

AN ANSWER TO PROPHETS OF DOOM AND GLOOM

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Matthew 25:14-30. “The coming of the Lord will be as a man going on a journey calls his servants and entrusts to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one. Each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them and he made five talents more. Also he who had two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. He who had received the five talents came forward bringing five talents more saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents. Here I have made five talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ And he also who had the two talents came forward saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents. Here I have made two talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ He also who had received the one talent came forward saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, gathering where you did not winnowed, so I was afraid. I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant. You knew that I reaped where I had not sown and gathered where I had not winnowed. You ought to have invested my money with a banker. At my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has more will be given. And he will have abundance. But from him who has not even what he has will be taken away and cast forth the servant into outer darkness and there will weep and gnash their teeth.”

This parable occurs in the setting of a prophetic passage of scripture known as the Olivet discourse or the discourse given by Jesus on the Mount of Olives. It consists of Matthew 24 and 25. It was an address regarding the future and his own return, that the Lord gave some two days before Passover in which he was betrayed. It is the only lengthy, systematic teaching which Jesus gave concerning the future. It is given at the end of his ministry probably with good reason. But the disciples were not ready to handle such a more difficult teaching until this point in their experience. They’d been learning about his kingdom in the present age, about who he was, about his mission in life. Now he is prepared to give them this focus on the future.

In Matthew 24 we find more of a teaching sort of a chapter and Matthew 25 the three parables there constitute more of the application of Matthew 24. In Matthew 24 Jesus is saying to the disciples essentially two things – tough times will come; get ready for them. And on the other hand he’s saying the Son of Man will come, get ready for him. When he said those two things then through the scope of three parables – the parable of the virgins, the talents, the sheep and the goats. Jesus gives the application of how they are to be ready for these two impending events. How on the one hand we can be ready for the worst – crisis in government, crisis in nature, famine to break out, persecution by the state, by religion, by the family and all men in general how we can be ready for the worst. On the other hand how we can be ready for his coming.

Perhaps of those three parables the parable of the talents focusing in more than the others on how we really are to live in light of two impending crises. The crisis of disaster and the crisis of the Lord’s return.

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There's a great deal of alarm in the world today, both in the secular world and among certain Christians. Alarmed at society and the way the world is going.

A book I came across recently says on the cover that 300,000 are now in print. The first paragraph are kind of the things that are to happen according to this non Christian view. The writer says a tremendous economic crash is about to destroy the entire financial structure of the United States. The end result will be a depression of a magnitude never before experienced in this nation. Millions of people will be out of work. Millions will starve. Riots, killings and plundering will sweep the nation. Disease will claim millions more. Cities will become infested with half starved human beings preying upon the weak, the sick, the old, and defenseless. Everywhere there will be the haunting hunger of the young and the innocent looking up with hollow eyes, begging, pleading for just a morsel of food, a morsel that is not there to give. By the description of events that is seen by the writer we would recognize already happening in certain countries. The theses of the book however is that the best things you could do is to buy a plot of land somewhere out in the countryside and not tell anybody about it. Start saving food that is non-perishable. And convert your currency into silver or gold. You will be able to make it through the crisis, which is coming. That's certainly a one secular view of how to prepare for an impending disaster.

There's kind of a disaster motif that goes through modern culture. We live on a thin thread. Even in the movies these days are disaster movies. Towering Inferno and Earthquake.

On top of the alarmists in the world, the alarm over the economy and over inflation and over world political conditions and the Middle East and Africa and Asia. Powerful things to become concerned over.

Prophetic teachings are also the church. The evangelical wing of the church and even the charismatic wing. Because of their intense speculative teaching are causing persons to become unsettled in their faith. Of course this is nothing new to the history of the Christian church. It happened in the first century at Thessalonica. Prophets that came along with certain statements that were untrue in respect to the Lord's return and perhaps conditions of the time. Their teaching produced evidently a shaking in the lives of the Thessalonian believers. So that Paul writes to them and says "Don't be quickly shaken in mind or excited." That's not a general counsel that's given in waiting for the return of the Lord or going through the traumas of the worst of an age – don't be excited. Keep your cool is what Paul was saying.

In 1 Thessalonians he tells the Thessalonians "Aspire to live quietly," and to those who quit their work in an eschatological frenzy and waiting for the coming of the Lord he says, Get back to work. Get back to your normal duties, aspire to live quietly.

