

The Parable of the Bags of Gold

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[0 : 00] Right behind, he was waiting, waiting for dinner. And sometimes, no doubt, I was waiting too. I was perhaps trying to finish an article downstairs in my study, and I was waiting too, and I was looking 28 minutes to go.

I hope I can finish this before the time comes when I have to go upstairs and carve the mutton. 26 minutes to go. We were both waiting. But for him, time was passing very slowly. And for me, it was passing far too quickly at the same time. Some people are waiting for the sun to go down and want it to slow down as they sit together hand in hand on the beach, watching the sun settle slowly in the west.

And others are waiting, waiting for the nausea to pass after the last chemo treatment. There's Job sitting on an ash pit, waiting to get through one more day, scraping his scabs with a piece of broken pottery.

It's all waiting. So the question is, how do Christians wait for Jesus? Now, in the parable that was read, sometimes called the parable of the talents, better call the parable of the bags of gold, we'll see.

[1 : 28] Matthew chapter 25, verses 14 and following. This is actually part of an extended argument of Jesus about how to wait for him. Matthew 24 and 25 deals with the end of the age, the coming of Jesus.

From 24 down to verse 36, what Jesus does is explain something of what takes place at the end. It's a complicated and tightly argued passage. And then from there on, the middle of chapter 24, all the way to the end of chapter 25, what Jesus does is give us five vignettes to tell us how to wait. How do you wait for Jesus? Because as we've just seen, waiting has different flavor. It feels different in different contexts, doesn't it? So how do you wait for Jesus? In chapter 24, verses 36 to 44, the point is this.

Wait for the Lord Jesus as those who do not wish to be surprised by the master's return. I repeat, wait for the Lord Jesus as those who do not wish to be surprised by the master's return.

So we read, but about that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the son, but only the father. Remember, as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the son of man.

[2 : 44] For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. And they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.

Notice this is not saying that at the end, everything will be just as wicked as it was in the days of Noah. That may be true, but it's not the point here. The point is that in the days of Noah before the flood, there was a certain amount of normalcy.

People were still going to weddings and funerals and having babies and buying houses and entering into commerce in the city and going off on a fishing trip and whatever else they had to do. And Jesus says that's the way it will be at the end.

A certain kind of normalcy that blinds them to the fact that the end is coming. The point is, wait for the Lord Jesus as those who do not wish to be surprised by the master's coming.

So a couple of additional vignettes. Verse 40, two men will be in the field. One will be taken and the other left. Whether this means taken away by God or taken away into judgment really makes very little difference.

[3 : 50] The point is that in the nature of first century farming, two men working in the field were likely father and son or two brothers or uncle and nephew.

Tight family connections. But when the end comes, it will be so sudden there will not be a chance to realign your life. One will be taken and the other not. Or two women.

And similarly, two women will be grinding with a hand mill, squatting before this mill, a stone flat on the ground. And on it, another stone with a hole in the middle into which you poured your seed.

And a stick sticking out one side of this upper stone. And one woman would pull that lever around 180 degrees. And the other one from the other side would reach over and pull around another 180 degrees.

Then the first one would pull around 180 degrees. And they kept that stone moving, grinding up the seed to turn it into flour. And in the nature of first century pragmatics, they would be mother and daughter or two sisters.

[4 : 46] And at the end, one is taken and the other is left. And then the stunning example. Keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

But understand this. If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready because the son of man will come in an hour when you do not expect him.

So wait for the Lord Jesus as those who do not wish to be surprised by the master's return. Number two. Wait for the Lord Jesus as stewards who must give an account of their service, faithful or otherwise.

It's not just a question of waiting passively for the event to take place. But understand you must give an account of what you have done with this time that the Lord has entrusted to you.

So he tells another parable in verses 45 and following regarding a faithful and wise servant versus a foolish servant. The foolish servant is given certain responsibilities.

