

## IN THE MEAN TIME

Chapter Ten. Matthew 24:45-51

by Ray C. Stedman

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In a small country store in a southern state a Negro lady came to do her shopping. Two or three young Negro men were standing around passing the time of day, and knowing that she was a Christian, they began to taunt her. "We hear you're expecting Jesus to come back," they said.

"I sure am," she replied brightly.

"Do you really believe he's coming?" they asked.

"Sure as you're born," she answered.

They said, "Well you'd better hurry home and get ready, he might be on the way!"

She turned and fixed her tormentors with a look. "I don't have to get ready," she said, "I keep ready!"

That is exactly the attitude the Lord meant to engender when he said to his disciples, "Watch!" He does not mean, "Keep staring at the sky." He means "Keep ready at all times." Now to make it perfectly clear what that would involve he goes on to give them three parables, each of which is an exposition of that one word, "Watch!" The first is the parable of the household which tells us that watching means a mutual concern and ministry of the Word to one another. The second is the parable of the ten maidens which makes clear that watching means a dependence on deeper things than mere human resources. And the third is the parable of the talents where we learn that watching means a deliberate investment of life.

### Three Illustrative Parables

It is evident that the Lord now finished, for the most part, the predictive part of his discourse. Except for a few details concerning the final scene of the nations, there are no new events described in the rest of his message. But it is extremely important that we understand these parables, for if we do not understand them we will not watch in the way he expects. And if we do not watch we will be deceived and miss much, if not all, of the exciting possibilities of the present hour. So let us listen carefully to his parable of the household, verses 45-47:

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions."

This parable is clearly for the instruction of those who are awaiting the Lord's return. The master of the household is gone but he has entrusted certain work to his steward until he returns. That work is primarily a ministry to the rest of the household, and notably, "to give them their food at the proper time." It is clearly addressed to the disciples and to those who will follow in their steps in the ministry of feeding and shepherding the church of Jesus Christ. Doubtless it includes any who have a ministry of teaching: pastors,

evangelists, prophets, elders, Sunday School teachers, children's workers and Bible class leaders. It takes in any who have gifts of teaching, whether exercised in a church building or in homes. It includes theological professors, editors of magazines, radio teachers, missionaries, youth workers, and many others.

## **Give Them Food!**

Since this is the first parable in the series it probably points up the most essential element in the matter of watching. The wise servant is given one major and primary responsibility: to feed the household at the proper time. If this is rightly done, the household will keep watching; if it is neglected, the household will languish and starve, and will not be ready when the Lord returns.

The task, therefore, of any leader within the church is to unfold the message of the Bible. Every pastor should set a loaded table before his congregation, not only that they might eat and grow, but also that they might learn from him how to draw from the Scriptures for themselves the spiritual nourishment they need. The Bible is wonderfully adapted to this purpose: there is milk for the beginner, bread for the more advanced, and strong meat to challenge and feed the mature. It is so designed that when books of the Bible are taught through consecutively they will cover a wide variety of subjects and yet keep truth marvelously in balance.

It is clearly evident, therefore, that the supreme need of the church during this time of waiting for its Lord is Bible study and knowledge. From this all else will flow. The Bible is the revelation of things as they really are. It represents the only truly realistic look at life that is available to man today. It is the only instrument provided by God that is adequate to the task of producing mature, well-adjusted, whole persons. That is the clear claim of 2 Timothy 3:16,17: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

## **I am the Bread of Life**

Be careful that you do not conclude from this that the Bible itself is the food for believers. It is not the book but the Lord which the book reveals that is our food. Christ is found in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments. But Bible study alone can be most dull and uninteresting if one does not expect the Spirit to take the words and from them cause the living Christ to emerge. That explains why some Bible students are such dull and dry people; they have concentrated on the Word alone, without the Spirit. And yet it is impossible to know the Lord Jesus in the fullness of his being without the revelation of the Word. We cannot neglect the Bible and grow in Christ; but we can grow in the knowledge of Scripture and never feed upon a risen Lord.

## **The Incredible Reward**

Imagine the joy of that servant when his lord returns and finds him faithfully at the task he assigned him. "Blessed is that servant," says Jesus. The Greek word for "blessed" can also be translated "happy." What a satisfying feeling it will be to know that he did his work well in the eyes of the only one who counts. What shall be done for such a man? What the Lord says next is truly amazing. Listen to it: "Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions." In another place Jesus said, "You have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much" (Matthew 25:21). This is the invariable rule of the kingdom of God.

