

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Luke 12:41-59

The Faithful Steward and the Lord's last words to the crowd

Today we are looking at Luke chapter 12:41-59. The passage starts with Peter asking Jesus a question about whether Jesus was addressing the parable of the watchful servant in verses 35-40 to His disciples or all the people.

Then Peter said to him, Lord, do you speak this parable only to us, or to all people?

It is an interesting question. The word of God, according to Hebrews 4:12, *is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword*. Sometimes it is addressed to everyone but at other times it is specifically addressed to followers of the Lord Jesus. But even when the Lord speaks about those who follow Him there is a difference. The difference is between true followers and those who outwardly follow or associate themselves with Him but who have never trusted in the Saviour.

Sometimes Jesus plainly answers questions addressed to Him; sometimes He appears to ignore questions; at other times he answers questions in complex ways which demand careful thought. In every case the Lord Jesus is always looking for a response in the hearts and lives of His hearers. This is still the same today. Let's look at Jesus' response to Peter's question:

And the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?

The Lord is looking for faithful and wise stewards who are enabled to take responsibility for the care of the master's household. These faithful and wise stewards are a reference to His followers. The household is a reference to His people.

Jesus brings forward two important spiritual attributes. The first – faithfulness - is the spiritual character of the steward and the second – wisdom - the spiritual care of the household. It is interesting that these themes are addressed in a conversation between the Lord Jesus and Peter. These two spiritual attributes are the same two that the Lord speaks to Peter about in John 21. In that chapter Peter is restored following his denial of the Lord Jesus. The Lord was changing Peter from an unfaithful and unwise steward into a faithful and wise one. Key to this process was the question He put to Peter three times, beginning with *Do you love me more than these?* On each occasion that He asked Peter the question Jesus commissioned him to spiritually care for His people. In verse 15 Jesus says, *Feed my lambs*, in verse 16 *Take care of my sheep* and lastly in verse 17 *Feed my sheep*. Peter's final response to the question of his love for his Saviour was, *Lord you know everything, you know that I love you*. This answer marked a key point in Peter's life. He was no longer trusting in himself but in the One who knew all things. From this point onwards Peter began to be characterised by faithfulness and wisdom.

Peter was called to be a shepherd and to care for the flock of God: this expression the flock of God is used as a title for Christ's church. In Ephesians 2:19 Paul calls the church *the household of God*:

*Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the **household** of God.*

In v. 42 of today's passage it is interesting that Jesus said:

And the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?

He speaks about the character and responsibilities of the steward - faithfulness and wisdom. The order is important. The steward is above all faithful to his master. He acts in obedience and always seeks to fulfil what he knows is his master's will. But he is also wise. Wisdom is the practical outworking of knowledge. Knowledge itself does not make us wise. We have to put knowledge into action. For example, I may know that illegal drugs will cause me great harm. Wisdom lies in not taking them. It is through faithfulness we grow in the knowledge of our Saviour and increase in wisdom from the application of that knowledge.

So we grow in the same way in the Lord Jesus Christ. As we grow in knowledge of him we are able to express that in the wisdom of our lives.

The very last words Peter writes in the New Testament are found in 2 Peter 3:18:

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

Peter himself had grown in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. We see this through the words he writes in his two letters. He had been transformed from the man we discover in the Gospels: he is no longer the self-confident and often brash young fisherman, but now in old age, a faithful and wise shepherd. He writes at the beginning of the fifth chapter of his first letter:

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of glory that does not fade away (vv. 1-4).

Notice his encouragement to the elders in verse 2: *Shepherd the flock of God*. This is what the Lord had asked him to do many years before, what he continued to do into old age and what he encouraged others to do. He was a shining example of what the Lord is saying in our passage, *And the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?* He was shepherding the flock and the household of God, and feeding the people of God.

In v. 43 Jesus describes such a servant as, *Blessed*:

Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.

This blessing or reward is associated with the return of the servant's Lord. Those who are rewarded are the servants who have remained faithful and wise during the absence of their master.

Peter conveys a similar thought in 1 Peter 5:4, *And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of glory that does not fade away*. Peter encouraged the elders to fulfil their shepherding or pastoral responsibilities in faithful and wise ways:

Shepherd the flock of God, which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (vv. 2-3).

