

THE WORD OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Parable of the Talents

In this article we shall continue our examination of the two great parables in Matthew 25. As we saw before, the Gospel of Mark reveals the gospel of God concerning Christ as the Slave-Savior, the Servant of God. The Gospel of Luke presents the gospel of the forgiveness of sins and reveals Christ as the Man-Savior, the only proper and normal man who lived on this earth. The Gospel of John is the gospel of life, unveiling Christ as the God-Savior, the incarnation and embodiment of God. The Gospel of Matthew, however, speaks of “the gospel of the kingdom” (4:23; 9:35; 24:14), the gospel of Christ as the King-Savior. This gospel brings people not only into God’s salvation but also into the kingdom of the heavens; thus, it emphasizes the heavenly ruling of God and the authority of the Lord. Accordingly, Matthew presents “the word of righteousness” (Heb. 5:13), the truth concerning the believers’ responsibility and accountability to God for their life and service in the church age. In particular, the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 warns the believers of our need for faithfulness to the Lord in our work and service to Him during our lifetime.

The Slaves Signifying Believers from the Aspect of Service

In Matthew 25:1, the parable of the virgins begins, “At that time the kingdom of the heavens....” *At that time* refers to the time of the Lord’s coming at the end of this age. In verse 14, the parable of the talents continues, “For the kingdom of the heavens is just like a man about to go abroad, who called his own slaves and delivered to them his possessions.” The “man” in verse 14 is Christ who, at the time He spoke this word, was about to “go abroad,” that is, into the heavens, through the process of His death, resurrection, and ascension. To go abroad here corresponds to His going to prepare a place for the disciples, of which He spoke in John 14:1-6. The Lord’s word in John 14 emphasizes His work to bring the disciples into an organic union with the Father through His death and resurrection. The Lord’s word in Matthew 25, however, emphasizes the Lord’s charge to His disciples as His slaves to faithfully serve Him for the course of their life in this age before His return.

In verse 14, the phrase *the kingdom of the heavens* is elided in the original Greek, but it is rightly provided in many

translations. There is no break between the Lord’s speaking concerning the ten virgins in verses 1 through 13 and His speaking concerning the talents in verses 14 through 30. The transitional *for* introduces the latter parable as an extension of the previous one. R. C. H. Lenski finds a strong connection between the two parables:

The connective γάρ [*for*] makes this parable an exposition of v. 13. It indicates the scope of the parable: our watching for our Lord’s coming by faithfully using his talents in his service. Thus grace which kindles faith and a new life that entitle us to enter the heavenly marriage is for this very reason to be followed by the fruits of grace and faith and a new life in good works. The order of the two parables cannot be changed. (971)

These two parables portray the believers’ twofold status in relation to Christ. The first aspect of this dual status is related to life, and the second aspect is related to service. No Christian should neglect these two aspects; rather, we must pay attention to both, becoming proper in life and in service. The parable of the virgins emphasizes the need for the believers’ watchfulness and for their growth in the divine life. As virgins who have received the regenerating Spirit in our human spirit, signified by oil in our lamps, we must allow the Spirit to grow and spread in our entire being, primarily our soul; this is signified by the extra portion of oil in the vessels (Matt. 25:1-4). Virgins signify believers viewed from the aspect of life (2 Cor. 11:2).

The parable of the talents, however, emphasizes the need of the believers for faithfulness in service. That this parable concerns the believers’ faithfulness in service is immediately made apparent by the Lord’s use of *slaves* in verse 14. Slaves signify believers viewed from the aspect of service. “The virgins *wait*, the servants *work*” (Vincent 133). The Greek word δοῦλος is the most common and general word for *slave* or *servant*. It is used for ownership of persons in natural society, as in Matthew 8:9, 1 Corinthians 7:21-22, Ephesians 6:5, Colossians 4:1, 1 Timothy 6:1, and frequently in the four Gospels. In the spiritual realm, it is used to describe the believers in their relationship to God (Acts 16:17; Titus 1:1; James 1:1; 1 Pet. 2:16; Rev. 7:3; 15:3; 19:2, 5; 22:6), to Christ (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 7:22; Gal. 1:10; Eph. 6:6; Phil. 1:1; Col. 4:12; James 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1), and to those to whom we