When you consider who this master really is, it becomes almost incredible that he should reward this servant by setting him over all his possessions. How much is that? Well, Paul wrote in I Corinthians 3:21-23: "For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's."

There is a staggering thought in Paul's letter to the Ephesians which sums all this up in the phrase, "the

unsearchable riches of Christ." Who can tell what boundless opportunities, what indescribable adventures of service, what fabulous vistas of challenge, are involved in a phrase like that? Surely one thing is clear: the commitment and labor required to fulfill the ministry of teaching which the Lord has left for us to do will not be worthy to be compared with what shall belong to a "faithful and wise servant" when the Lord returns.

## **The Unfaithful Servant**

But unfortunately not every servant of the Lord proves to be wise and faithful. With the utter candor that characterizes him, Jesus gives the negative side of the picture in verses 48-51:

"But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunken, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth."

It is evident that this servant has the same ministry committed to him as the first one. He, too, is expected "to give them their food at the proper time." Thesame storehouse of the Word is at his disposal so that he too can feed the hungry of the household whenever they need it. The health and welfare of the household is his responsibility and depends upon his faithful ministry.

But this servant is different. When his lord does not come as soon as he expects, he says to himself, "My master is delayed." There is more than a hint here that the return of the Lord Jesus will be delayed far beyond the expectations of men. The apostles expected him in the first century, but he did not come. Now many centuries have gone by, and the effect of that long delay has been what the Lord here predicts. Many who claim to be his servants have given up hope of his return. The former bishop of the Episcopal Church, James Pike, himself one who had given up such a hope, stated that "only 24% of Episcopalians, by survey, believe it."\* The effect of that lost hope is immediately apparent. The servant, says the Lord, begins to beat his fellow servants, mistreat them, criticize and complain continually, neglect his ministry, and indulge his appetites to the full. It is a vivid picture of what happens, in one degree or another, when the expectation of the Lord's return is abandoned. There is a precise sequence of failure that can be traced. First, the hope of the Lord's return grows weak and eventually is lost. Because of this there is little motivation to the ministry of feeding the household, and therefore it is neglected. When the Word is not taught the people grow spiritually weak, and therefore full of weakness and carnality. This then manifests itself in quarreling, injustices, and excesses of every sort, in which the servant responsible for the feeding also joins.

It should be obvious from this that the fact of Christ's return is more important as a doctrine of the church than may at first appear. As we have already seen, it is an indicator of the degree to which the Lord's present indwelling life is being experienced. If there is little desire for his appearing, there is little concern to walk in the strength of his life. When the hope of the Lord's return crumbles, then it is already apparent that the experience of his life has largely ceased, if it existed at all. That is why the Lord lays such stress upon this and underscores it as the primary cause for the neglect of Bible teaching and the subsequent weakness of the church.

But though the servant has given up on the Lord's return, that does not prevent the Lord from returning. Suddenly he appears at an hour which the servant does not know and at a time when he does not expect him. Undoubtedly this will be one of those occasions when the servant will say, "Lord, Lord, have I not done mighty works in your name?" There may indeed be other things he has done which he felt would be impressive to the Lord if he returned. But it is all to no avail. He has specifically not done the one thing the Lord required of him. He has been faithless to his commission. Therefore he shall be punished and put where he belongs-with the hypocrites! He is himself a hypocrite, for he has assumed the name of a faithful servant of the Lord, but has proved false to his trust.

It is obvious from what our Lord says of this man, that he has never been a true servant at all. His destiny is to be put in the place where men will weep and gnash their teeth. Further on, in chapter 25, verse 30, the Lord

describes that place as "outer darkness." It is a place of frustration and defiance. Men weep because of their lost opportunities; they gnash their teeth out of bitter rage and defiance. It is not a pleasant picture, but let us remember, it is the Lord Jesus Christ who thus describes it to us.

## **A Demoralized Household**

The Lord has made crystal clear by this parable that it is a very serious thing to fail in feeding the household of God. It is not because the man's personal failure has a demoralizing effect upon the household. This has been most apparent in the church. One of the haunting problems in the church today is its identity crisis. In many places it seems to have lost the sense of what it was intended to be. Instead of a body, with each one "members one of another" and ministering to one another in love and concern, it has become an organization operating various programs. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). But today's Christians often touch each others' lives on only the most superficial basis, and do not want to hear another's problems because they "don't want to get involved."