The result of such service would be a crown of glory from the Chief Shepherd at His appearing.

In **v. 44** Jesus goes on to speak of rewarding the faithful and wise servant by making him ruler over all that the Lord had: *Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has.*

Joseph is a great example of this in Genesis chapter 41:

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you are. You shall be ruler over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt (vv. 39-41).

God loves to reward faithfulness in His people. Christian faithfulness is about staying close to the Lord you are serving, and growing in your knowledge of Him and increasing in wisdom. Paul, after long years of faithful service to the Lord Jesus who he describes in Galatians 2:20 as *the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*, also writes in Philippians 3:10, *That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death.* Paul understood what the Lord himself had taught His disciples in John 15:5, *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing.* True Christian service finds its power in these words, with the result, as the Lord further explains in John 15, our fruitfulness increases - *and we bear fruit (v. 2), more fruit (v. 2), and much fruit (v. 8).*

In **v. 45** Jesus address the condition of the servant who has no commitment to or love for his master:

But if that servant says in his heart, My master is delaying his coming, and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk.

Note that the servant's behaviour starts from what is in his heart. In the Bible the heart is often used as a metaphor for our entire mental and moral activity. The heart represents the hidden person. In this case it is the source of violent behaviour towards others, and of self-gratification. Instead of caring for and feeding those the servant had responsibility for, his fellow servants become objects of his hatred. At the same time the servant is utterly selfish and out of control. The behaviour the Lord Jesus was describing could be seen in His own day in the way the Pharisees acted. But sadly, such behaviours have been seen throughout the history of Christendom. On the one hand there are God's true people living lives of love, faithfulness and wisdom in service for God. On the other hand, and in the name of Christ, there has been a catalogue of abuse, selfishness and moral failure which has damaged the lives of those who should have received care and support and brought reproach upon the church which is called to witness to the love, grace and mercy of God.

The Lord Jesus is never hesitant in addressing behaviour which causes untold harm to His people. On the road to Damascus Paul discovered the reality of Christ feeling in heaven what His people were suffering on earth:

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he said, Who are you, Lord? Then the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads. (Acts 9:3-5).

After this encounter, Paul was called to be an apostle and spent the rest of his life caring for the people of God whom he had so once cruelly treated. But also, the story of Paul on the Damascus road teaches something else about the Lord Jesus. He appeared when He was least expected. Saul of Tarsus had waged an unrelenting persecution against the members of Christ's newly formed church. His campaign to destroy the church was going well. It seemed the scattered believers were about to be overcome. Then the Lord Jesus appears. He appears in glory not to judge Saul but make him understand the glory of Christ in resurrection and Christ's care for those He loved. Christ appeared in glory and in grace and transformed Saul's life.

In **v. 46** Jesus speaks in parable form of His coming. But his appearance has to do with righteousness. It indicates a day of account:

The master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with unbelievers. And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed these things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more (vv. 46-48).

In this passage the Lord highlights the reality and suddenness of His appearing, and the reality and justice of His judgements. Although the passage is most probably a reference to the Lord's coming at the outset of His Millennium kingdom, it outlines principles that are important for us ourselves to understand.

First we are to live in the expectation that Jesus Christ will return. This is not a distant hope unrelated to our present circumstances. It is a blessed hope which provides the spiritual impetus to live our lives for the Lord now. I believe the Bible teaches that Christ's return is in two parts. First, He returns into the air to *rapture* His church out of this world into glory as He describes in John 14:1-3:

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also.

And in John 17:24: Jesus praying

Father, I desire that they also whom you've given me may be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which you have given me; for you loved me before the foundation of the world.

How this happens is described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18:

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus shall we always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

The second part of the Lord's return is when He comes with His people as King of Kings and Lord of Lords to begin His Millennium reign, *which he will manifest in his own time, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Timothy 6:15).*

And in Revelation 17:14:

*... the Lamb will overcome them [those who make war with the Lamb], for he is Lord of lords and King of kings; and **those who are with Him** are called, chosen, and faithful.*

After the Millennium there is the final judgement and then the eternal state is described in the later chapters of Revelation.

