

ETERNAL PRIORITIES

SERIES: THE LORD OF HISTORY

by Steve Zeisler

This is the fourth and final message in a series of studies in the Olivet Discourse, Matthew 24-25, which begins when Jesus' disciples ask him about the future. He speaks to their questions and then to realities that are far beyond what they ask.

By way of review, there are two themes that we've discovered in this discourse. One is a warning the Lord issues to not give way to the voices of bogus emergency proclaiming that a portent or a sign in the heavens or an event on the earth is apocalyptic in its meaning. Jesus warns three times against listening to such voices, either in the church age or during the great tribulation. Matthew 24:5 says, "For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many." Verse 11 says, "...Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people." Verse 24 says, "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect-if that were possible." We shouldn't quake with fear, we shouldn't be railroaded into reactions that are inappropriate, we shouldn't believe voices that make claims that are untrue, and we shouldn't imagine significance that doesn't exist.

The other theme that we found throughout this discourse, and it's one that we're going to take up further in this message, is essentially the opposite problem: believing that nothing will ever change, that things will go on exactly as they are, that no accounting will be made for human lives at Jesus' second coming. This is the voice that tells us that nothing really matters, that you can always get around to the things of God later.

That is a very dangerous notion also, and it's one that Jesus talks about in his parables, which begin at the end of chapter 24 and continue throughout chapter 25.

Embedded in all these stories is Jesus' urging watchfulness upon us: Be alert, on track, concerned; maintain priorities. He is not telling us to be watchful as someone with a crystal ball who can predict the coming things and arrange our life to be right on time with events as they proceed out of the future. He denies that it's possible to do that. We don't know when our Master will return, when the accounting will be made. Our watchfulness is to be that of a servant who has an assignment, who has the possibility of influencing the world in our lifetime, who has truth to dispense, reality to live, and joy to declare. That's the point of these stories.

Leadership that remains faithful

Let's read the first one. Matthew 24:45-51:

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. 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 and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

(The reference to cutting the servant in pieces probably means scourging him.)

The first of these stories speaks of a servant who is in charge of other servants. He is supposed to make sure that they are fed on time and are given everything they need.

Being fed the things of God is a familiar theme throughout the Old and New Testaments. The word of God is often

referred to as a meal. The good shepherd will lead his sheep to green pastures where they can feed on the truth of God. We find the meal of Scripture is delineated sometimes as milk for the young in the faith or as meat for those mature in the faith. Feeding people of God the truth of God is the responsibility of pastors, elders, and Bible study teachers. Parents are responsible to provide the children in their charge with the healthy, nourishing meals of truth that they need.

Some will carry out their responsibilities faithfully. But I've been a pastor long enough to know the ease with which temptations occur to serve oneself rather than the people in one's charge, to grow self-indulgent, to use the standing of Christian leadership to feather one's own nest. There are far too many examples everywhere in the world that all of us can quickly point to of this kind of self-indulgence and superficiality and self-service. Jesus says that those who have leadership need to be faithful and wise. Serving in ministry as a good steward of the things of God brings honor to the Savior we love. And knowing that some day he is going to come and review the life we've lived keeps us focused on proper priorities.

A reservoir for God's presence

The second of these stories is about a wedding. Matthew 25:1-13:

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'

"Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'

"'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'

"But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

"Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!'

"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

The imagery here again is familiar from other passages in Scripture: light-bearers, lamps, oil. Oil signifies the presence of the Holy Spirit.

I misunderstood this story for a long time. I used to think of these young girls as having oil lamps in the same way that kids take flashlights to camp. I imagined that these girls would not be able to find their way to the banquet if they didn't have a lamp. But the story actually says something very different. These girls are already at the banqueting place, which is most likely the home of the bride. They are probably her friends. Their responsibility when the groom comes to the town, perhaps having traveled from a distance, is to go outside and hold lights up along the way so that the light shines on the groom and makes his beauty visible, so that the joy on his face and the spring in his step are apparent to all as he approaches the home of his bride and the banquet that's to take place. When other people see him they will rejoice with him. This description of girls holding up lamps so that the groom is given honor and praise is really a picture of worship. It's the community of the Lord's people making his name great, making his face attractive, making his person obvious.

In the first story anyone can tell who is wicked and who is faithful and wise. We don't require the master to come back in order to know that. In this story it's not as easy to tell the difference between the wise and the foolish girls. They all have the same assignment. They all fall asleep. They all get awakened at the same time. They all rush out to meet the bridegroom. It's then that we discover a difference between them. Only five of them have enough oil to last through the night.

