, rewards and positions of authority depending on how obedient and faithful one has

been as a servant of God and of Christ, for God is just and he rewards those who earnestly seek him and serve him (Matthew 5:19-20; Luke 19:11-27; Hebrews 11:6). Ultimately, we shall reap what we sow, whether we sow to the Spirit and reap eternal life, or sow to the flesh and reap destruction (cf. Galatians 6:7-10).

For he who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked of him. He who has will be given an abundance, but he who does not have, even what he has will be taken away, and he will be figuratively lashed with either many blows or fewer blows, depending upon either his knowledge or his ignorance of the will of the Master.

### Hypocrisy & Self-Righteousness

Here's another strong word from Jesus himself to the hypocritical Jewish religious leaders of his day, which could also be applied to many of the leaders within the Christian Church in general throughout its history.

While all the people were listening, Jesus said to his disciples, "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. **Such men will be punished most severely.**"

(Luke 20:45-47 NIV)

God hates the self-righteous actions of religious hypocrites. Nevertheless, as revealed in the parable, the punishment for those classed as hypocrites and unbelievers cannot exceed the divine limit, for God is just – although the final destruction for all those outside of Christ will be eternal.<sup>4</sup> This accords with the rest of Jesus' teaching that the subjects of the kingdom who are hypocritical liars shall be thrown into outer darkness and suffer the destruction of body & soul.

Jesus has already paid the price for our sins and transgressions, which is why he was lashed and beaten most severely, not by a normal whip of cords, which would've been bad enough, but with the dreaded Roman flagellum that ripped the flesh like a knife. It is also possible that, in accordance with the Divine Law, Jesus was stoned while he was on the cross, which would've caused even further lacerations to his whole body - so much so that his face would've been marred beyond that of any man (cf. Isaiah 52:13-15). It is truly by his wounds that we have been healed (cf. Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24).

Therefore, for those who rejected Christ's word and the glorious Gospel of God's Son, there was nothing left but for the Living Stone to crush them as they received the due punishment for their words and actions on the Day he was revealed. The same goes for all those who have stubbornly disbelieved and disobeyed since then. The Gospel does not do away with God's Holiness and Justice, although it is true that Grace & Mercy triumphs over judgment in and through Christ. The salvation and restoration promised to Israel was fully established in the Day of the Lord of 70 AD, and all those who believe in the Name of Christ and become his followers can enter in to this heavenly kingdom.

So, for those of us who are servants of the Living God and of Christ Jesus, let us endeavour to become wise and faithful servants, those who run the race to the end to gain the prize. May we become vessels of gold and silver (as spiritually mature children), rather than those of wood and clay (i.e. immature fleshly children); being precious holy instruments in the hands of the Master to be used for noble purposes in his great household, prepared for any good work he calls us to do. As Paul said to Timothy,

<sup>20</sup> In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use.

<sup>21</sup> **Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.**

(2 Timothy 2:20-21 NIV)

### Become Watchful

In Mark's account of this parable, Jesus refers to the doorkeeper of the house being watchful. In ancient times particularly, a wealthy household would have many servants, and one or two of those servants would be given the job of Doorkeeper or Gatekeeper. Their main task was to keep watch at the main entrance to the house, usually in the courtyard, to greet visitors, messengers and merchants, as well as being a guard to ward off any intruder or enemy. They were like the watchmen who stood guard at the gates of a city, but on a smaller scale. They had to be vigilant and sober, keeping themselves awake, even through the night shift.

Jesus uses this figure of a watchmen or doorkeeper staying awake and being on guard to teach his servants to stay awake spiritually, to be vigilant and sober, watching for his return in expectation, being careful about the way one lives, being aware that all God's servants have to give an account to the Master after his return, and then all shall be given wages accordingly – or for some the reward may be forfeited altogether (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). These words of warning, though originally given to those in the first century, are not to be taken lightly even now, for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ when our time here is done (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:10).

<sup>6</sup> So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, **but let us be awake and sober.** <sup>7</sup> For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. <sup>8</sup> But since we belong to the day, **let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.** <sup>9</sup> For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(1 Thessalonians 5:6-9 NIV; see also Revelation 3:2-3)

This closing text offers good advice and encouragement for all who are wise servants and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, especially in these days of increasing darkness & lawlessness.

<sup>13</sup> **Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.**

<sup>14</sup> **Do everything in love.**

(1 Corinthians 16:13-14 NIV)

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> As stated in the previous chapter, it is very evident, if one lays aside any prior presuppositions, that *the whole Olivet discourse* is to be understood as applying to the generation then living in the first century AD; i.e. the apostolic generation of Jesus' disciples. The same applies to any given passage that speaks of the coming of the Son of Man. The 'end of the age' was intimately tied up with the then-approaching destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; and so was the coming of the Son of Man at the end of that age. For further study, see my article *The Olivet Discourse & The Second Advent*.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "a long time" can refer to a period of hours, days, weeks, months, or years, because it is relative to a particular context. This is how it is used throughout the NT. For instance, if I was to say that I was popping out for ten minutes but then took two hours, my absence could be viewed as "a long time". On the other hand, if I was to leave home on a trip that would take many weeks or months, it could also be said that my absence would be for "a long time".

In this parable, the "long time" that the master is away is not to be understood as hundreds or thousands of years! He returns within the lifetime of his servants whom he placed in charge of his estate. In fact, in Mark's account of this parable, the owner of the house is pictured as returning later that same day, either in the evening or during the night watches. Again, it needs to be emphasised that this has specific reference to the end of the age within that first century generation.

<sup>3</sup> As has been emphasised throughout this book, this parable, along with many others within Jesus' teaching, had particular relevance to that first century generation who would live to experience the eschatological event of the Day of the Lord, the Return and Parousia of Christ, when the kingdom of heaven would be fully established. I think the principal taught here still applies to every generation of the Christian church since 70 AD, with the added difference being that the focus is on the end of one's life rather than the Day of the Lord itself. No one usually knows the day or hour in which their life on Earth will end, thereby introducing the Day of Judgment on the other side.

<sup>4</sup> For further study of the subject of Eternal Punishment & Eternal Destruction, see my article *Is Universal Salvation Explicitly Taught in the NT? Part 4*.