minister (2 Cor. 4:5). As the perfect example and prototype, Christ Himself as a man in the flesh changed His outward expression from the form of God to the form of a slave, humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death (Phil. 2:7-8). The book of Revelation refers to the prophets of the Old Testament as the slaves of God (10:7; 11:18), and the martyrs at the end of this age are also called slaves (6:11). Moreover, in eternity all the redeemed ones will serve God and the Lamb as slaves (22:3). To be slaves of God and of Christ is the rightful status of the redeemed believers, for we have been purchased for God, bought with a price, by the precious blood of Christ (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Rev. 5:9).

The best Bible expositors agree that *slaves* in the New Testament is a designation applied uniquely to the believers as the purchased and redeemed ones of God. The unregenerate sinners in the fallen world are not the slaves of God. They have neither the status, the right, nor the inclination to serve Him, and they are not worthy of the title of *slaves*, as the apostles were and the believers throughout all the ages have been, by His grace. That the slaves in the parable of the talents signify the believers is most clearly indicated by the phrase *his own slaves* (τοὺς ἰδίους δούλους) in Matthew 25:14. The New Testament believers, as the Lord's own slaves, are His unique possession. Henry Alford says,

The parable is still concerned with *Christians* (τοὺς ἰδίους δούλους), and *not the world at large*. We must remember the relation of master and slave, in order to understand his delivering to them his property, and punishing them for not fructifying with it. (251)

In contrasting this parable with the parable of the pounds, or minas, in Luke 19:11-27, Lenski agrees: "The parable of the Pounds includes Christ's enemies and was spoken to the disciples and to the multitude; that of the Talents deals only with the disciples" (972).¹ Herbert Lockyer concurs: "The servants, or bond-servants, or slaves were, in the first instance, the twelve disciples to whom Jesus addressed the parable, and then in a broader sense all born-again believers" (243). J. P. Lange says, "In this parable the idea of retribution, as affecting individual Christians, comes prominently forward" (442).

Being Committed with the Lord's Possessions

Matthew 25:14 says that the man delivered to his own slaves "his possessions." Verse 15 continues, "To one he gave five talents, and to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability." It should be emphasized here that *talents* does not refer to natural abilities, the particular and differing endowments received by each person through his birth and training. The meaning of

the word *talent* as a "marked innate ability, as for artistic accomplishment,...[a] natural endowment or ability of a superior quality" (*American Heritage* 1830), is not to be employed here. This usage of the word was not found in the English language before the early 1400s, and even then it is simply an extension of the meaning of *talent* in Matthew 25. Prior to this, in English as well as in the ancient languages, *talent* was a sum of money, from the Greek τάλαντον. It was originally a balance, then a weight, then a sum of money in gold or silver equivalent to that weight. The Jewish talent contained 3,000 shekels of the sanctuary (Exo. 30:13) and in New Testament times was equal to 6,000 denarii or drachmas. Since a denarius was considered a good day's pay (Matt. 20:2), a talent was by any standard a large amount of money.

The talents given to the believers, as the Lord's own slaves, are the Lord's possessions. *His possessions* signifies the church, composed of all the believers as the Lord's inheritance (Eph. 1:18), who constitute God's household (Matt. 24:45). *His possessions* may also signify the gospel and the truth, which are delivered to the believers for their stewardship in saving sinners and teaching and perfecting the saints. Lockyer adds,

What magnificent merchandise is ours to trade with! The complete revelation of God Himself as given in the Bible; the glorious Gospel of redeeming love and grace; the spiritual gifts to the church Paul wrote about; the faith committed to the saints; the gift and graces of the Holy Spirit: these are among "His goods." Pertaining to Him, they are *His* and not natural endowments. Thus, what we trade with in our Lord's absence, belongs to Him. It is not our merchandise....The "goods," then, are not a question of our possessions or fitness, but are the unsearchable riches of His grace, provided for an impoverished humanity in quantity. (243)