In **vv. 46-48** the Lord appears to be describing His judgements in the nation of Israel when He returns to set up His Millennial kingdom. The key teaching in these verses is Christ's proportionate

judgement in relation to the privileges and responsibilities of those who own His Lordship. We sometimes have difficulty with the concept of God's judgement. But this passage helps us to understand that, whether judging those He loves in relation to their service or judging those who reject Christ, the judgement is just.

God's judgement is also important in relation to the history of the world, addressing responsibility in our behaviours across the whole spectrum of human experience from personal responsibility to crimes against humanity. The simple message is that we will be held responsible for our actions and our sins. This is why we need a Saviour. The Lord Jesus is described as the Prince of Peace in Isaiah 9 v. 6. Luke's Gospel begins with the announcement of *peace on earth* and ends with the Lord Jesus declaring in resurrection, *Peace unto you*.

In vv. **49-53**, however, Jesus describes things which are anything but peaceful. He starts with the words:

I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!

I think the fire described here is the division which the Lord's coming caused and which led to His persecution and to His sacrificial death. On the Mount of Transfiguration, in Luke 9:29-31, we read:

As he prayed, the appearance of his face was altered, and his robe became white and glistening. And behold, two men talked with him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his decease which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

The topic of Christ's conversation with Moses and Elijah was His death which Christ was going to accomplish. When Jesus says in v. **49** of our chapter, *and how I wish it were already kindled!* I think he is referring to the purpose of His coming into the world, which was to sacrifice Himself. This is supported by what He says next, *But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!* We have the sense of urgency in the Lord's words as He approaches the time of His final journey - to Calvary - and the display of the love of God in the giving of Himself.

Although Jesus came to heal the broken hearted and to bring peace into such hearts, in v. **51** He explains that the response to His coming divided people. There are those who trust, love and follow the Saviour and those who reject Him either carelessly or deliberately. The Lord Jesus highlights how this division is seen even within families:

Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (vv. 51-53).

It is well for us to remember that there are still parts of the world where trusting Christ leads to total rejection by family, community and government.

In v. **54-59**, the final section of our passage, Jesus addresses the multitudes who came to hear Him:

Then he also said to the multitudes, Whenever you see a cloud rising out of the east, immediately you say, A shower is coming; and so it is. And when you see the south wind blow, you say, There will be hot weather; and there is. Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how is it you do not discern this time?

In these verses Jesus compares the skill of people had to understand the weather compared with their lack of understanding of the time they were living in. Their promised Messiah had been

heralded by John the Baptist and throughout His ministry Jesus had demonstrated He was the Son of God. In spite of their knowledge of the Scriptures and the evidence before their eyes they did not believe.

Jesus then uses an illustration which His hearers would understand:

Yes, and why, even of yourselves, do you not judge what is right? When you go with your adversary to the magistrate, make every effort along the way to settle with him, lest he drag you to the judge, the judge deliver you to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you shall not depart from there till you have paid every last mite (vv. 57-59).

In this short passage Jesus challenges their ability to judge intelligently. He uses the example of settling a debt and the dangers of not doing so. If they had a debt, they knew the best way to settle it was through direct agreement with the one to whom they owed the money. They knew also that if a settlement was not reached, they would be brought before a judge who would deliver them to an officer and who in turn would place them in prison. Their release was dependent upon them paying all the debt.

The background to what Jesus is teaching is that both John the Baptist and the Lord Himself had preached repentance and faith toward God. The people were in debt to God because of their personal and national rejection of Him and lives of sinfulness. God had sent His Son as He had promised. Now was the time, as indicated in the words of Isaiah:

*Come now, and let us reason together,
Says the LORD,
Though your sins are like scarlet,
They shall be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:18).*

Jesus is awakening His listeners to their need to come to Him in faith and to receive salvation. He has never ceased to appeal to everyone to take the same step of faith, so that they might know in the words of the apostle Paul, *the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).*

Today is a fresh opportunity to give worship to God in the joy of our salvation and to share this wonderful message.

You have been listening to a Truth for Today talk on Luke chapter 12, verses 41-59, The Faithful Steward and the Lord's last words to the crowd, talk number T1105.

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