

New Year's Day
“Christ's Advent: A Long Time In Coming”

January 1, 2017
Matthew 25:1-46

SI: We've spent Advent and Christmas studying the Olivet Discourse—
Matthew chapters 24 and 25, which is Christ's most extended teaching
on his second coming.

I'd like to spend one more Sunday on it, looking at chapter 25 as a whole,
because I think it's particularly appropriate for the New Year before us.

INTRO: When the cat's away . . . you know what happens when the cat's away! One Friday night when I was in college, the Dean of Students took his whole staff on an overnight retreat—all the resident directors, all the resident assistants. Basically all the people who enforced the rules were gone for the night.

Things started to get rowdy.

The best moment was when some of my hall-mates pried open the elevator doors, waited until some unsuspecting souls entered the elevator car two floors below and then poured 32 gallons of water straight down the elevator shaft.

When the cat's away!

I know of a pastor who had been at a church for a decade and he asked for a six month sabbatical. The church agreed, he went away.

When he came back he said: That was good. Just what I needed.

And the church said: Yes, that was good for us too.

We held a congregational meeting and decided it's time for you to go.

When the cat's away!

You get the point. Often times, when the leader leaves and is gone for a critical period of time, whether from a business or a school or a government—things start falling apart.

What happened in jolly old England when King Richard the Lionhearted went away on the crusades? All sorts of injustice and oppression.

In these parables Jesus describes his kingdom on earth and one of primary points he makes is that in his kingdom, the king's away.

The king says he's coming back, but he doesn't say when and he's already stayed away for a long time.

But what's striking is that even though Christ went away almost 2,000 years ago, and has stayed away and hasn't come back yet or told us when—his kingdom hasn't started falling apart—instead it's flourishing.

In a great many churches throughout the ages and all around the world, even today, the work of the kingdom is going on.

The good news is being preached to all nations. God is being worshipped.

So how does Christ's kingdom survive the absence of the King?

Well, certainly the number one reason is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit carries on the work of Christ in his absence.

All success in the church during this age before Christ's return due to Holy Spirit.

That goes without saying. Without him the church can do nothing.

But there is another facet to the continued functioning of Christ's kingdom.

The King has given us instructions.
And he expects us to show our loyalty to him by carrying on while he is away.

We've looked at Matthew 25 for the past three Sundays
but I want us to look at it one more time from a different perspective.
We've looked at it in terms of Christ's promised return,
let's look at it in terms of his absence.
Also, we looked at each of the three parables or descriptions separately,
let's look at them together and see how they are integrated.

Here's the big question we'll ask:
What are our responsibilities as Christians while the Cat's away?
Three of them, I'll give them to you as we go.

Before I say more, I want to give credit where credit is due:
Listened to a wonderful sermon by Dick Lucas on passage that helped immensely.

Three responsibilities . . .

MP#1 While Christ is away, you have a responsibility for your own spiritual readiness.

This is the point of the parable of the ten virgins.

You have to have oil for your lamp.

You have to oversee the provision of your own oil so your lamp burns brightly. The tension of the parable is that some made that provision for themselves and others did not.

And when those that didn't have it suddenly needed it and asked the other virgins to give them some of theirs, they said—Get your own oil.

What is the oil? What does it represent in the parable?

Jesus doesn't say exactly, but we noted a few weeks ago when we looked at this parable in depth that the oil is the inner possession of the life of the Lord Jesus. You might remember that quote from Charles Spurgeon.

I won't read it again, but to paraphrase, the oil is a great change wrought in you. It is being renewed in your nature, washed from your sins, justified by Christ's righteousness, reconciled to God, made to be like God, brought out of nature's darkness into God's marvelous light.

Now that's all first and foremost the work of the Holy Spirit.

As I said at the beginning, we can't forget the Holy Spirit's work.

But let's not miss the point of the parable.

Get your own oil!

In other words, while Jesus is away he expects you to take responsibility for your own fitness of spiritual character.

It's up to you to keep your own lamp supplied with oil.

It's up to you to cooperate fully and actively with the Holy Spirit and make use of means of grace so all the facets of Christ's life in you are exercised and growing.

Some commentaries ask the question is: Were the wise virgins selfish?

They had oil, those who didn't asked them for some, they refused.

Were they selfish?

What a bizarre question. It misses a crucial point Jesus is making.

The wise virgins refusing to give their oil means

you can't pass on your spiritual fitness to someone else.

And the flipside is you can't delegate to other people the responsibility for your own spiritual fitness.

I once I visited a man who said his wife was the serious Christian in their marriage.

She's the one who goes to church and prays and reads the Bible and leads devotions for the kids so it was like he didn't have to worry about it.

You can imagine him on the last day saying:

Honey, where are you? Jesus is here and I need some of your oil.

And she says: Get your own oil.