Witness Lee writes,

In the parable of the virgins, oil signifies the Spirit of God (vv. 3-4), whereas in this parable, talents signify spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:4; 1 Pet. 4:10; 2 Tim. 1:6). For life we need oil, the Spirit of God, even His filling, that we may be enabled to live the virgin life for the Lord's testimony; for service, for work, we need the talent, the spiritual gift, that we may be equipped as a good slave to accomplish what the Lord intends to accomplish. The filling of the Spirit in life enables us to use the spiritual gift in service (work), and the spiritual gift in service matches the filling of the Spirit in life, that we may be a perfect member of Christ. (Recovery Version, Matt. 25:15, note 1)

Whereas the talents refer to the Lord's possessions, not our natural ability, the talents are given to the Lord's

slaves “to each according to his own ability” (v. 15). Our own natural ability, which is constituted of God’s creation and our learning, is the measure “according” to which the Lord’s possessions are delivered to us. Thus, one slave, according to his own ability, received five talents, another two, and another one. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 12:4 speaks of “distinctions of gifts,” which are distributed to each one respectively by the Spirit even as He purposes (v. 11).

Trading with the Talents to Gain a Profitable Result

Verses 16 and 17 of Matthew 25 say, “Immediately he who had received the five talents went and traded with them and gained another five. Similarly, he who had received the two gained another two.” To trade with the talents signifies using the gift that the Lord has given us, and to gain other talents signifies that the gift we received from the Lord has been used to the fullest extent, without any loss or waste. The result of trading in this way is that the Lord’s possessions are multiplied. Lenski says,

The talents gained are the graces and the gifts found in others whom we win for the church and whom we help forward in their Christian life. There is a constant extension and multiplication of gifts in the church, talent producing talent. (975)

As we have seen, the Lord’s possessions are the gospel, the truth, the believers, and the churches. The work carried out by the apostles and the believers in the Acts was a work that caused the Lord’s possessions to be multiplied. Acts 6:7 says, “The word of God grew, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly.” Acts 9:31 says, “So then the church throughout the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was multiplied.” Similarly, 12:24 says that “the word of God grew and multiplied.”

Matthew 25:18 says, “But he who had received the one went off and dug in the earth and hid his master’s money.” In this verse we come to the main focus of this parable, which is the actions of the one-talented slave, who received the smallest gift. In actuality, the slave with the one talent describes the vast majority of Christians throughout the ages. Paul told the Corinthians that most of those whom the Lord calls are not great in ability, in status, or in the eyes of man:

For consider your calling, brothers, that there are not many wise according to flesh, not many powerful, not many wellborn. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world that He might shame those who are wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world that He might shame the things that are strong, and the lowborn things of the world and the despised things God has chosen, things which are not, that He might bring to nought the things which are, so that no flesh may boast before God. (1 Cor. 1:26-29)

Despised in verse 28 may also be translated *contemptible*, being of the same Greek root as the word for *counted as nothing* in Mark 9:12. In this passage Paul declares that it is the less capable, much more than the greatly capable, that are the material of humanity for the building work of the church. Later in the same book Paul speaks further concerning the members of Christ, comparing them to the foot and the ear, which because of their modest position do not regard themselves as being of the body (1 Cor. 12:15-16), and he proceeds to encourage and console the members which seem to be weaker, those which we consider to be less honorable, the uncomely members, and the members that lack (vv. 22-24). That the weaker members of the Body of Christ often consider themselves as unworthy attests to the tendency of these least gifted ones to easily mistreat or ignore their gift. However, to neglect our God-given gift is to deny the sovereignty of the Lord in placing the members in the Body as He wills (v. 18); it is to refuse our calling and shun our portion in the unique ministry of the New Testament (Acts 1:17); it is to neglect and quench the gift of God that is in us (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6); and it is to reject our divinely appointed limitations. Moreover, as centuries of experience in the church have demonstrated, the one-talented ones often cede their valuable function in the church to the more gifted ones and thus become inactive and indolent. In this regard, Watchman Nee says,