We know that ultimately some things will take place. The age will run out on itself. The Lord will also return. We know these things to be true. There is a spirit that we're to have in the midst of these things that is very important for us. Jesus himself said in Matthew 24 when he begins talking about wars and rumors of wars – 24:6 "You'll hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed." Alarmed to me means that when I'm sleeping there's something I keep at the foot of the bed that is set for a certain time in the morning. When it goes off I am alarmed! All normal activity comes to an end and a panic emerges as I try to reach for that thing and shut it off.

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We realize that there is a time bomb ticking away in the Middle East. And other areas of the world. Every time that the heat warms up in the Mid East it's important that we as Christians we not come unglued. The Lord says to us, Do not be alarmed.

Furthermore in the most severe crisis that can ever hit, verses 15-20, Jesus describes the advent of the denoting sacrilege, which probably had an initial performance in 70 A.D. and yet is to be fulfilled with the antichrist in Jerusalem. He's telling the believers during that period of time "Let those in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house. [if this guy had been saving food there wasn't time enough to go get it. If he had converted all his currency into metal he wouldn't have had time to go down and get it.] Let him who is in the fields not go back to get his mantel." There's not enough time. The implication is if that crisis hits then the Lord is capable of sustaining these people who go to the wilderness.

Am I saying in view of perhaps an impending crisis don't save money? Am I saying don't save food? Am I saying don't plant a vegetable garden? No. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying if you're doing these things then one reason why you should be doing them is if you believe these things are going to happen then you're calmly preparing for the future and by your wisdom you're going to help others who aren't as astute as you. So that when the famine comes, if it comes, your food will be shared with others.

I'm amazed at the selfishness that is coming through some prophetic teaching these days that says horde it in for yourself and don't let anybody know that you've got it because you'll want to run with it when the worst comes. Where is the parable of the Good Samaritan in this story? Where is the idea within the book of Acts where the Jerusalem church was undergoing a famine in rough times and the rest of the church comes to their aide.

Even if the worst is coming the Lord wants us to face it with hope. That's why this parable of the talents comes along and it's so important. It tells us how to live in light of either a coming disaster or the coming of the Lord.

The parable begins by saying that the master is going to be gone some time. The man who's going on a journey, the master as he's called, is none other than the Lord says I'm going away for a time. Indeed we see from verse 19 that it was a long time that he was away. When he left on his journey he didn't say, I'll be gone for a long time. He was just going on a journey. But it turned out that he was gone for a long time.

In the course of his being gone he entrusts what he had to those who are his followers. These are the persons who had the five, the two and the one talent, which represents the disciples and represent us. We're the persons to whom Christ gives the responsibility. He says I'm going to be gone from the earth for a while. In physical presence I'll be gone. While I'm gone the task which I began is yours to fulfill. I began the task of preaching the good news. I began the task of ministering to the sick. I began the task of preaching relief to the captives and now that's your job. You carry it on.

What he's really saying is a very striking thing here. He's saying that individual spiritual growth and the growth of his church are really resting in our hands. It's both our working and him working. It is as we work that he works. If we do not work then he does not work. He will raise up someone else who will work. While he's gone he entrusts his kingdom to us.

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I can recall church situations where the congregation would wait and pray, “Oh, Lord, send a revival!” And in the meantime all kinds of bickering was in the congregation. The Lord was accused of not sending a revival because he wasn’t concerned about that town. But that wasn’t the case at all. The Lord had given the responsibility for witness of that church and it was unfaithful to that responsibility and therefore the Lord couldn’t send a revival. He had given the church the talent and it went out and it buried it.

The fundamental law of the kingdom is to recognize that the Lord does place responsibility in our hands. Not that we can do it by ourselves. That’s not the idea of the parable. It is as the Lord’s power comes that we can do it. But there must be a willingness to do. There must be a getting to it. When he calls these persons before him he recognizes in them differing talents or differing capabilities.

Each of us have different capabilities for the Lord. And the Lord doesn’t expect the same thing out of us that he expects of another person. He may expect more or less out of you than another. He says some persons are five talents, others two, and others one.