You can't delegate spiritual readiness and you can't share it.

There are aspects of the Christian life that are communal and covenantal.

We are saved to be part of the family of God.

The Christian life—service and sanctification—take place in the body of Christ.

True believers and good churches are devoted to biblical fellowship—

the sharing of our common life together in Christ, bearing each other's burdens.

Christian parents claim God's promises on behalf of their children.

The whole church body is united around raising our covenant children in faith.

All of that is true, but there is also a very individualistic side of salvation.

The church provides all sorts of resources and opportunities for growth in grace—

but you yourself, you personally, you individually have to take responsibility to avail yourself of those things.

You have to make use of the means of grace God has provided.

If you want to be wise and not foolish, sensible and not an idiot—

then take responsibility for your own spiritual readiness while Christ is away.

When you hear about a father with young children who dies suddenly or is killed, you grieve for his family, but when you discover that he never took the time or made the sacrifices to buy some term life insurance, even a little bit, you can't help thinking—what a foolish man.

You would have done it for him if you could, but you couldn't.

That was his responsibility but he kept putting it off year after year until too late.

So, a new year lies before you.

What do you need to start doing to supply your lamp with oil?

We have gifted, devoted adult Sunday school teachers here. Great classes.

You can go and have oil poured into your lamp. Just an idea of what talking about.

Don't play while the Cat's away—take responsibility for your own spiritual readiness as the Lord Jesus Christ expects you to.

MP#2 While Christ is away, you have a responsibility for the growth of his kingdom.

This is the point of the parable of the talents.

The master gathers his servants and he gives to each of them portions of his assets based on their abilities and then he goes away on a long journey.

He doesn't say so explicitly, but the implication is that he want them to do all they can while he is away to increase his estate, to build his wealth.

He wants things to be bigger and better when he returns.

The two faithful servants set about doing it.

The language is robust and active. They went at once and put the money to work.

They make wealth, they gain possessions for the master.

They use the talents he has given them to do it.

The word talent came into the English language from this parable.

We use it to mean a natural ability or aptitude.

We speak of a person having a talent for music or a talent for sales.

But that's too narrow a definition for this parable.

A talent is an opportunity to take part in growing Christ's kingdom that is suited to your ability.

It's helpful to contrast this parable with the one just before it.

The parable of the virgins is about attentiveness to the internal life of your soul—the Christian's responsibility for personal growth.

The parable of the talents about the Christian's responsibility for corporate growth.

While Christ is away he expects you to have an eye for things like the growth of your church, wanting Christ Covenant to grow in love, maturity, and in numbers.

This parable mentions numbers—five growing to ten, two growing to four.

One just sitting there and not growing at all.

The book of Acts makes a point of reporting numbers added to the church—3,000 added to the membership on one day.

The Lord told Paul he had many people in the city of Corinth—so for Paul to stay and work hard to grow the church.

There's a right way to care about numbers.

We should want more and more people to come under the gracious rule of Christ.

The Holy Spirit is the one who brings the increase, but we are to work for it.

There's no division in this parable between ordained pastors and the people in the pews. It's addressed to all the master's servants.

That means the Lord Jesus has given each and every one of you abilities—not just talents in the narrow sense, but spiritual gifts, burdens, interests, resources—and he wants you to use those to grow this body.

Many of you are doing that—some in visible ways and some in hidden ways.
But through you, the church is growing.

Of course, Christ's kingdom is much bigger than Christ Covenant—
it includes all churches and denominations that preach the gospel of Jesus—
as well as ministries and institutions and causes that spread his rule.

In God's providence you're going to be introduced to other Christian works
outside your local church and your heart will be drawn to them,
Jesus expects you to start working and investing in them.

Not all of them, you can't do that.

Even the servant with the five talents didn't have unlimited resources.
He had to pick and choose where to devote his energy.

A few months ago you may recall when Katie Thompson and Susan Peek talked to
us about First Source for Women down in Hanceville.

They were trying to get us to take baby bottles and fill them with spare change.
Both Katie and Susan described how the Lord's providential leading in their
lives combined with their interests and talents and experience
led them to take on work for the growth of that ministry to women and children.

I know there are many of you here who are devoting your time and money and
prayers to ministries like The Foundry and The Link and Fixed Point.

There are those of you who are devoting time to the new connection with
Honduras and the development of that mission team.

As the pastor I'm privy to a lot of work that goes unseen, I know people in this
body who are regularly investing their time and energies and resources
to so many people and places outside the walls of this church.

There is even hidden work that I barely know about, but the Lord sees
and when he returns, you will be commended.

This is New Year's Day. Perhaps it's time for you to make a resolution before
the master to start to invest in that particular kingdom work where he has
opened a door and is tugging at your heart.

Don't play while the Cat's away—take responsibility for growth of the kingdom.

MP#3 While Christ is away, you have a responsibility for the needs of other people.