[5 : 53] Apparently, this servant is head of the household and he exploits the other servants. He uses up the master's wealth. He is not acting responsibly. And as a result, when the master comes back after a long time, he holds this servant to account and destroys him.

Then number three. Sometimes called the parable of the five wise and the five foolish virgins. Wait for the Lord Jesus as those who know the master's coming may be long delayed. Wait for the Lord Jesus as those who know the master's coming may be long delayed. Now, it's helpful in understanding this well-known parable to recall marriage circumstances in village life and first century Palestine.

It was not uncommon for the groom to enter into some small family festivities at the bride's home first. That could go on for quite a few hours.

And then eventually there would be a parade through the streets, often in the evening, a torchlight parade back to the groom's house. And if the groom had a little more money, it could even be a walled house with a compound.

[7 : 01] And there the real official marriage took place. And if the groom were not all that well to do, it would last a day or so. If you were well to do, it could easily last a week.

In those days, it wasn't the bride's parents who paid for the wedding. It was the groom, which was also why they tended to be a little older in those days before they got married. He had to save up to pay for it.

And in fact, that's why the bride here isn't even mentioned in our wedding announcements and our descriptions today. The newspaper account goes on and on about the taffeta and the length of the dress and the veil and the bouquet and what the flower girls were wearing and so on, so on, so on.

And toward the end, it says the groom was also present. But in the ancient world, it was just the opposite. The things tended to focus on the groom and the bride was also present. Do you see? So the focus here now is on the groom.

And then the people who were not part of the immediate family would join in in this torchlight procession until they finally got to the groom's place. And if we're a fairly large wedding, maybe not everybody would know everybody.

[8 : 06] And there were sometimes party crashers, gate crashers who were trying to get in to have the free food and the free wine. And so people would be checked at the door and so forth.

And they would come in and the wedding would begin. And amongst those who are waiting are five wise and five foolish virgins. Some realize that these things can take a little longer than is predicted.

And so they carry extra oil for their oil torches. And when at midnight the cry goes up, here's the groom. They light their torches.

They fill the pouch with with oil afresh. And and now they're ready to join. And the foolish ones who have just brought enough for their lamps to keep going, they have no extra oil and their their lamps sputter out.

And and they realize that this will make them look like party crashers, gate crashers who are merely trying to join in without any preparation or any any sanction, any right to be there.

[9 : 07] So they have to rush off into town, knock somebody up to try to open up a shop and get some oil in the middle of the night. And by the time they come back, the gates are shut and they're excluded.

What's the point? It's a parable. What's the point? Wait for the Lord Jesus as those who know his coming might belong delayed.

Now, you could tease that out a long way. If his coming could belong delayed, that does not only indicate the need for perseverance, but for some strategic thinking, passing things on to another generation.

And being careful on the long haul. To build for eternity, not for the next six months. Do you see?

And then our parable. There's one more after this parable that we don't have time to look at.

The parable of the sheep and goats. But the parable of the bags of gold, as I've called it, is found in verses 14 to 30. Let me tell you what the lesson is and then we'll work it out.

[10 : 10] Wait for the Lord Jesus as slaves commissioned to improve their master's assets. Wait for the Lord Jesus as slaves commissioned to improve their master's assets.

So you see how in each case the notion of how you wait is being ratcheted up just a bit. Now it's not just beyond being ready. Or performing one's duty.

Or being prepared for a long delay. Now it's wait in such a way that you improve your master's assets. Now what I shall do is take a few moments to unpack the parable so its cultural illusions will be understood by all of us.

And then we'll think through what it means for us. Slaves in the ancient world had highly diverse amounts of freedom. In America, when slavery operated, blacks, all blacks, and only blacks were slaves.

And inevitably they became slaves because some ships had transported them from the west coast of Africa to North America. And inevitably they were the menials.

[11 : 20] The lowest strung. The lowest rung on the ladder of society. But in the ancient world, slavery wasn't like that.