I was thinking how we get all stuck up in our Christian life sometimes by wanting to have the talent or the responsibilities that someone else has and the Lord may not be calling us to those responsibilities.

I noted in Acts where Peter was in Solomon’s portico and the apostles are there. Great works of healing are being done. People are being blessed. The apostles are laying their hands on people and they’re being made well. Then all of a sudden Peter emerges and his shadow is falling upon people and whoever Peter’s shadow falls upon is healed. I got to thinking what if Peter were ministering today and a lot of people had healing ministries but Peter’s shadow was more effective. Nobody else’s shadow was doing what Peter’s was doing. So somebody comes along and has a ministry that God has used and all of a sudden says, God’s not using me. I want the shadow ministry. And he becomes all upset in their life striving for the shadow ministry and the Lord never called them to the shadow ministry.

The Lord gives us various kinds of capabilities and he expects us to translate into faithfulness and performance for him.

The talents which the Lord gives we run by this in English rather rapidly – one talent, two talents, five talents. We need to recognize that a whole lot is involved here. A talent in 1967 when the International Bible Dictionary was published was worth about a thousand dollars in American currency. Perhaps more today. The average working man in biblical days earned about a denari a day or about twenty cents a day. I got to thinking, if the Lord gave one, one talent another two talents and another five talents how much money in terms of our inflated economy was he actually making them responsible for. The average man working fourteen years non stop would have one talent. To have five talents means that the average man would have had to have worked 25,000 days or 70 years to have had that much money. So when the Lord hands this man 5 talents he’s given him a wad of money.

If you put that into our currency the average income in Orange County is supposedly around \$50 a day. You may earn less, you may earn more than that. If you take the five talent man and put him in our economy it means the Lord gave him a check \$1,250,000 and said this is yours. To

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the other he wrote out a check for a half a million dollars. And to another \$250,000. He said, I want to see what you do with it. I'm going on a journey. My assets are yours. Do with them as you will. Great confidence in his employees.

What would you do if someone gave you a million dollars? Two of the servants are successful. I ask myself why are these two servants successful?

I think they're successful for several reasons.

One is they take their master at his word. They take him seriously. They really believe that he has entrusted to them his property. And they act upon it. And they watch for his coming by getting to work in the present.

I use that word "watch" because in this discourse on the future, Matthew 24-25 it is a word that is frequently used. If you compare Matthew 24 and 25 with the reference in Mark 13 the same situation, the same address, in Mark 13 it's more abbreviated. In Mark 13 you'll find the absence of the parable of the virgins, the talents and the sheep and the goats. Instead you'll find those three parables summarized by a statement that say "Watch. You don't know when I'm coming. Watch." I like to think that these parables constitute the definition of what it means to watch for the coming of the Lord.

You don't watch for the coming of the Lord by getting out a pair of binoculars and looking up at the clouds to see which one he's going to come through. You do not watch by necessarily having an astute knowledge of current world events and finding out where America fits into World War III. You do not watch by having a speculative knowledge.

You watch by getting to work in this age. And being faithful to your present responsibilities. That's what the parable of the talents is all about. It's a parable that tells us how to watch. Watch by working. Living with the hope of the coming of the Lord. Ready to meet him when he comes. But not neglecting responsibilities.

They plan long range, these men do. They invest what he gives them. They traded. Took some of the assets which were liquid and put them into property, put them into businesses, put them into salaries for employees and get to work. What if the master had come the day after he'd given the money and he called the 5 talent guy forward. Where is my 5 talents? "I only have 1 talent left. The rest is out working." He calls the one talent guy and he said, "I've got it. I just had my hand on the shovel but I heard you were coming and I brought it back."

What this shows about these men is they didn't let two things keep them from planning to live in the present. They didn't look at the uncertainty of the economic and political situation and say, In times like these we'd better keep this in the ground. But they said, Let's get to work. We don't know how long the Lord's going to be gone. We can't guess the political situation. The times are in his hand. He's the Lord of history. He's got the whole world in his hands. We believe that. What we know to do is in the present, in the now – we're going to do it.

Neither did they become paralyzed by the fact of the Lord's return and set around and do nothing, waiting for him to come back.

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What if the master had returned in a short period of time? The guy with the one talent would have momentarily looked pretty good. I got to thinking about that. What does happen if you invest? What is the illustration that I can convey what I believe the Lord would have?

