

Mat 24-25: The Parable of the Talents--God, or Man?

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SCC has heard me promote compassion and forgiveness as the cornerstone of YHWH's vision for the Creation. [It's another story, but I use YHWH as my concept for "God".] Back in the 90's, I started using this vision as the focal point of my exegesis, or of how I explain, analyze, interpret scripture.

Having such a vision has changed how I understand much of the Gospels, as well as the rest of the Bible.

From an early age, we all are taught to follow along with the chapter divisions and subtitles and verse structure we see in today's bibles. But, this structure was, in essence, arbitrarily assumed and assigned to various scriptures, by the government sponsored theologians of the Roman Catholic Church.

This produced the 'official' bible of the Roman Catholic Church, the Latin Vulgate. This translation, which was used for printing the Gutenberg Bible, back in the 15th century, is actually from about the 4th century! And, its structure is still not significantly revised! Why? Because this was the only printed version, known as the King James Bible, generally available for hundreds of years! After that, no one could imagine anything different, because every Westerner had grown up with it and never saw, let alone thought, of anything else.

Then, later interpretations, like American Standard, and New International versions, began 'editing' in hypothetical, but plausible, subheadings, like the 'Ask, Seek, Knock' passage, the 'Seven Woes', 'Ten Virgins', and 'the Sheep and the Goats'.

We have been limited in our understanding by this bias.

As a result, it seems to me that most of Christendom misses the point of the teaching in Matthew 24-25, big time....

How did I come to this conclusion? Simple. I ignored the artificial chapter divisions [they are not real, anyway]. I did not assume that every little story must be independent, and just read the teaching all the way through.²

As I reread scripture, from my view point grounded in this vision of compassion, I found that other conventional exegetics- or standard interpretations- created openings for what I'd call misunderstandings of Jesus' teachings.

What I am sharing today is the result of my exegesis of Matthew Ch 24 and 25.

Now, some may be challenged and possibly distressed by this commentary. But, may you also find yourself enlightened to new possibilities and hope.

The discussion in Mathew about "Signs of the end of the Age" is not about Armageddon. [That is another discussion- "The End is Near? No! The Time is Now? Yes!"]

Here, I focus on the idea that the teaching, which began in Chapter 24, does not stop at verse 25, or at the end of chapter 24 after "The day and the hour unknown" teaching (vs 51). It actually continued all the way through the next "chapter," through both the Parable of the Talents and of the Sheep and the Goats. (another 46 verses and 5 stories!).¹

First, a comment about the first story, these so-called "Signs of the End of the Age" at the beginning of Ch 24.³ At the very beginning, in vs 2, Matthew noted that, while leaving the temple, Jesus commented that every temple stone "will be thrown down." This sign is not about the "end of the world," but the fall of "the temple." In addition, previously, in Ch 12, vs 6, Matthew also has Jesus referring to "the temple," as well as Matthew's, Mark's and Luke's description of the crucifixion events [tearing of the temple curtain]. All these images clearly suggest this 'ending' will be of the "temple", and therefore, of the organized religion of the nation.

Second, Matthew continues this teaching by with another [second] story, in verses 36-42, which points out that "No one Knows the day or the Hour." This teaching, and the various [five] following 'teachings', are mostly labeled as independent parables, but all six actually constitute one teaching.

Third, Matthew's 'day or the hour' parable ends at verse 42, not 51. Verse 43 begins another story with "But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what time ... the thief was coming, he ... would not have let his house be broken into." Clearly another [third] explanatory teaching. This "house" represents the prevailing religion (exemplified by the "temple") and the owner is the theocrats (servants) who created the religion. The "thief" who will "break in" is YHWH, which will unshackle religion by freeing it from preoccupation with redemptive violence!³ As for when this is to occur, verse 44 states "be ready" at any, or all, time. All includes now, the present.

