

KINGDOM. SUPPLEMENT 14

[THE PARABLES OF JESUS] THE FAITHFUL AND UNFAITHFUL SERVANTS

“The parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants” in Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-48 is a parable about SERVICE IN GOD’S KINGDOM.

Read Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-48.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

A manager of servants. A master of several servants or slaves is about to leave on a long journey. Before he leaves, he places his most trusted servant in charge of the other servants. In this capacity as newly appointed manager, this servant not only supervises the work of the other servants, but also specifically takes care that they are well provided for. When there is no manager or boss supervising the servants, it is often very difficult for them to do their work faithfully or qualitatively well.

The return of the master. This happens completely unexpected. Not only the day, but also the exact hour is totally unknown! The servant that functioned as a manager is pictured as either faithful or unfaithful. The return of the master will have a completely different effect for the faithful servant than for the unfaithful servant.

Commendation for the faithful servant. If this servant in his capacity as manager is faithful in his task and eager to do the will of his master, the master will put him in charge of all his possessions at his return. This servant has been doing the will of his master all the time right up to his return and he faithfully cared for the master’s other servants.

Condemnation for the unfaithful servant. However, if this servant in his capacity as manager is unfaithful, he will be condemned. He consciously deliberated in his heart that he would wilfully act irresponsibly and do as he pleases. He thought that, because his master was going to take a long time to return, he was going to have fun. Not just innocent fun. This man was a sadist. He threw his weight around and beat the other servants in order to make them cower and cringe. And he filled his time with partying, eating, drinking and getting drunk.

At his return, the master cut this servant to pieces, a reminder how masters in that time sometimes treated their servants that disappointed them. The master assigned him to a place with the unbelievers, the place of inconsolable weeping and excruciating pain. Because he had abused the trust given to him and was thoroughly unreliable, the master threw him into hell (cf. Revelation 21:8; Matthew 25:46).

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of the parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Luke 12:35-41.

Jesus had just told the parable of the watchful servants. Peter then asked him, “Lord, are you telling this parable to us or to everyone?” Peter is curious. But Jesus does not give him a direct answer. This happened again in Luke 13:23-24. What Jesus seemed to be saying was, “Never mind asking questions stemming from pure curiosity. What you should do is to try very hard to be a faithful and wise servant, managing your assigned tasks.” And to illustrate what he meant, Jesus told the parable of the faithful or unfaithful servant in his capacity as manager of other servants.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Luke 12:42-46.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Luke 12:47-48.

It says, “That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants, will be beaten with many blows. But the one, who does not know and does things deserving punishment, will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” At his return, the master will judge his servants or the managers of his assigned tasks in complete justice. He will reward the faithful servants (Luke 19:17,19), but he will punish the unfaithful servants (Luke 12:47-48). Some servants will be punished lightly, because although they did not know the master’s will, they still did things deserving punishment. Other servants will be punished severely, because they did not only know the master’s will, but also defied him and did things deserving punishment.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Teach. Jesus did not give any of the details any particular meaning.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants in Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-46 teaches about “service in God’s kingdom.”

The main message of the parable is the following. “Christians should not wilfully act irresponsibly and do what they like in their lives. They should deliberately act responsibly, take their God-assigned tasks seriously and try to be faithful and wise managers of the people, activities, time, opportunities, etc., which God has entrusted to them.” God will hold every Christian servant responsible and accountable for the tasks he has entrusted to him.

Service is one of the fundamental characteristics of God’s kingdom. The genuine people of God’s kingdom serve by faithfully executing their God-given assignments.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Discover and discuss. How does what each of these Bible passages teach compare to what the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants teaches?

(1) The servant and his assignment.

Every servant receives an assigned task. Mark 13:34 says, “It is like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task.”

Every servant is required to be faithful. 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 says, “Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”

Not a single servant knows when his master will return and evaluate his service. Mark 13:31-35 says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son (in his human nature), but only the Father. Be on your guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back - whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at dawn.”

(2) The servant and responsibility.

The servant’s responsibility varies with what has been entrusted to him. It is proportionate to how much knowledge he has and what he did with his opportunities.

Read Leviticus 26:1-46. Obedience and disobedience.

God will reward obedience and punish disobedience.

Read Numbers 15:22-31; Psalm 19:12-13. Unintentional and defiant disobedience.

Unintentional sins should be atoned for, but committing sins deliberately and defiantly will be severely punished. Christians should pray that God keep them away from wilful sins. They could pray for forgiveness of their hidden faults and errors.

Read Luke 12:47-48; 23:34; Acts 3:17; 1 Timothy 1:13. Ignorance or knowledge and disobedience.

The disobedience of the servant will be punished according to how much he knew about God’s will. In summary, “from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48b).

Read Amos 3:2; Matthew 10:15; 11:20-24. Divine election may never be separated from human responsibility.

Israel, whom God had chosen from all the families of the earth to be his special people, will also be punished for all its sins. The cities, which have experienced the presence, preaching and miracles of Jesus Christ, but have not repented, will be more severely punished than the wicked cities, which have not experienced such privileges.

(3) The servant and disobedience.

Why should the servant, who did not know his master’s will, be punished at all?

Read Romans 1:18-21; 2:14-16. Ignorance is never absolute! Nobody can claim that he had no knowledge of God or God’s will at all. God has revealed his existence and power in his creation and he has revealed his moral will (what is good and what is evil) in the heart and conscience of all his human creatures. God will judge people in complete justice according to their knowledge and behaviour.

Read John 3:16-18,36; Romans 8:1; 1 Corinthians 3:14; Ecclesiastes 12:14; James 2:14-17; Numbers 16:1-35;

3 John 9. The criterion for salvation is faith. God will judge all people according to their faith or unbelief in him and his message. Christians are justified, not by keeping the law, not by their good works, and not by being religious (doing their religious duties), but only by their faith in Jesus Christ and his completed work of salvation for them and in their place. But the criterion for the final judgement is works. The life of faith is shown in how people live their lives in righteousness. Christians will be rewarded according to their works of righteousness.

Likewise others show how they live their lives in unrighteousness. There have always been unfaithful managers among God's people, like the Levite Dathan and his colleagues, or like the church leader Diotrephes, who loved to be the first, who would have nothing to do with the apostle John and who opposed God's co-workers. They will not escape God's judgement.

(4) The servant and the second coming.

How should Christian servants relate to the coming of their master?

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3. The second coming of Jesus Christ will be sudden and unexpected. No human being will be able to escape that momentous event!

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2; 3:6-12. Christians should not wait for the second coming of Jesus Christ being nervous as the people of Thessalonica did.

Read Revelation 3:14-22. Christians should not wait for the second coming of Jesus Christ being lukewarm as the people of Laodicea did.

Read Revelation 2:8-11. Christians should wait for the second coming of Jesus Christ being faithful and active as the people of Smyrna did. The only right way of waiting for the second coming is to continue to serve Jesus Christ faithfully!

6. A summary of service in the Bible

See supplement 17.