I remember as a kid seeing a chicken killed, a hen. I watched my parents cut the chicken open. I remember in this hen was a whole egg laying system there. There was an egg about ready to be laid. It seemed like there was a whole assembly line of eggs. It kept going back and back until it got to a very small thing you could hardly even see. So it was kind of an assembly line of the next 30 day egg supply. If the chicken had lived, an egg about five days away from being laid, if the chicken had lived it would have laid the egg. You know the chicken's nature and you know that the egg was going to be laid.

I think this man with the five talents had put his \$1,250,000 out, invested one million of it, and if the Lord had come back a couple of days or a couple of months after he had left the Lord would have looked and said, "Oh, yes! I see that you've got things moving along in an assembly line. I see that if I leave you alone and I don't interrupt you that that's going to come to fruition. There's going to be a complete product. I look at your potential.

This causes me a great deal of rest, not living in panic in an age that many can live in panic. It should say something to those of you who are young, considering your plans for schooling, for training, for vocational equipment and all these kind of things. It means that it's ok to invest these years in training. It's not a waste of time. If the Lord returns the day you are going to your training, that's ok because he can look and say, If I just let you continue I know what that would have brought forth. He sees the potential.

What if there had been a collapse of the economy? What if the Lord hadn't returned but instead the economy had gone all crazy and the guy had lost his mission dollars out there on the market. What would have happened? I think several things about that kind of situation. One is he would be in much better shape to recover from an economic disaster than the guy who was sitting on his funds and didn't know how to use them. He'd have greater reserves because he was experienced. He had not been foolish in how he invested them. The responsibility for failure was not his fault.

The second thing I think about this man who went out and invested what he had for the Lord was that he was not afraid of failing. One of the things that keeps us often from doing things for the Lord is that we are afraid that we might fail. "I can't do that. I'm not qualified. I might get embarrassed. That's not my nature." But here was a person who said, "No sweat! If you're a Christian you can afford to fail. You've got Christ to catch you when you fall." There's a freedom that comes in our Christian life, a freedom that doesn't worry about failing.

This man who had the five talents, the man who had the two talents went out. They knew they could have faced disaster but they were going to live and plan as if they had a lifetime.

The Lord stays away long enough and the economic conditions hold true enough they double their investment.

But the third one comes and he's the one who's unsuccessful. Why? He is unsuccessful because he did not live what he believed. That's why he doesn't succeed. How do I know? Look at what he says to the Lord, verse 24, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow." What an angry mean conception of God!

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“You, God, are so exacting and so bent on making money that you even expect to make money in places where you did not put any. You expect to get a crop where you did not sow. That’s the kind of God I knew you were.” Something is wrong with this man’s perception of God. He is describing not the way God is at all. God does not reap where he does not sow. God only reaps where he sows. But this man believes that about God. He believes that God was that mercenary.

If he believed that about God then what he does with his money is total foolishness. Because he puts it in the ground. He should have known and Jesus points it out to him, if this is the way you really knew it was then the least you could have done was have gone to the bankers and you could have got some interest money. It wouldn’t have been as great as the investment these other two guys did by getting into business. But at least you could have got something. But you did not act on what you believed.

Then the man articulates his response: “So I was afraid.” He went through the troublesome times. He went through life fearing. He lived on the defensive.

The Lord makes a strong response to him. He in fact gives a surprisingly sharp response. I picture the Lord here, kind of as working for a boss that you really love and respect but whom you know you cannot go beyond a certain line. If you go beyond that there is going to be somebody to be responsible to. Here’s the Lord coming back with a strong response to this man. “You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reaped where I have not sown, gathered where I have not winnowed. Then you ought to have invested my money.” Then the Lord says to him, “I’m going to take what you have and give it to another. Give it to the guy who has the five talents.”

What’s the Lord demonstrating? A principle that he demonstrated continually throughout his ministry. In fact four times the Lord uses this phrase: “To him who has more will be given.” It’s simply a demonstration that as we become faithful to the Lord in our responsibilities he gives us more. If we’re not he gives the responsibility elsewhere.

This man is not only rebuked for not having. But he’s also told that since in his life he accomplished nothing there is nothing more for him to do except regress and weep. The Lord tells him there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Nothing more productive in his whole life to live for. His whole life has been unfruitful and unproductive. Now the time has come that there is no hope for further productivity.