Most Christians are in this category. Receiving one talent is dangerous because those who receive one talent have the greatest tendency to become lazy or slothful and bury their talent. They often feel ashamed of having little. ...Some feel that it is better to have nothing than to have only a little....It is cowardly to bury our talent. (*Matthew* 341)

Matthew 25:18 says that the third slave dug in the earth and hid his master’s money. The earth here signifies the world; thus, *dug in the earth* signifies becoming involved

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in the world. While neglecting their God-given function in the church, it is easy for the slothful ones to bury their talent under worldly involvement, which makes it all the harder to find the talent when it is needed. “Any association, any involvement, with the world, even a little worldly talk, will bury the gift we have received from the Lord” (Recovery Version, v. 18, note 2). *Hide his master’s money* signifies rendering the Lord’s gift useless, letting it lie waste under the cloak of certain earthly excuses. To make any excuse for not using the Lord’s gift is to hide the gift. This is always the danger with the one-talented ones, those who consider their gift to be the smallest.

The Settling of Accounts at the Judgment Seat of Christ

The parable of the talents continues in Matthew 25:19 through 23:

Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came and brought another five talents, saying, Master, you delivered to me five talents; behold, I have gained another five talents. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful over a few things; I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master. And he who had received the two talents also came and said, Master, you delivered to me two talents; behold, I have gained another two talents. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful over a few things; I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master.

This portion speaks of the Lord’s return at the end of the church age, when He will call all genuine believers, His slaves, to give an account before Him at His judgment seat (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10). *A long time* in Matthew 25:19 signifies the entire church age, and *came* signifies the Lord’s descending to the air in His parousia. In addition, *came* in verses 20, 22, and 24 refers to the believers’ rapture to the air after the great tribulation (1 Thes. 4:17). At that time Christ will descend, the believers will ascend, and the two will meet in the air at the judgment seat of Christ. At this judgment seat, the Lord will settle accounts with the believers by judging their living, conduct, and work. The outcome of this judgment will not be eternal salvation, for this has been settled once for all; rather, the outcome will be the reward or punishment of the believers. Concerning the settling of accounts, Watchman Nee says,

No one can excuse himself by saying that he has no gift, because we all have at least one talent. Do not excuse yourself by saying that you have no gift. If you have no gift, you are not a child of God. Since all believers do have the gifts of the Holy Spirit, each will have to give an

account of himself before the Lord in that day. (*Matthew 339-340*)

Concerning the judgment at the judgment seat of Christ, Alford says,

This proceeding is *not*, strictly speaking, *the last judgment*, but still *the same as that in the former parable; the beginning of the judgment at the house of God*—the judgment of the *millennial advent*. This, to the servants of Christ (τοὺς ἰδίους δούλους, ver. 14), is *their* final judgment—but not that of the rest of the world...In the two former parables we have seen the difference between, and judgment of, *Christians*—in their inward readiness for their Lord, and their outward diligence in profiting by his gifts. And *both these had reference to that first resurrection and millennial Kingdom*...during which *all Christians* shall be judged. (252, 254)

At this time the slave who received five talents declares that he has traded with them and gained five more talents. The gaining of another five talents is the result of the slave’s full use of the gift of the five talents. To gain other talents is referred to in Matthew 25:27 as interest. *Interest* (τόκῳ) signifies the profitable result we gain for the Lord’s work by using His gift. It is a very graphic word meaning first *childbirth* and then *offspring*, hence *interest*, which may be considered as the produce or offspring of capital (Vincent 134). During the time of the Roman Empire, legal interest stood at eight percent. Since this is more than enough, by the rule of compound interest, to double an investment within twenty years, the doubling of the talents here implies the faithful service of the first and second slaves over a certain span of years.

