

# “Inevitable—Parables of Return”

*Luke 12:35–40; Matthew 25:1–13; Matthew 25:14–30*

## **The true story**

**As Jesus’ hour draws closer and closer, he begins to tell parables of a return with one over-arching question. No timetable. Just a question. Will Jesus’ disciples be ready?**

Having set his face toward Jerusalem, Jesus talks with his disciples about his return, principally by telling them parables, these short stories that illustrate Jesus’ teachings and, sometimes, cloak them in mystery. Today’s parables bring to mind two periods in my life. First, I am an Eagle Scout. In Scouting, I learned the Scout motto: “Be Prepared.” Good instruction for life and I think it was drilled into me enough that some of it stuck. “Be Prepared” – that could be title of the parable from Matthew about the ten bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13).

I also worked for a brief while as a lifeguard (oh to be young, slim, and fit again!). Most of the job is being a nanny – stop running, no fighting, and so on. But you always knew that you were to stay alert, constantly scanning for someone in trouble in the water. “Stay Alert” – that could be the subtitle of the passage from Luke (12:35-40), at the end of which Jesus says, “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

Be Prepared. Stay Alert. Keep Watch . . . We are ready to put these teachings to work in our lives and careers. In fact, given the predominance of type-A folks on our congregation, I’d bet staying prepared and alert are second nature for most of us, lessons applied countless times over the years. But how about in our faith, in our discipleship, in our life with Christ? Be prepared and stay alert? For what? What are we preparing for? What are we waiting for?

Simple: the return of our Lord. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:22, *maranatha*, Come Lord! The Aramaic phrase Paul uses is a simple prayer for the return of Jesus, for him to come a second time, at which time God’s kingdom on earth will come to its full consummation.

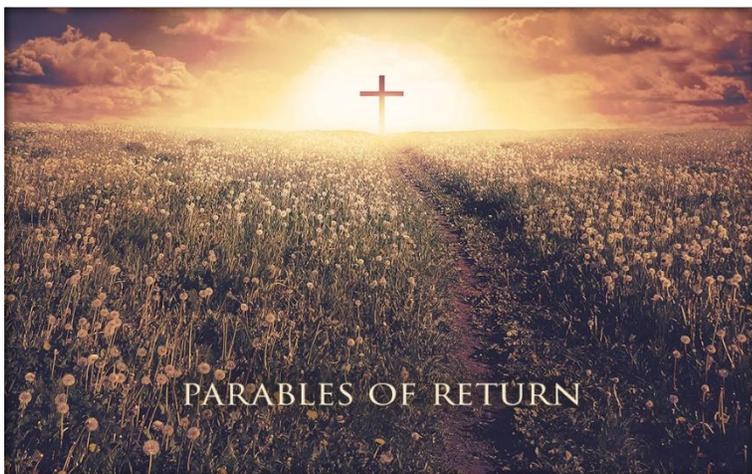
For two millennia, Christians have proclaimed that Jesus would return bringing God’s redemptive work to all its fullness. And for two thousand years we’ve waited . . . and waited . . . waited. Thus, it isn’t surprising that some Christians have never given the whole thing much thought. Yes, we affirm that Jesus is returning and could at any moment, but do we live that way? For many of us, it just doesn’t seem very real and has no bearing on our life as a disciple.

Granted, there are some parts of the Christian family that seem consumed with Jesus’ second coming, trying mightily to figure out when and even where. William Miller led Christians to upstate New York, having convinced them that Jesus would return there in 1842. He did not. Then, Miller did some refiguring and they headed back to the caves and fields on October 22, 1844, to await Jesus’ arrival. But they waited in vain. The experience became known as “The Great Disappointment.” The Seventh-Day Adventist denomination, with 18 million members, is a legacy of Miller’s movement. Sadly, Miller and many others have failed to heed Paul’s teaching in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 that Jesus would return like a thief in the night, which echoes Jesus’ own teaching.

If neither ignoring the promise of Jesus’ return or obsessing over it is the way to go, then what do we do? These are the things we’ll talk about in this series. And we begin with the parable from bridesmaids/virgins parable from Matthew: Be Prepared.

## **Be Prepared**

Jesus tells the parable of the ten bridesmaids in the middle of a long teaching section just before he begins his final journey toward the cross. Jesus has many things to say to his disciples, including his promised return and what he expects of his disciples in the interim. He tells them a story about faithful and unfaithful servants (24:45-51) and then relates the parable of the bridesmaids. It is a straightforward tale. There are ten bridesmaids in all. They are told to wait for the bridegroom. All ten have lamps for the evening but only five have oil also. They all fall asleep (no staying alert



here). When the groom gets there, all ten rise and grab their lamps but, alas, the five foolish girls have no oil to light their lamps. They have been caught unprepared. Eugene Boring fills in some of the pieces:

Right at the beginning of the parable of the ten bridesmaids, Jesus tells us that five of them were foolish, and five were wise. The reason why he tells us this from the outset is that we cannot tell this just by looking at them. All ten have come to the wedding; all ten have their lamps aglow with expectation; all ten, presumably, have on their bridesmaid gowns. We would never guess from appearances that half are wise and half foolish.