Our Lord is talking symbolically about the difference between people who worship with shallow emotion or intellectual reserve and those whose hearts form a generous reservoir for the presence of the Lord. These ones enjoy a spirit-guided

passion to know God and be changed by him in ways that may not be visible, but are deep and genuine.

The foolish girls represent worshipers who look similar on the outside. In church they sing songs as energetically as the others. When powerful sermons are preached they listen with rapt attention just like the others. They weep at a touching testimony. But they've never really let anything change on the inside. They've never let God carve out a space for himself down deep; they don't have a reservoir of oil. So when the long night passes and things change and they're required at the end to make the Lord beautiful in their worship, to be able to stand and welcome him, to shine a light on him, they don't have anything to offer.

Last Wednesday morning I was on my way to our men's Bible study, the Road Crew. I saw Roy Bradford walking as fast as he could, but with an obvious limp. He lives only a few blocks away and he usually walks to church. So I picked Roy up and drove him the rest of the way to the church. I knew that the previous Sunday he had been in a car accident. He told me the account of his car being totaled and his night spent in the hospital. I looked at him and realized that one of the lenses of his glasses still had six or eight jagged cracks.

It struck me that even though Roy had excuses not to be, he was on his way to give a blessing to a group of men who look up to him. Roy is one of the patriarchs of our group. He prays for us and encourages us. I don't think a day goes by when someone doesn't ask him for a word of encouragement. He is not currently an elder, but he was for many years in this church. He and Maxine have a special place in the hearts of hundreds in this congregation. Roy has a reservoir of oil that will last him till the last day of his life and will be a blessing into eternity.

Investing the gifts of God

The third story tells of a man who gives his servant money to invest. We won't read all this, so let me summarize it. There are three servants who are each given a different amount of money, a number of talents. A talent is quite a large amount of money. The master leaves and says, "Make use of this money in my absence." Then he returns, and he gives the first two the same commendations, this word of approval (verses 21, 23):

"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

But the third servant refuses to invest the money he is given. He wraps it in a napkin, buries it in the ground, and when the master comes back, gives him intact all the money that he was given to start with. When the master questions his behavior, he answers (Matthew 25:24-25):

"'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'"

What distinguished the first two men in this story is their awareness that their master was generous. Their master came to them with open arms after he returned and said, "Come and share your master's happiness! I want to give you not only what you have, but more." These men knew instinctively that the one they served wanted them to give away, to invest, to grow, to share abroad, to see more wealth gained where some had been before. They knew that the character of their master was one of outreach and optimism and adventure, that they would serve him best by taking what they had been given and seeing it grow as it touched the lives of other people.

Everything turns on what you believe about God. Is God unfair and negative? Does he make unreasonable demands? Does he give us awful burdens to bear, refuse to help us bear them, and then judge us when we fail? Does he look for ways to conclude terrible things about us? Does he see us only in the worst possible light? Should we fear failing because the moment we step over a line calamity will strike, because our God himself is so harsh and unyielding and loveless? That's what the servant said: "I knew you were that kind of man, so I was afraid and I wanted to give you back intact, without any loss, what you gave me to invest." And of course, he lost everything because he slandered his master's good name.

God has consistently made known his love for us. He loves us enough to tell us the truth about our failings and then to

pay the price for them, to die in our place. He loves us enough to walk beside us every step of the way. When we say to him, "I knew you were harsh and unreasonable and loveless," we are uttering blasphemy.

The lesson of this third story is to recognize that we have a chance to give away the things he has given us, to see others benefit, to see life grow fuller in every place rather than to be fearful and negative and restricted, assuming the worst about God.

These three stories have similarities, of course. They all use language we find elsewhere in the New Testament: the language of treasure, light, oil, food, servants. Another way in which they are alike is this: Nothing happens when the bridegroom comes or the master returns that wasn't already true. There is no dramatic new occurrence. What has been true all along gets revealed. Every individual in these stories becomes the kind of person they are by the choices they made over a long period of time. The faithful make choices to believe and watch and stay alert, to have a stewardship that they take seriously, to care about the things their master cares about, day in and day out. Over a lifetime everyone becomes either a wise or a foolish virgin, either a faithful and wise servant or a wicked one, an outgoing servant and investor and enthusiast for the things of God, or a huddled and frightened and negative servant.