To both of these slaves the master says, “Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful over a few things; I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master.” It is central to the theme of this parable that although the gift given to the two-talented slave was smaller than that given to the five-talented one, the Lord’s appraisal and reward were the same in both cases. This indicates that the Lord’s appraisal and reward are not related to the size and quantity of our work, but to our faithfulness in using His gift to the fullest extent. This same theme is found in the Lord’s encouragement and commendation to the church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3:8: “You have a little power.” This word of approval to the small but overcoming saints indicates that what pleases the Lord is not our doing much for Him but our faithful use of what we have been given. This means that we trade faithfully and diligently with our talent. Those who are thus faithful will be rewarded with the joy of their Master. This is the enjoyment of the Lord in the coming kingdom. To rule over five or ten cities as a reward in the next age is the outward position of the

overcoming saints (Luke 19:17, 19), whereas to enter into the joy of the Lord will be the inward satisfaction of the overcomers. To participate in the Lord's joy is the greatest reward, better than glory and position in the kingdom.

Matthew 25:24-25 says,

Then he who had received the one talent also came and said, Master, I knew about you, that you are a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow. And I was afraid and went off and hid your talent in the earth; behold, you have what is yours.

Many expositors denounce the useless slave here as speaking from falseness of heart, lying about the character of his master. It is perhaps more in keeping with the theme of the parable that the slave was not consciously lying in his censure of his master; rather, he was befuddled, darkened, and self-deceived through his own negligence, indolence, and fear. In his self-justification he perceived the Lord only according to appearances. This may be indicated by *knew about you* (ἐγνων σε), referring to outward, objective knowledge, not to inward, subjective realization. Apparently, the Lord is hard in His strictness; He demands that we use His gift to the fullest extent for His work, which requires our absoluteness. And apparently, the Lord's work always begins from zero. This often seems to be the case when a servant of God enters a new, untilled, or barren field to do the work of the Lord. This may give the impression that the Lord, reaping where He did not sow and gathering where He did not winnow, seemingly demands that we work for Him with nothing. This, however, should not be an excuse for the one-talented one to neglect the use of his gift. Rather, this should force him to exercise his faith so that he can use his gift to the uttermost.

In a sense the slave's word of censure appears true, but in another sense it is not true. We should not say that the Lord has not scattered, for He has given each of us at least one talent. His giving the talent to us is the sowing and the scattering. None of us can say that the Lord has given us nothing. The one talent of even the smallest member of Christ is the seed for sowing and the possession for scattering. Therefore, we need to reap where the Lord did not sow and gather where He did not scatter. What the Lord has given to us contains the element to produce a result for Him. If the one-talented slave had had this view and had been as faithful with his talent as the other two slaves, the Lord would have given him the same appraisal and reward that He gave to the others.

In verse 25 the slothful slave says, "I was afraid and went off and hid your talent in the earth." To be afraid is

negative. We should, rather, be positive and aggressive in using the Lord's gift. Moreover, fear often derives from sloth (Prov. 22:13). Similarly, to *go off* is to be too passive. We should be active in the Lord's work. Daniel 11:32 says, "The people who know their God will show strength and take action." To take action means to do something noble and worthy which may be considered as an achievement. Today, we need to be those who show strength and take action. The useless slave believed that the Lord demanded him to work for Him with nothing. However, verse 29 says that "even that which he has shall be taken away from him." Apparently, we do not have sufficient resources with which to gain a profitable result for the Lord. In actuality we do, for the Lord speaks of "even that which he has." Therefore, we should exercise our faith and be positive, aggressive, and active to use our gift to the uttermost in the Lord's work, as Paul said, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Merely to keep the Lord's gift and not lose it is not sufficient; we must gain a profit by using it.

In Matthew 25:26 and 27 the master of the slave replies,

Evil and slothful slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not winnow. Therefore you should have deposited my money with the money changers; and when I came, I would have recovered what is mine with interest.

The Lord admits that He is strict in what He demands of His slaves for His work. Therefore, every slave of God must trade with His "money." In practical life, the money changers were the brokers who exchanged money for a fee, dealt with loans and deposits, and paid interest on money. To trade with the money changers signifies the use of the Lord's gift to save people and to minister His riches to them. Some have said that the money changers signify the stronger ones who do business for the Lord on a greater scale, who can lead the more timid to the useful employment of their gifts. Alford finds this interpretation objectionable, for it is impossible, he says, to employ the grace given to one person through another person's means (254). It is more fitting to say that the money changers are actually the new, weak, young, and even backsliding believers, with whom we need to deposit the riches of Christ as His possessions. To care for the weak ones, to show love to those whose hearts have grown cold, and to visit and invite the estranged ones produce a profit for both the ones ministering and the ones ministered to. This profit is signified in verse 27 by interest, the profitable result we gain for the Lord's work by using His gift.