Every major culture until the 18th century had slavery. But ancient Roman slavery was a bit different. There it was not associated with one race. There were Brits who were slaves and Brits who were free.

There were Romans who were slaves and Romans who were free. There were Africans who were slaves and Africans who were free. Sometimes they became slaves because of military triumphs of one sort or another. But sometimes it was because there were no bankruptcy laws.

You borrowed money from somebody to start a business. And then the economy went down. Your business went belly up. And so you sold yourself as a slave. That was your only option.

You sold yourself and perhaps your family as a slave. And some slaves were menials, of course.

And some were very harshly treated. But some were accountants and business people.

[12 : 17] So sometimes wealthy families would hire managers and accountants and skilled tradespeople to work on their own properties.

And occasionally, therefore, slaves were more educated than their masters. They brought the technical skills to the business. Do you see? It was a very different sort of world. But you have to remember that these are slaves.

That becomes very important. The NRSV, which was read earlier, has the word slaves in there.

That's right. Some versions here only have servants. The argument won't work if they're servants.

We'll see in a moment. What does Jesus say now?

Well, this master is going off for a long time. That brings to mind the previous lesson. Be aware that he could be long delayed. But now he actually gives his slaves something to do while he's gone.

He invests in them according to his assessment of their capacity. That's what the text says. Each according to his ability. The master gives them something according to his ability.

[13 : 21] This parable is often called the parable of the five talents because a lot of English versions describe what he gives out as talents. The original word is talenton. And it sounds a bit like talent.

So say, okay, it's the parable of the five talents. And then we start speaking of what talents you have to give to God. Well, I'm sure that's a good notion. But a talenton in the original is actually a unit of weight.

It's a unit of weight of silver or of gold. If it's silver, it's 6,000 denarii. That's a coin in the ancient world. One denarius was about one day's wage for a working person.

So 6,000 denarii is about 20 years of money for a day worker. What's that? 600,000 to 800,000 Australian dollars.

It's quite a lot of money. It's quite a lot of money. That's one talent. And if it's a talent of gold, then it's multiplying that I don't know how many times.

[14 : 20] It's millions of dollars. So this is not some measly investment, \$50 to go and play with the stock market. This is a vast sum which he is giving to these slaves of his.

Five bags of gold to one, two to another, and one to the third. Each according to the master's assessment of the ability of the slave. And then he goes away for a long trip.

We're told that immediately, at once, the first slave went and worked the money. That doesn't mean he put it on the stock market. There was no stock market. He entered into trade. He bought a fishing business or he bought a farm or he started a small packing company.

Whatever he did, maybe several of them. With that amount of money, he could have invested in quite a lot of companies. And gradually, with his sweat, with hiring people and working at things, the company grew. And then several companies grew.

And eventually, by the time the master returned, quite a long time later, he had ten bags of gold. And the master turns to him.

[15 : 24] And he says, well done, good and faithful slave. You have been faithful over a few things. A few things?

Wish I had a few things like that. Millions and millions. It shows how astonishingly rich this master is. He's been testing him with a few things.

Millions and millions and millions. Wonderful treasures. You've been faithful with these few things. I will make you ruler over many things. I will entrust many things to you.

Enter into your master's happiness. Do you hear how strange that is? Have you seen these little silly cartoon line drawings of what it's like in heaven?

Where you sit around in a puffy cloud and a white nightshirt and play a harp? Now, I like classical music and I don't even mind harps. But if I have to wear a white nightshirt and play a harp for all eternity, I'm not even sure I want to go.

[16 : 27] Do you see? That is really not a very accurate image of what heaven's like. In fact, the word that is sometimes rendered, harp, in our Bibles, is in the ancient Jewish world, an instrument that is connected with toe-stomping happiness.

So that when the Jews are getting carted off into exile, for example, they say, by the rivers of Babylon, there we hung up our harps. On the trees.