No, it is not the looks, the lamps, or the long dresses that sets the wise apart from the foolish—it's the readiness. Five of the bridesmaids are ready for the groom to be delayed, but the other five are not. The wise have enough oil for the wedding to start whenever the groom arrives; the foolish have only enough oil for their own timetable. Five are prepared and ready, even for a delay; five are not.

Readiness in Matthew is, of course, living the life of the kingdom, living the quality of life described in the Sermon on the Mount. Many can do this for a short while; but when the kingdom is delayed, the problems arise. Being a peacemaker for a day is not as demanding as being a peacemaker year after year when the hostility breaks out again and again, and the bridegroom is delayed. Being merciful for an evening can be pleasant; being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Boring is spot on. One could sum up the Christian life in this way: learn to distinguish wisdom from foolishness and then live it! And, thus, it sums up what it means to be prepared for Jesus' return. Simply do as God has taught us, for God is Wisdom – love him and love others more every day, in all that we do and all that we say. This is what it means to Be Prepared. If we are growing in our discipleship every day, then every day we are becoming more prepared.

### **Stay Alert**

Though the topic is the same, Jesus puts a different emphasis in the brief parable of Luke 12:35-40. Here too, the setting is a wedding feast. And the servants are to keep their lamps lit and stay ready to serve. No sleeping here. These folks are not only to be prepared; they are to stay alert. They don't want to be caught unaware. For as Jesus says, "the Son of Man is coming at a time when you don't expect him."<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, one of the most striking moments in Jesus' brief parable is when the bridegroom, finding the servants ready and waiting, reverses roles and proceeds to serve them. I guess it shouldn't surprise us, given that Jesus came "not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). But still, it takes one's breath away.

Alan Culpepper provides some helpful background on this parable. (The "*parousia*" Culpepper refers to is Jesus' second coming. The word is Greek and refers to an arrival or an official visit by an emperor or such).

Verses 35–40 contain at least the rudiments of two parables: (1) servants awaiting the bridegroom and (2) the householder. The first assures blessing on the faithful; the second warns of judgment on the unprepared. To gird one's loins (which the NRSV translates as "Be dressed for action" and Fitzmyer renders "Keep your aprons on") means literally to draw up the long outer garment and tuck it into the sash around one's waist or hips so as to be prepared for vigorous activity. As an exhortation to readiness it appears prominently in the instructions for the celebration of the first Passover (Exod 12:11; cf. 1 Pet 1:13). The lamps in the tabernacle were to be lit with pure oil so that they would burn steadily (Exod 27:20; Lev 24:2). The exhortation to keep your lamps burning and be ready for the master echoes the parable of the wise and foolish maidens in Matt 25:13, but the theme of readiness for the returning master also occurs in Mark 13:33–37. The situation assumed in v. 36 is that the master of the house has gone to his bride's home to be married. His servants await his return so that they may open the door for him when he knocks (see Rev 3:20), but they do not know when he will come. . . .

The second parable (v. 39) warns of the alternative. For some the master's coming will be like the approach of a thief in the night (see Mark 3:27; Gospel of Thomas 21). This image occurs elsewhere in the NT in reference to the expectation of the *parousia* (Matt 24:43–44; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15). The apocalyptic imagery appropriately yields to a reference to Jesus as the coming Son of Man. Jesus warns his audience, therefore, to be ready. From instructions in earlier contexts, the reader may assume that readiness means trust

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<sup>1</sup> Boring, M. E. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Matthew. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 8, p. 451). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, it always has seemed to me that the more world events make you think Jesus is coming, the less likely it is that he actually will. . . . just a thought!

in God as a heavenly Father, putting away all hypocrisy, handling one's material possessions faithfully, obeying the ethic of the kingdom, and making life a matter of constant prayer.<sup>3</sup>

### ***And in the meantime?***

Understanding the context of any passage is always important. The final return parable above (Matthew 25:14-30), often called the parable of the talents, is in the middle of what is sometimes called Jesus' Mount of Olives discourse, spanning Matthew 24-25. It is the last week of Jesus' life and he goes to the Mount of Olives, to the east of the temple mount, where he looks down upon the temple and Jerusalem with deep sadness. He looks ahead to the tragedy that will soon befall the Jews if they do not abandon their misguided way of being God's people. Jesus' words carry stark warnings and set forth his expectations of his disciples after Jesus' departure. Today's parable precedes the somberly drawn parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46).

### ***Use it or lose it?***

Before embarking on a long journey, a very rich man calls in three slaves and offers each of them a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Each will be given the opportunity to manage a portion of the master's wealth. Now, the master is no fool. He knows that the slaves vary in their abilities, as we all do. So the master entrusts varying sums to each of them. The most able slave is entrusted with the most money, the least able is entrusted with much less.

