

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – November 19, 2017

[Matthew 25:14-30](#) & [1st Thessalonians 5:1-11](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentaries below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Matthew 25:14-30 (From the *Homiletics* archive; “The Long Tail” – Nov. 13, 2005)

What does it mean to wait faithfully? The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) addresses this question and leaves the listener strangely uncertain about how to wait for the parousia in the time between the ages. Caution and conservatism, values that are usually lauded as positive and healthy, in this case result in the dismissal and condemnation of the master’s servant who only seeks to preserve what is his master’s property. If not careful protection of the master’s goods, what is it then that Jesus expects?

The parable is set in the last of Matthew’s five great discourses, this one comprised of Matthew 23-25 and focusing on Jesus’ eschatological teaching. The context into which Matthew places the parable emphasizes the difference from Luke’s version (Luke 19:11-27) where the rewards of the faithful servants are cities to rule (Luke 19:17, 19) and the punishment of the unfaithful servant is to be killed (v. 27). In Matthew the faithful are invited to “enter into the joy of your master” (vv. 21, 23) and listeners are directed to “throw [this worthless slave] into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”(v. 30). The earthly, concrete images of Luke are transformed by Matthew into the rewards and punishments of the time to come when a transformed Jesus will be fully present as the Christ of faith. By setting the parable in the larger context of other parables and sayings concerning the time to come Matthew has emphasized the eschatological nature of the parable and its meaning for those who wait.

Matthew’s images in the parable are dramatic and larger than life. A talent is a very large sum of money, equal to many years of wages for a day servant. Thus the slaves are entrusted with huge sums of money while the master is away. The master is known to be harsh, and he is feared (v. 24ff). He is gone for a long time (v. 19), a fact that both gives the servants time to act in the course of the story itself, and reinforces the action of the parable in the eschatological context — Jesus’ return will not necessarily be immediate and predictable. Upon the master’s return, the slaves who build his capital are “good” and “faithful” and they are to be trusted with many more things, partaking of joy that is more than earthly joy. In contrast, the servant who buried the lone talent is not only negligent, but “wicked” and “lazy” (v. 26) and “worthless” (v. 30), and he is to be thrown into a darkness that is more than earthly pain.

This parable is an example of a certain edginess in Jesus’ teaching, a quality that does not allow the reader to comfortably take a simple object lesson and move on. Several factors in the parable are somewhat disquieting. The intent of the one-talent servant is clearly good; he did not squander the master’s trust, rather conserving it and presenting it when the master returns. This is even clearer if one considers the version of the parable in the gospel of the Nazarenes, a first-century noncanonical expansion

of Matthew. In that version there is another servant who squanders the master's money on prostitutes and musicians, and it is that servant who suffers the severe punishment. In light of the servant's action in that noncanonical version, the conservative, fearful, one-talent servant in Matthew appears in a much less negative light. However, he is not only rebuked but also punished by the master for his lack of use and return on the money. Clearly the master desires not security, but activity, not conservatism, but initiative. Even so, the rebuke seems unduly harsh with words like wicked, lazy and worthless, and the ultimate punishment seems out of proportion to the offense.

The parable seems also to work contrary to Jesus' usual concern with those who are poor and disadvantaged when the master commands that the talent of the rebuked servant be taken from him and given to the servant who has 10 talents. The unusual nature of this action is emphasized more in the Lukan version (19:25) where the bystanders question the master who takes from the poor and gives to the rich. Their question implies that taking from one who has little to give to one who has much does not seem proper.

These actions of the master in Matthew's version seem out of keeping and at odds with the general tenor of Jesus' message as seen in many of his other actions and stories. The mixture of generous reward and harsh punishment, coupled with the saying of verse 29 about taking from those who have nothing and giving to those who have much reinforces the strangeness of the narrative. The kingdom that Jesus proclaims is a more complex, uncertain and unexpected place than we would like it to be.