Every one of these stories ends with a very hard warning. The door is shut and the bridegroom says, "I don't know you." Servants are cast out into a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. These stories are frightening and severe on one level. But they exist here in Jesus' teaching to issue an important warning: We cannot forever put off responsiveness to the things he has given us to do. We cannot imagine that there will never be an accounting, that there will never come a time when our life will have been made something by our choices. We may think, "There's always a time farther on where my passion for Christ can dig a reservoir on the inside," or, "There's a time later on when I can use the gifts that he's given me," or, "There's a time farther downstream when I can pay attention." The real warning here is that we're becoming the kind of person who can't pay attention if we go on forever stiff-arming the truth. And then the day will come when the accounting needs to be made.

"Those who have ears to hear should hear." That is always the responsibility we have. If it matters to us that we be good stewards, that we learn to worship, hear, or serve, then the time to respond is now.

Perhaps you are not a Christian. Yes, you give God high approval ratings, and if we were taking a poll, you would vote for God in the next election. But Jesus' penetrating question is "Do you truly love me?" (John 21:16) Lifeless familiarity with the gospel is not the same as belief in the gospel.

These are hard stories because there is a need to sound an alarm. Are you a wise and faithful servant or something less?

"You did it for me"

The last story, in verses 31-46, is different from the others. Matthew 25:31-32:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."

Jesus describes one group that will join him in eternity, and another that will be withdrawn from him in eternity. He turns to the first group, the sheep at his right hand, and he tells them marvelous things about themselves. He commends them and thanks them (verses 35-36):

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

And the people on his right hand, the good stewards, the wise virgins, the faithful and wise servants, the people who in the earlier stories encouraged us by their lives, are surprised to hear Jesus say, "You fed and visited and clothed me." They ask, "When did we do these things, Lord?" And his answer is (verse 40),

"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Jesus is talking about visiting real people in real prisons with bars on them, real strangers who have nowhere to go who get to eat or stay in the shelter of your home, people who have no place to go for even warm clothing in the winter, for whom you provide.

But every one of these words is also a metaphor that Jesus and others use to talk about our life in God's presence. There are those who are hungry for the bread that comes down from heaven (John 6:50, 58), Christ himself. There are those who are thirsty for the reality of God's presence, those who are strangers who are welcomed into the community of the Savior, those who are naked and in filthy rags who are clothed with the righteousness of Christ, those who are sick at heart who are cared about and ministered to and healed, those who are in prisons of sin who have the bars broken asunder for them, who are visited and then led out of their prisons. And his answer is, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

We don't need to wait for his return to bless him. He is present everywhere there is heartsickness, loneliness, sorrow, and hopelessness. It isn't just when he comes in the clouds that we'll see him. We see him in the lives of people who are captured by his love. He's not just at the end of the road, but here in the present.

Last week a group of us heard the story of a man named Nick Palermo, who works with Young Life in San Jose in a ministry called the Capernaum Project, which targets high-school kids who have significant physical disabilities.

Nick told the story about the first time he got involved in this ministry. He was taking kids in wheelchairs to camp. It was a logistic nightmare trying to get them in and out of bathrooms and Burger Kings on the way to camp. It was a long trip. Late at night they finally got into their cabins. At 2:00 A.M. he had finally gotten the last kid in bed. He climbed up into the top bunk, and the kid in the lower bunk said, "Nick, will you come turn me over?" He said he was exhausted, mad at God, and frustrated with the kids. He climbed down the ladder and turned the kid over. And then as he was climbing back up, there was a window with moonlight coming through. He raised his eyes and started to look up at the moon, and he heard a voice say, "Nick, you did it for me." And he started crying. The Lord commended him for turning over a kid who couldn't turn himself over and said, "That was me."

That's why it's worth taking up the stewardship, caring about the things that our Lord cares about, investing ourselves where he would, going deep in our worship so that there's a reservoir of oil that will last till the very end, paying attention to the word of God, studying it and teaching it and offering it to people, seeing their lives changed by it. It's worth paying attention to all the things that he cares about rather than postponing them, ignoring them, or getting distracted. A great moment is coming when you will hear the Lord tell you what you did for him. He'll recall what has been forgotten, sort out the beauty in your mixed motives, expand on efforts you see as inadequate. That day will eclipse every doubt and struggle in this life. He will say it was worth everything. "You did it for me."

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