They hung up their harps. You don't hang up one of these modern big harps on a tree. It means they hung up their instrument of joy. What's an instrument of joy for you? Well, in the southern part of the United States, for example, it's a banjo.

It really is hard to be sad when a really good banjo player is going. You never hear a banjo at a funeral. You just never do. And so here's an image of heaven that is full of joy and happiness.

And here the image is twofold. One, increased responsibility. You spent the last years investing, working up, playing with these bags of gold, which you've now doubled.

[17 : 37] You've shown yourself to be trustworthy in a few small matters. Now, you ought to see the job I'm going to give you now. This is going to be a whopper. You are really going to have some big responsibilities. But in the new heaven and the new earth, the ability, the strength, the stamina, the pleasure, the God-centeredness, the joy to do it.

And not only so, but in the ancient world, when the master came home, the slaves were supposed to scutter around and make sure they kept their master happy. What he says is, come and share your master's happiness.

Oh, slaves. Yes, he's bought them all right. In fact, outside the narrative world, Christ has bought them with his own blood. He's paid for them all right. He's secured them. But now he says, come and share your master's happiness.

The happiness of being forever in the presence of the great God in his holiness and delight and beneficence under his smile and his reign in the perfect kingdom of resurrection existence in the new heavens and the new earth.

Come and share that. Come and share that. And then he turns to the second slave and the second slave has invested his two bags of gold and double that amount, too.

[18 : 50] And to him, the master says exactly the same thing. And then the third slave comes. And the third slave says, master. I knew that you are a hard man.

Harvesting where you have not sown, gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you. Now, if you are thinking not slave, but worker connected with a trade union, perhaps you can actually have a certain amount of sympathy for this character.

After all, doesn't a worker have the right to withdraw services if he wants to? If he thinks the terms are unfair. And you can hear what he's thinking.

If this slave is unsuccessful, supposing he invests in something and starts working hard, but it's bound up with agriculture. And there are a couple of years of drought and the investment is wiped out.

He'll have nothing to show his master and he'll be blamed for it. Suppose instead he invests in something and the return is spectacular. Supposing like the others, he doubles the income. Does he get to keep any of it?

[20 : 04] No, he's a slave. It all goes back to the master. Where's the justice in that? So you see, if you are thinking of a trade union worker today who can withdraw services if he wants and and is expected to benefit in some fair way from the produce, the productivity, the income generated by the business, then you can say that this chap has a point.

But what you have to remember is. He's a slave. And slaves don't respond to their masters that way.

Not unless they want to be chastised, punished, even killed. And if you say, does this mean Jesus is justifying slavery? No, of course not.

He's no more justifying slavery than earlier on when he compared his coming to a thief. He was justifying theft. He was using something of the social dynamics and happenings of the day to illustrate a point.

And the point is, from the Bible's perspective, you and I are either slaves to sin or slaves to God. One of the two. We're slaves to ourself.

[21 : 23] Or we're slaves to God. And if we are slaves to God, if we have been blood bought. In fact, Paul elsewhere says you are not your own. You've been bought with a price. That's slavery language.

Do you see? If you really are a slave to God, you enter into perfect freedom in him precisely by coming under his lordship, delighting in his salvation and doing what he says.

So this slave has no right to withdraw his services. That's not what you do if you're a slave. If you do that, you are asking to be punished. It is not being faithful. This is not trade union rules.

And so the master argues with him on his own terms, supposing, in fact, this master is a bit harsh. What should have been inferred?

His master replies, you wicked, lazy slave. So let's take your own argument. You knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed. Well, then you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers.

[22 : 25] And then at least I would have collected interest. In other words, what this chap did with it, digging a hole in the ground and burying it, showed that he had no concern for his master at all.

No submission to him. It was flat out rebellion. The only thing he could have done that was worse would have been just to steal it and waste it all. But he was not at all concerned for his master's interests.