“Cast Out the Useless Slave into the Outer Darkness”

Verses 28 through 30 speak of the negative consequences of the Lord’s judgment of the evil and slothful slave. These verses say,

Take away therefore the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to every one who has, more shall be given, and he shall abound; but from him who does not have, even that which he has shall be taken away from him. And cast out the useless slave into the outer darkness. In that place there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

Concerning the consequences of the judgment seat of Christ, Lockyer warns us not to be those who will count our life as wasted, forfeit our reward, and be saved “yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15). He says,

What a solemn judgment fell upon the servant who buried his talent! As the faithful are rewarded according to the intrinsic value of their service, so there is condemnation for the non-use of Christ’s trust. At the Judgment Seat of Christ many will be commended, but others will be condemned. For those who have honored Him there is a *crown* (II Timothy 4:8): a *throne* (Revelation 3:21): a *kingdom* (Matthew 25:34). Will ours be a full reward, or shall we be among those “saved yet so as by fire”? A saved soul, but a lost life and forfeited reward. (246)

In speaking of a “saved soul,” Lockyer is no doubt saying that those who forfeit their reward at the judgment seat of Christ are unprofitable slaves of the Lord who have been redeemed and born again. Thus, the condemnation he mentions is not that of eternal perdition but a rebuke with dispensational consequences.

Watchman Nee itemizes twelve reasons why the one who received one talent must be a saved person, even though he receives a rebuke and a punishment at the time of judgment. The slave was useless; however, says Nee, “useless does not mean false.”

He received judgment for his work, not for his believing or not believing. If he were not saved, how could the Lord judge his work? The Lord should then judge his contempt for the precious blood. If he could be counted as saved only after he gained an extra talent, then salvation would not be based on faith....If he were not a saved one, the Lord could not rebuke him concerning his unfaithfulness, or for not taking his talent to do the Lord’s business, or for not using his gift. The Lord cannot rebuke the unsaved ones for not preaching the gospel. The Lord prefers that they not preach. The deeper they bury their service, the better....Can the Lord ask the unsaved to be faithful? (*Matthew* 347-348)

To say that the useless slave is not a genuine believer leads to grave errors concerning the scriptural truth of salvation. According to the parable of the talents, the third slave is rebuked and punished by the Lord for his failure to use the gifts given to him for the Lord’s work. If this rebuke from the Lord is equivalent to the condemnation of perdition, which is the portion of the unbelievers, then salvation must be by works and perdition by the lack of them. This, however, is a serious heresy, for our eternal salvation is by grace through faith. The unique criterion for the judgment of the unbelievers at the great white throne after the millennium is whether or not their name is written in the Lamb’s book of life (Rev. 20:15). Not believing in the Lord is the unique sin that causes people to perish (John 16:9). The judgment in Matthew 25, however, is according to works. Therefore, all three of the slaves must be regenerated believers, and the outcome of their judgment is not eternal salvation but reward or punishment in the kingdom based on their work and service in this age. “Here we learn that none who are ἀχρηῖτος, useless to the Lord, can remain in his kingdom” (Lenski 986).

The slothful slave suffers a punishment of two natures. First, his talent, “even that which he has” (v. 29), will be taken away from him in the coming kingdom. Since he has proven himself to be an unprofitable steward of the riches of the Lord’s grace and gift by not gaining a profit in the church age, the gift will be taken from him in the coming kingdom age. Verse 30 speaks of the second aspect of his punishment. This verse says, “And cast out the useless slave into the outer darkness. In that place there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.” While the good and faithful slaves enter into the joy of the Lord in the coming millennial kingdom, the evil and slothful slave is “cast out” to be in another place. Concerning outer darkness, Watchman Nee says,