This widespread ignorance of the church's true nature is directly traceable to a lack of systematic Bible teaching. Many passages in the New Testament epistles plainly detail the true nature of the church. Its "body life" is clearly described and illustrated from actual experience. Its supernatural endowment with spiritual gifts as the basis for all its ministry is described in half a dozen places. Its unique power, deriving from the presence of an indwelling and active Lord, is set before us again and again. The way to the consistent exercise of spiritual power, making its impact upon a decadent society, is detailed in many places.

## **Results of Biblical Ignorance**

But how much does the average Christian know of this? The blunt answer is: scarcely anything! The degree of biblical illiteracy, prevalent in American churches, is beyond belief. And the widespread effect, visible everywhere, is a powerless, quarreling, materialistic church whose knowledge of its Lord's living presence is almost nil, and whose hope of his soon return has long ago burned out into gray embers.

The cause for this sterile mediocrity is, says Jesus, faithless and wicked servants who have never assumed or have given up the task of feeding the household at the proper time. He views this failure with the greatest solemnity. There is a sobering word from Paul in I Corinthians 3:17: "If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are." Consequently we should not be surprised to hear Jesus say that when the master of the house returns he will confront the faithless servant and "will punish him, and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth."

## **The Secrets of the Heart**

In both of these cases, that of the faithful and that of the faithless servant, it is evident that the return of Jesus Christ simply reveals what men have been all the time. "Each man's work will become manifest," says Paul, "for the Day will disclose it" (1 Corinthians 3:13). The truly shocking thing about that is that what we are proved to be in that Day, we must continue to be forever! What we have been in the secret places of the heart through life must now be displayed as our true self through eternity.

Thus the Lord desires to emphasize to us that the present time is an exceedingly precious commodity. It is given to us to redeem. Helmut Thielicke,\* a noted German author, points out that on New Year's Eve we learn something about time we can never learn in any other way. Then we look at our watch or clock quite differently from any other day of our lives. Usually we glance at our watch in order to see what time we should be at a certain place, or whether we are going to make an appointment on time. But on New Year's Eve we suddenly, look at it, not in order to move ourselves, but because we become aware of the fact that time

itself is moving.

## **Our Personal Time Line**

Dr. Thieliicke says that then we can almost hear the stream of time beginning to murmur as it drops over the dam of that strange midnight hour. We become aware of the fact that we are not living an endless repetitive cycle, but we are moving on a straight line of time and we can never retrace it. The reason we do not experience this more frequently is because our clocks are round; that is, if we haven't finished something by six o'clock this morning we know that the hands of the clock will come around to six o'clock tonight, and we can get it done by then. Or by six o'clock tomorrow night. We suffer, therefore, from the illusion that time is repeating itself.

But on New Year's Eve, we discover otherwise. We become quite aware, as the midnight hour approaches, that time is moving continually on and that we can never go back, that what we have been will unalterably remain, forever. It can never be changed. We can never retrace our steps nor refill the contents of the past with something either better or worse. It remains exactly what it was. Perhaps last year we made a wrong decision or got married (the two are not necessarily linked) or entered into some new project or achieved some goal. Whatever it was, that has now become an unchangeable part of our destiny, our lot. It is irrevocably the same, it can never be changed. God's grace has moved him to bear certain effects of our misdeeds himself, but they remain for him to bear and are never dissipated into nothingness. If that grace is rejected, there is no escape.

## **A Final New Year's Eve**

This is what the sudden intervention of Jesus Christ into human affairs seems to be: a final New Year's Eve midnight hour when men will become aware that life has been lived, and it is whatever it is and will never be any different. No one can go back and change it. That leaves us facing an inevitable question: How long have you lived? "Oh," you say, "I am (so many) years old." No, you cannot answer in those terms. The only part of life that can be called living is the time you have been watching for your Lord's return in the strength of his abiding life. All else is death.

The great missionary to Africa, C. T. Studd, summed up the truth in a little couplet:

"Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last."

Now let us ask it again: How long have you lived? How much of your life will abide the day of his coming? Whatever is not gold, silver or precious stones, coming from the activity of his life in you, is nothing more than hay, wood, and stubble. When are you going to start living? You only have today!

## **Prayer**

Father, keep us from the folly of dreaming away our days in a fruitless endeavor to satisfy only the fancies of our spirit and the appetites of our bodies. Deliver us from the bondage of things. Teach us how to feed upon the Word of truth, and to walk continually in that truth, manifesting the splendor of your life in us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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