He was not at all concerned to improve his master's assets. Even at the most fundamental level, even if his own argument was right, he should have at least invested it. He did nothing.

Take a bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. And ask for this wicked servant. Throw him outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Now, what are we to make of this parable for us? Well, the obvious lesson.

[23 : 28] Our task, while we wait for Jesus, is to improve our master's assets, not our own. It's to improve our master's assets, not our own.

This is a colorful, narrational way, a story way, of saying something that Jesus says elsewhere about laying up for yourself treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not corrode, where thieves do not dig through and steal.

Instead of investing everything in this life, when you die from this life, if Christ has not come back first, you will take out exactly what I take out.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. But if we are Christ's people, living with eternity's values and view, then our concern even in this life, though it is part of our responsibilities, no doubt, to look after our families and so forth, yet more broadly, more comprehensively than that, we are concerned to please our master, our self-sacrificing master who bought us at the cost of his own blood to improve his assets.

For we are not our own. We've been bought with a price. We are his. We are his slaves. And delight to be his slaves. For the alternative is to be enslaved to ourself and to our sin.

[25 : 02] To be enslaved to this world. To be enslaved to that which passes away. If we are enslaved to him, then we are thinking in terms of eternity. And we are concerned then to improve our master's assets.

The second thing to observe is that this is not telling us how to become a Christian. This is not saying if you want to become a Christian, make sure you try to improve God's assets.

This is not saying if you want to become a Christian, make sure you do enough good deeds that somehow God will save you on the last day. Well done, good and faithful slave. That's not the point at all. The point, rather, is that genuine Christians, genuine Christians will be concerned to improve their master's assets.

This is not saying how you become a Christian. But if you really are one of Christ's slaves, if this is who you are, this is your identity, this is how you see yourself, then you will be concerned to improve your master's assets.

It's another way of saying what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. By their fruit, you will know them. It's not that the fruit makes you a Christian, but that if you are a Christian, it does so change your life that there will be some fruit somewhere.

[26 : 14] People will have different amounts of fruit. They will have different amounts of asset management. God will entrust different gifts to different believers. No doubt. But there will be such a change that people will be observably different.

Their lives will be heading in a different direction. What they do with their time and their energy, their money, their imagination, their loves, their relationships, their family will all be different. Because by God's grace, they have become Christians.

They have known sins forgiven. They receive the gift of the spirit to transform them. Their hearts are toward heaven. And they want to be like Christ. They want to see his assets improve.

If you want to unpack this, you really need to read through Matthew's gospel to see what it is that our lives ought to be in Matthew's gospel if we are Christ's. And amongst the things you then discover is the training mission account in Matthew chapter 10, where Jesus disciples learn how to bear witness to Christ.

That's the way the gospel ends up with the Great Commission. We are told to make disciples of all nations. So part of what we do to push back the frontiers of the kingdom and improve the master's assets is to bear witness to him.

[27 : 25] The gospel itself sees people converted as Christ's power works through them. And the master's assets are improved because he has given us all we need to discharge these responsibilities.

We who are the blood-bought slaves of Christ Jesus. Brothers and sisters in Christ, our task while we wait is to improve the master's assets.

This is a spectacular privilege. It is not undertaken with resentment or malice. That belongs to the one who wants to resent the master so much he refuses to do anything for him.

This is viewed by Christ's followers as immaculate privilege so that we go at once and start investing whatever it is the master has put into our hands for his glory and his people's good. Let us pray. Let us pray.

[28 : 56] What a spectacular privilege to serve so great a master. So help us, Lord God, at every stage of our life to hunger with our whole being in word and thought and deed.

And the priorities we set in the use of all that you have given us to improve the master's assets. Let us pray.

Let us pray. Grant that our whole desire at the end of the age, when Christ does return, may be to hear him say, Well done, good and faithful slave.

You have been faithful with a few things. Now I will give you many things to do. Come. Enter your master's happiness.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.