Someone may ask why he was cast into outer darkness. Is this not hell? If it means hell, the “darkness” should be changed to the “lake of fire,” which will come after the millennium, whereas this event takes place before the millennium....The New Testament never mentions that hell is the outer darkness. Hell has no darkness, but rather fire. (*Matthew* 348, 350)

Lockyer says simply, “The Bible does not reveal all that is implied by the term, ‘outer darkness,’ which seems to imply a ‘darkness outside some region of light’” (246). Clearly, outer darkness is not the joy of the Lord, the bright glory of Christ’s kingdom, and His glorious presence in His kingdom. Rather, those slothful believers, who do not use their God-given talent to gain a profitable result for Him during the course of their life in this age, will be excluded from the enjoyment of the Lord and the reigning with Him in the next age. To be thus excluded corresponds

to being appointed a portion with the hypocrites in 24:51 and being shut out from the wedding feast in 25:10.²

A Strong Incentive for Faithfulness in Service

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25 provides a strong incentive for our faithfulness to the Lord in our work and service to Him in this age. We must be positive, aggressive, and active to minister the unsearchable riches of Christ to God's chosen ones in order to gain a profitable result for the accomplishment of His great economy. To this end, God has granted to each believer both the spiritual gifts and the opportunities for service. God's possessions are those whom He chose, predestinated, and called. They include the sinful ones, backsliding ones, weak ones, new ones, and young ones. These are the capital He has given to us, His slaves, and He requires us to trade with this capital, according to the grace and the measure of the gift He has given us, to gain a profitable result, an increase, for Him according to His economy for the fulfillment of His purpose in man. We must not make the error of the one-talented slave in supposing that the Lord had given him too little and expected too much. We must not make excuses for ourselves. If we are weak, others are weaker and need our portion of Christ. Even if we feel we are the weakest ones, there are some who are near spiritual death, who need what the Lord has committed to us. We all need to learn to use our talent to multiply the Lord's possessions. The Lord has given each of us part of His possessions as a talent, and our burden, duty, and responsibility are to see that this talent is multiplied. Today we must take action to spend our talent by faith. If we are still hesitating, lingering, considering, and feeling that we are not qualified, we are wrong. Watchman Nee says,

We hope everyone who has "one talent" will dig out his talent from the earth. Everyone who has the "mina" should realize that the handkerchief is for wiping sweat, not for wrapping up his mina (Luke 19:20). We must learn to serve according to our ability. When everyone rises up to serve and no one passes his responsibility to someone else, we have the church. (*Further Talks* 135)

In a loving exhortation to the Lord's serving ones, Witness Lee concludes,

You must achieve something for the Lord. Never bury the grace that the Lord has given you or the gains that your training has brought you. When the Lord returns, you will be in trouble if the treasure within you is not dug out and the talents not utilized. I hope that from now on, you will spend all you have and will not hold back anything. If you have a talent, spend a talent. If you have two talents, spend two talents. Only then will the Lord have a way to go on. (*Present Practice* 17-18)

If, however, we are slothful and negligent in the use of our God-given talent, we will be unprofitable to Him, and at His coming we shall suffer a loss. "Even that which he has" will be taken from the indolent slave, and he will be cast into the outer darkness. This is the sure and true word of the Bible.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹Bible students have taken great pains to debate whether or not the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 is the same as the parable of the minas in Luke 19. As Lenski points out, the latter is spoken to the multitude as well as to the disciples and thus contains references to the unbelieving Jews in verse 14 and their perdition in verse 27. The greater part of the latter parable, however, relates to the faithfulness of the genuine New Testament believers, as does the entirety of the parable of the talents. In Matthew 25, the slaves are given a varying number of talents according to their individual ability. In Luke 19, each slave is given an equal amount, emphasizing the common portion given equally to each slave based on the common salvation. "However, the point of both parables is the same: the faithfulness of the slaves will determine their portion as their reward in the coming kingdom" (Recovery Version, Luke 19:13, note 1).

²Since a more complete definition of outer darkness is necessary for the proper understanding of the word of righteousness in the New Testament, it requires a more thorough expounding. Such an exposition must be reserved for a later time.

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