Try to put yourself in the place of the slaves. First, these *are* slaves. You will sometimes find this rendered as "servants" in modern translations and paraphrases. However, in the Greek, it is "slave" and the word highlights that these men have no choice but to take on the responsibilities given them. Second, each slave is entrusted with more money than he could imagine. The master doesn't ask them whether they want to be entrusted with this wealth; he simply places the treasure in their hands. The only question is how each will respond.

Two of the slaves step up to the challenge, go to work, and make the most of what the master entrusted to them. They give it their best. In fact, they each double the master's money. They are the sort of trustees you and I would want to manage our money.

However, the third slave buries the treasure in the ground. He doesn't use it at all. Seeing only risk in the treasure, the third slave cowers fearfully in the face of his new responsibilities. He isn't really interested in serving the master, but only in his own security. So when the master returns, the third slave has nothing more to give than what the master entrusted to him in the first place. He imagines himself to be prudent when he is really squandering a master-given opportunity.

Not surprisingly, the master entrusts the first two slaves with even more money. But the third slave, the one who thought he was avoiding risk by preserving the treasure rather than using it, is stripped of everything and cast out into the darkness. The master expects that those to whom he entrusts his treasure will use it to create more treasure; either they will use it or they will lose it.

### ***Which slave are we?***

Luke also includes this parable in his gospel, but in Luke's version (19:11-27), each slave is entrusted with much less money, nothing like the vast wealth in Matthew's version. Surely, Matthew wants us to grasp the immensity of the gifts that God has given each of us, gifts that begin with the life of his own son. Nothing we might ever do approaches the generosity of God. He *is* the Lord of the Gift, as John Ortberg has put it.

The Lord of the Gift has given immeasurable gifts to us all. Like the three slaves, we vary in the nature and even the amount of the gifts. But, regardless of the size or variety of the gift that God has entrusted to us, the question is what we'll do with it. Will we acknowledge that all we have is a gift from God, or will we insist on calling it "mine"? Will we step forward in faith, taking what seems to be risks so that the gifts entrusted to us do all the good that can be done? The slaves held the master's wealth in trust. We hold God's wealth in trust. Len Sweet and Harry Wendt put all this business about being trustees rather bluntly:

"When we place our so-called 'gift' on the offering plate, we are not giving God anything . . . We are merely getting our grubby little hands off what has always belonged to God. In short, we are not called to practice Christian giving, but Christian management and distribution [of God's creation], and this applies not merely to

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<sup>3</sup> Culpepper, R. A. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Luke. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 9, pp. 262–263). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

what we 'give' on Sundays, but to our total use of life as we manage this planet to the glory of God and for the good of all."

The question to each of us is pointed. Am I a faithful slave of God? Do I make productive use of all that God has entrusted to me? Do I respond out of love for my Master and a desire to serve? If so, then perhaps when it comes to the money entrusted to me, God calls me to boldness.

Granted, in a dangerous world it is tempting to focus on preserving and protecting what "we have" or what "we've built." But God calls us to press ever forward, using well and investing well all the gifts that he has entrusted to us. It is revealing that when the first community of believers was threatened, they didn't pray for God's protection, they prayed that they would stay bold in the face of danger (Acts 4). So it is with our time, talents, and, yes, our money. We too are to pray for boldness and courage as we pursue God's vision for our lives and for God's church.

### ***A good beginning and a good end***

Even those who may know little else about the Bible are familiar with its opening: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, . . ." Most also know that God pronounced it good: "And God saw that the light was good;..." God created all that is -- all matter, all energy -- and, not surprisingly, it is a good creation. The final chapters of Revelation are a vision of Jesus' return and God's restoration of his creation. When Revelation ends, the cosmic warp and distortion of sin has been washed away; creation again is as God created it to be. That is why we fervently await the return of our Lord.

Yet, despite this, we humans seem to be drawn to the idea that the physical world is somehow inferior to the spiritual or, as some might say, "it is our souls that really matter, our bodies are just smelly, easy-to-break vessels for our souls." But this is not the Christian view.

Why does this matter? It matters for more reasons than I could touch on here, but let's look at one. Embracing the goodness and the inherent value of God's creation helps us to understand and to accomplish the work God has given us. This world is not a place to be escaped from or even tolerated as we await our trip to heaven. Yes, the world is in much need of renewal and restoration. There is often little evidence of God's kingdom. But our charge is to do all we can to make God's kingdom evident to all. We can't build the kingdom, that is God's work, but we can build for the kingdom. Every kind touch, every mouth we feed and body we clothe, every act of selfless giving, every word of truth, every work of beauty we create, all compassion, all sacrifice -- none of it will be lost, all of it will be incorporated into God's renewal of creation, a restoration of the physical *and* the spiritual.

But we should never forget that at "The End," stands not an event or even a place, as wonderfully as that place might be depicted. Standing there is a person, the Lamb, Jesus the Christ. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the substance of our hopes and the embodiment of God's promises. However wonderful I might imagine eternity with Christ to be, I am imagining in black-and-white, compared to the wonders of God's colors.

As hope-crushing as our present sufferings may be, the light of Christ, a light that shines with the brilliance of a thousand suns, beckons us and those we love to join him, now and forever. . . . *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*