This third teaching continues with the "faithful servant... put in charge" story, at verse 45. We are taught that the "master" here has to be YHWH. But, first, just exactly who is the "wicked" servant (vs 48)? That is the one who is thinking and planning to take advantage of the "end times", is the 'servant of God' who says "to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards." (vs 49) There is no concern for the present. The wicked servant focuses on the future "coming" instead of the now. (We will also see that the "owner" or keeper "of the [God's] house" in Ch 24, vs 43 is this same servant.)

The "wise and faithful servant [is the one who gives them] their food at the proper time." [vs46]. What is the proper time? Again, note that verse 36 and 42, and 43 and 44, all teach that "no one knows", so "therefore keep watch," serve all in need, "any time," or ALL THE TIME.

The "Ten Virgins" version of the "proper time" actually is a continuation from vs 50-51, that begins a fourth story-- The "Master of that servant will come on a day when not expect[ed]..."

The very next verse, 25:1, [the "official" start of Ten Virgins,] states "At that time" [the kingdom ... will be like ten virgins...."]

"That time" directly links back to vs 50, the day the Master returns. Those (brides), meaning the servants who lived each and everyday as if God were here, 'at the door'- right now- were invited into the "wedding banquet."

The other servants, theocrats that teach others to look elsewhere for signs of His coming [vs 23] or to expect that someone would warn them of His arrival (vs 26), were the unfaithful who were not allowed in. Again, verse 13 warns "you do not know the hour."

The next, fifth, story, The Talents, [25:14-30] immediately continues the teaching, saying "Again, it will be like..." What is it like? "...when the master of the servant will come...", the master of Ch 24:50. However, what "it will be like" is not completed until Ch 25, vs 46! After the Sheep and the Goats! [This parable truly is one such as referred to in Luke 8:10!]

At this point, a person to properly identify here is "the man going on a journey." Every religious apologist or theocrat assumes that it has to be Jesus. I agree that it may be a god [a kosmos, after Walter Wink's Domination System], but it is NOT YHWH. It is the god of organized religion. It isn't the true, compassionate YHWH that Jesus teaches, but the oppressive substitute created by theologians who must justify the authority they and their governors wield.

How so? Verse 24 describes the 'Master' as a "hard man." That cannot be the Jesus repeatedly described by every one He contacted. Therefore, it cannot be YHWH, either. This 'hard master' is one who goes around "harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed." (vs 26) Every sowing and scattering seed reference to the Kingdom implies growing or nurturing before harvesting. This reference- harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered- means you have done nothing. Clearly, it implies taking or allocating. [How else does one "harvest" and "gather" what you have not "sown" or "scattered?"] This 'Master' God is one of violence and oppression; one who cannot understand or accept a servant who does not cheat or abuse his neighbor. [After all, the abuse is for the "glory of his God" by enriching the 'master' of his god's "one true" religion, is it not? Thus, the 'harsh master' is of organized religion.] The outcome (vs 28-30) for those who deny violence, such as the third servant in vs 24, will be rejection by society (as when the servant was labeled as "wicked and lazy" by her abusive master)! This is what the world view is like, then and now. Again, I note that the teaching does not stop here, but immediately continues within the sixth story, called The Sheep and The Goats (31-46).

ONLY NOW is the setting turning to the time when the temple 'falls.' The sheep and goats analogy ONLY NOW considers the alleged "time of reckoning" or "the end of the age" that the disciples first asked about back in Ch 24:3 (-44).

It is important to realize that the Talents story (25:14-30) describes what organized religion expects to occur. The Sheep and the Goats story (31-46) describes what would occur at such a time "of reckoning."

The Sheep and Goats story tells us that all nations and individuals would be "gathered" and assessed for their behavior toward one another. (vs 32-33) Those who do not abuse or oppress or commit violence against another will be counted as the "righteous" (vs 37). Only they. Not those who allow plans and acts and organizations that define others as enemies or outsiders and thereby justify violence against them.

When are these acts of violence done? It is clearly stated in vs 45: " whenever you DID NOT DO for one of the least of these" [emphasis added]. Acts of omission are acts of violence. So are acts of exclusion, the true outcome of any sort of favoritism.