I’m intrigued though, why the Lord gives the \$250,000 to the man who already has two million and a half in his hand. Particularly I’m intrigued – and I know you shouldn’t force a parable this far – But I’m intrigued by the fact that the Lord has returned and he’s come again. When the Lord comes again what more need for any work or money is there. There’s going to be the Messianic currency. Whatever that is. But now the Lord is saying, I’m going to give his money or his responsibility to you. This suggests to me that what Jesus may be presenting in this parable is to say that responsibility is somewhat on a continuum between this life and the life to come. That heaven not only consists of worship. But heaven consists of work. Glorious work. Work without thorns and thistles. Work without frustration. But work which is sheer delight. Work which is sheer accomplishment. Work which innervates and invigorates the human being. Heaven is more than rest, more than worship. But the giving of responsibilities.

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I don't know what these responsibilities may be in the age to come but it strikes more that the Lord in making us sees us in not only needing physical needs like food and rest and shelter and in the human life we're never satisfied if we just have our physical needs met. We have needs for fulfillment and work and meaning.

So the Lord says in the age to come, you were responsible now I'll give you more. And the man goes away blessed.

Jesus is saying that as we are faithful to our current responsibilities he'll give us more responsibilities. In this life and in the age to come.

In light of the possibility of the panic or the depression in our country, or in light of the coming of the Lord, we're to lift up our heads for our redemption draweth nigh. Praise God! What an age in which to live. What a year! What a tremendous time in which to bring up children. Isn't it great? Scripture says, Iniquity would increase but the Spirit of God also says the Holy Spirit would be poured out. Thank God that my children can be brought up in a culture which tests more than ever the power of the keeping of the Holy Spirit and the challenge of the Holy Spirit to fill them. They'll be wise and they'll be strong in ways I never was. Because I never faced the strong challenges they're facing. Thank God for this generation and face it with courage.

David Livingston after some years in Africa as a missionary, his next to his last term there, he'd returned to England for some days of rest. And also to receive an honorary degree from the University of Glasgow. His biographer in speaking of Livingston on the occasion of the awarding of this degree describes him as looking very haggard because of his long exposure to the African sun. In fact in those previous 16 years Livingston had been laid low by fever on some thirty different occasions. Almost lost his life on many of them. He stood up to receive his degree, a left arm hung limply at his side because it had been crushed by an encounter with a lion in Africa. After being warmly greeted by the audience Livingston indicated that his desire was to return to Africa and indeed he was returning to Africa. Part of what he said on that occasion he said, But I return to Africa without misgivings and with great gladness for would you like me to tell you what supported me all through the years of exile? Among people whose language I could not understand? And whose attitude toward me was always uncertain and often hostile? It was this. 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' On these words I have staked everything and they have never failed. He who hath this hope purifieth himself."

Indeed, Lord, we are purified in our hearts as we consider the solace of your word. We would purify our lives from anxious fears. We would purify our hearts from the concerns of the world and we indeed in our hearts would lift up our face to look upon you. You are the Lord. You're in control. We can live in light of the crisis of the worst or in light of the crises of your coming. We can go on and we can live fruitfully for you. Lord, I pray for young persons in church today who are struggling with questions of what shall I do? In view of the age and in view of the possible nearness of the Lord's return should I become involved in further training. It may be, Lord, you're saying, put your talents into the market. Invest them. Let them go underground for a while that greater fruitfulness may come. Lord, there may be others, young married couples wondering whether or not this is the kind of the age in which to bring children into the world or wondering how to bring children up in an age like this. Lord, let us just have your peace and confidence, which rests strongly upon you and acknowledges you as Lord. There are persons in our church who live on fixed incomes. For whom the prospect of increasing inflation and for whom the prospect of

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currency devaluation and high rent and all these kind of economic pressures can weight very deeply and heavily upon them. I pray today that there would be a release of their faith towards you to affirm your great price, "I am with you always, even to the close of the age." Keep us centered in you. Keep us solid in you. Keep us growing and thriving. We want to grow in the midst of pressure. We want to live joyfully in the midst of crisis. We want to give ourselves to you in new and fresh ways every day that we might mature and grow up in you. Keep us persevering for you, for your work. In Jesus' name. Amen.