However, the saying in verse 29 helps clarify the canonical purpose of the story, especially when viewed in other contexts. The saying itself seems hard and unfair on its face: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." The same saying appears in Mark 4:25 (and parallels in Matthew 13:12 and Luke 8:18) where it is used as part of a larger discourse to explain the purpose of parables. The occurrence of the saying in the latter contexts focuses on the necessity of proclaiming and using the faith that is found through Jesus. These other occurrences also help return our focus to the actions of the servants here in Matthew rather than to their intrinsic worth or character. Everyone has the opportunity to hear and to follow and to be faithful — some will and some will not, either out of disbelief, laziness, fear or other purpose or emotion. In the context of eschatological waiting described by Jesus, his teachings and the meaning of faithfulness are inextricably linked. It is those who listen, pay attention, and then actively seek to further the interests of the Master who will be rewarded in the coming kingdom.

Commentary on 1st Thess. 5:1-11

(From the *Homiletics* archive; "Prepping for the Apocalypse" – Nov. 19, 2017)

The concern with the coming of the day of the Lord that Paul demonstrates in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 is familiar to readers of the NT, but this passage does not strike quite the same anxious tone observable in similar passages such as Matthew 24:36-51, 25:1-13 and 2 Peter 3:3-10. Indeed, as Paul will assert in verse 4, his audience is not in the dark when it comes to preparation for the arrival of that day. Thus, Paul's tone here is more positively exhortative than admonishing and warning.

Paul's opening to this section in verse 1 is reminiscent of a similar construction from 4:9. In both 5:1 and 4:9, Paul states that "concerning" (περι σε) a certain matter, his audience does not have a need (ου χρειαν εχετε) to be written. However, in spite of making these explicit statements, Paul proceeds in both 4:10ff and 5:2ff to review precisely those matters that he claimed his audience had no need of hearing a discussion. Thus, both 4:9 and 5:1 serve the rhetorical purpose of subtly drawing his audience's attention to the matters which he is about to discuss without blatantly introducing them as such. In 5:1, Paul introduces his topic as the issue of "times" (του χρονου) and "seasons" (του καιρου). While these terms are more or less synonymous, the latter may refer to a more specified time period than the former as evidenced by Paul's use of the latter in a more restrictive sense elsewhere (Romans 5:6; 1 Corinthians 7:5, 7:29; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Galatians 4:10, 6:9). Nonetheless, Paul's use of both terms conveys essentially the same meaning.

Verse 2 introduces the thief in the night metaphor, which will remain operative in this passage through verse 4. This metaphor, of course, appears elsewhere in the NT in connection to the Jesus tradition (Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:39; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3, 16:15) and thus appears to have widespread circulation outside of Pauline circles alone. If the thief metaphor was well-known in Christian circles, the "day of the Lord" tradition was likely an equally familiar concept from its attestation in the OT prophetic tradition (Isaiah 13:6, 9; Joel 1:15, 2:1, 11, 3:4, 4:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Obadiah 1:15; Zephaniah 1:7, 14; Malachi 3:23).

The opening of verse 3 is reminiscent of similar sayings in Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11 and Ezekiel 13:10. It is just as likely, however, that Paul was drawing not on the usage of this notion in prophetic tradition but on the popular Roman proclamation of the *pax romana*, which made claims about the presence of peace throughout the entirety of the Roman Empire. This statement, then, might be a subtle critique of empire rhetoric. In any case, the second part of this verse suddenly switches from the metaphor of a thief in the night to that of a pregnant woman in labor. The unexpectedness of this shift (especially in light of Paul's return to the thief metaphor in verse 4) might be a way of rhetorically highlighting Paul's point about the surprise coming of the day of the Lord. Just as his audience might be surprised at the sudden shift of the metaphor, so too would they be surprised at the suddenness of the coming of the day of the Lord.

Verse 4 returns to the thief metaphor. Although many Greek manuscripts attest to the singular "thief" (κλεπτης) here, there are a number of other reliable manuscripts which have the plural "thieves" (κλεπτηαζ). The plural might carry a slightly different meaning and emphasize the thieves' own surprise at the breaking of dawn when they imagined themselves to be working under the cover of the night. Regardless of whether the singular or plural is to be preferred, however, Paul is clear that this moment of unfortunate surprise will not be the fate of his audience, which he emphasizes with the double use of a second-person plural pronoun (υμεις, υμας).