Here we see one way YHWH, through Jesus and this teaching, blesses humankind to break our cycle of violence. [A reminder that 'to bless' is to act, to be of the same mind as the one you follow.] Jesus does not speak or teach of destruction or of an Armageddon. He speaks of and only acts with compassion.

There is no ethnocentricity- no favoritism- from YHWH, therefore no reason for any acts of violence.

All of His teachings struggle against the myth of redemptive violence.

Redemptive violence is assumed by those who need power. It is a lie used to justify and perpetuate "others," and enemies, and oppression.

Matthew 25 thru 25 teaches that everyone is the same in the eyes of YHWH, everyone is a child of God. Since all are of God, no one is different.

One cannot justify violence of against another child of YHWH.

Not even if it means you must share something you do not want to share.

We are not "more special" than another.

We must come to understand and believe this concept. We must also convey this understanding to the rest of our world, as best we can.

The organized religions of Christianity cannot continue to abandon active nonviolence and the Sabbath ministry of reconciliation in order to maintain theology's Armageddon- a predicted war that would restore the favored religion or people of God- because YHWH has no such favorite.

In closing, I ask that I may turn my heart away from my acceptance of convention and coercion as the way to gain righteousness by enforcing rules that separate, and turn toward the overwhelming compassion that YHWH is.

May my ears open through my vanity-encrusted heart and into my soul.

¹ Even within a “chapter 24” about the alleged “end times”, two key verses are glossed over, verses 36 and 42. “No one knows about that day or hour” when “every [stone] will be thrown down.” (vs24:2). Such temple references would refer to either organized religion or the corporeal body of Jesus. Also simply ignored by “millennialists” is who actually is “no one.” It is literally no one, “... not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, ...”. Also ignored is the one Jesus identified as having any such knowledge- “... only the Father.” That is verse 36. In order to have the ‘cleansing’ devastation that religion demands, this verse has to be ignored (along with 4, 6b, 23, 26). [ref’s from NIV]

Verse 42 clearly and succinctly states “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” The message is not that we should try to guess at and bet on God’s timing but to live every day as if God were already here. Otherwise, we will be tempted to continue to delay our walk with God because we will be too busy looking of the “signs of the end times.” We will try to detect just exactly when we must finally “change our ways”- just exactly when the “signs” are “bad enough” to force us to “get right with God.” In reality, tomorrow is not the day- yesterday was the day. Today is already too late to “get right with God.” The point of 24:1-42 is that no one or no power in our universe knows about any sort of “end times.” The focus of the first 42 verses is to NOT speculate on any alleged end times.

² See “Mat 21-23: Trick Questions Trick the Questioners”, by Bryan Miller.

³ However, the apologists interpreted this reference as preceding generations of organized religion had taught them to hear it- there must be a final act of overwhelming violence and destruction that will “redeem” only those persons (of a certain specific ethnicity or theology) who have behaved better than everyone else and, therefore, are worth being saved. Only the “one true religion” can be “one with God.” The rest must be interfering with the “coming of the Kingdom.” That automatically makes them some sort of “enemy” and therefore are to be “damned.” Therefore, all of “them” must be eradicated! This requirement for blame and separation between people is a foundational assumption of all organized religion. It justifies the assumption that redemption (metanoia, “turning around”) can come only by some act of violence (the “myth of redemptive violence”, p.13-33, Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers, 1992). This myth, and not scripture, is the reason that Mat 24 is seen as a reference to Armageddon and as being apocalyptic, after the fashion of Daniel and Revelation.

⁴ What is the “proper food?” To be discussed another time....

⁵ How do we “take oil” (vs 4) with us as we seek the “groom” (God)? To be discussed another time....

These are the opinions of Bryan Miller, alone. They in no way intended to represent the opinions or beliefs of anyone else, or anyone associated with the leadership of Shalom Community Church or Mennonite Church USA. Any comments should only be directed to me, not to others.

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