That's the point of the last section, the description of the final judgment
and the Shepherd separating the sheep from the goats.

Jesus commends those on his right for giving food, drink, clothing, and shelter

to those in need, for visiting those who are sick and in prison.
It's what he obviously expects of his people while he is away—
to take care of the needs of those people who come across our path.

I pointed out last week that when Jesus uses the phrases “my bothers” and
“the least of these” he is referring to believers. That's the primary concern.
We are first and foremost to care for the needs of fellow believers in the body.
But Christians have always understood the implications of this passage
as reaching beyond the walls of the church to all sorts of people.

The Apostle Paul nails it in Galatians 6:10.

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who
belong to the family of believers.

He notes that there is a particular obligation to the family, but must do good to all.

Now what's interesting about this list of good deeds Jesus mentions is that he
doesn't use the biblical language of salvation.

Jesus doesn't say heal the sick, liberate the prisoner, give the thirsty living water,
give the hungry bread of heaven, clothe the naked in robes of white.

The Bible often uses that sort of language to speak of salvation.

It describes the meeting of physical needs with spiritual graces.

But that's not what Jesus says here.

He doesn't say to heal the sick person, liberate the prisoner—just says, visit him.

He doesn't say give thirsty living water—just says give him something to drink.

These are ordinary, physical needs he is describing.

So don't spiritualize these verses.

In fact, it helps to contrast this with the parable of the talents.

The parable of the talents is about what we might call spiritual things.

Using your talents to be a part of introducing people to Jesus Christ and bringing
them to faith and incorporating them into the life of the church—
so the kingdom of God grows.

But this last part of Matthew 25 is just about helping people.

It's not about spiritual things, it's about physical things.

This shows that while Jesus is away, he expects the citizens of his kingdom
to be attentive and active in simply meeting human needs.

In other words, he is not expecting you to give a gospel presentation or share
your faith every time you help someone. He just expects you to help.

My own parents have been an example to me in this over the years.

Because everywhere they live, they become good neighbors.

They get to know and are attentive to the needs—a divine impulse. When they lived in their condo in Florida, the neighbor on one side was an elderly Irish Catholic woman and the neighbors on the other side were two lesbians. My parents took care of them over the years in so many practical ways—fixing things, taking them meals, sending cards when pets died.

When they decided to sell their place and move to NC full time, we went down. The Irish woman, Christine, said to me: Oh, your parents are moving. I don't know what I'm going to do. I rely on them so much, been so good to me. One of the women on the other side stopped me in the driveway and said— I want you to know that your father is the kindest and finest man I've ever known.

Christ expects this to become such a common, ordinary pattern for his people, that on the last day, when he commends you for it, you say—What? When? I didn't do anything unusual, Lord. Just like those in the parable. Jesus wants this to become second nature to us.

The Bible says God is loving toward all he has made. Sends rain on just and unjust. While the King is away he wants that loving heart of God to be manifest in us. That takes the work of the Holy Spirit, to attune your selfish heart in this way. And it also takes allowing these words of Jesus to hit home and stir us up to see needs and to meet them. That's how we cooperate with the Spirit's work.

Once again, New Years' resolutions. Who are those neighbors or needy souls who you know right now that you should be helping in practical ways? Don't play while the Cat's away and neglect this all-important work of kingdom.

INTRO: Just two closing thoughts about this life we're called to live while Jesus is away

First, it's a very busy life. If you take seriously these three responsibilities for your own spiritual fitness, for the growth of the kingdom of God, and for meeting needs of people—you're going to be busy.

Because then you also have the rest of your life to live and all your other responsibilities of work and family and whatever.
Sometimes it will feel like there is just too much to do.

Don't say: Well, some day when my business is stable or when the kids are grown or when I've retired—then I'll get serious about these things.
You'll probably just keep putting it off and you'll miss the present calling.
It's a busy life Jesus has called us to.

Second, it's a balanced life—and I think knowing this can help with busyness.
There is an inner dimension of this life and an outer dimension.
Attentiveness to the oil in your lamp and to the work of the kingdom.
You need both. And doing each makes the other more effective.

There is spiritual work and there is practical work.
It's not just sharing faith, it's also taking care of ordinary human needs.
Doing both gives a big picture and keeps grateful and humble.

There is love for Christ and love for the brothers (and the sisters).
We love Jesus, but we don't love him in a vacuum, not just me and Jesus.
We love him as we love the family of God.
And this is where our batteries are charged, love poured into our hearts—
that we then pour out to Jesus and fellow believers.

So, another year has passed, and the Cat is still away. He hasn't come back yet.
The Lion of the Tribe of Judah has not yet returned.
And, we may very well be here one year from now and he's still not back.
But while he's away he's given us jobs to do to show our loyalty.
And he's given us his Holy Spirit and the grace to do it.