Verse 5 introduces the first of several antitheses in this passage with the use of light / dark and day / night language. Verse 6 continues this parade of antitheses with the introduction of wakefulness / sleep and sobriety / drunkenness. These pairings might be of common stock in Paul's thought as similar antithetical pairs appear in Romans 13:11-14. Indeed, the similarity between 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8 and Romans 13:11-14 is further notable in connection with the notion of armor that appears there (Romans 13:12) and the mention of a breastplate and helmet here in verse 8. Additionally, verses 6-10 show similarity with Romans 13:12-13 in their use of first-person plural hortatory subjunctive verb forms. Although Paul began this passage in verse 1 by addressing his audience with the second-person plural "you," beginning in verse 6, Paul switches to a first-person plural "we," which presumably includes himself alongside the audience he is addressing. This serves to highlight the distinction between the "we" and "the rest" (οιλοιποι) in verse 6.

After sketching this distinction between the "we" and "the others," Paul turns in verse 9 to address God's role. By placing the negative adverb "not" (ουκ) at the beginning of the sentence, Paul emphasizes the falseness of the assertion that God has placed "us" in a position to be the recipients of wrath. Rather, Paul states that God's intention is salvation by means of Jesus Christ. The attribution of Christ's death as an act carried out on the behalf of believers (verse 10) is familiar elsewhere in the Pauline epistles (2 Corinthians 5:15, 21; Galatians 1:4).

In light of Paul's injunction to remain awake in verse 6, his statement in verse 10 concerning life with Christ regardless of wakefulness or sleep initially seems to be at odds with his earlier point. However, it is likely that no such contradiction is present here, and rather, Paul is using wakefulness and sleep as circumlocutions for life and death as in Romans 14:8-9.

Finally, Paul concludes this passage in verse 11 much as he concluded 4:18, with an exhortation for his audience to encourage one another. Paul expands upon this previous command, however, by adding that in addition to encouraging one another, his audience is to build one another up. Thus, the proper response to a consideration of the sudden coming of the day of the Lord is mutual encouragement and edification among believers who are living in the light of the day as opposed to "the others" who are not.

Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [“Hitchhiking the Word”](#), a blog on the lectionary texts from the Episcopal tradition by C. Andrew Doyle. You will have to scroll down to find the resources for this week’s scriptures...Doyle works ahead! (originally posted on November 9)

Reflection Questions on Matthew 25:14-30:

1. This passage comes in a series of teachings of Jesus about the end times. It is also about investment. If we accept that the value of an investment lies in the promise of future rewards and/or benefits, what does that do to the meaning of this scripture if we begin to question the immanence of the end times (which could seem pretty reasonable after two millennia of waiting)?
2. When the master in this parable leaves, the only thing we are told is that he entrusted his property to his slaves/servants. Should we assume a job description that mandated investment? Why? What might you imagine would have been the reaction of the master if one of his slaves had invested, but lost *instead of gained*?
3. Is it right to identify the master in this parable with God? If so, what does this scripture say about the character of God? What has lasting value if we look at the parable this way?

Reflection Questions on 1st Thessalonians 5:1-11:

1. Paul seems to assume that his readers are well-versed about the “day of the Lord” (v.2). Is this because of his own previous teaching? Current accepted interpretation in the Judeo-Christian tradition? Part of the “popular religion/spirituality” of the time?
2. In verse 11, Paul says to “encourage one another and build up each other, *as indeed you are doing.*” If that last part is accurate, what is the purpose of Paul sharing the preceding words about the “times and seasons”? Have other people/teachers stirred up concerns or doubts among the faithful, such that they just need to be encouraged to stay the course and keep doing what they are already doing? Or is there more?
3. A fancy standard seminary question that applies to this text is “How does our eschatology affect our ethics?” In other words, “How does our expectations about the future – the end toward which our life and/or our world is moving – affect the living out of our lives?”

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?