

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants** in Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-46. This is a parable concerning SERVANTHOOD IN GOD'S KINGDOM.

A parable is *an earthly story with a heavenly meaning*. It is *a true-to-life story or illustration designed to teach a spiritual truth*. Jesus used the commonplace and the events of everyday to illumine the mysteries of the kingdom of God and to confront people with the reality of their situation and their need for renewal.

Please read Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-48 by yourself, or take turns in the group to read a few verses each.

(S) Luke 12:42-46 says, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. he will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers."

(T) **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Let us take turns to explain the true-to-life elements of the story of this parable.

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 employees. In this capacity, this newly appointed manager not only supervises the work of the other servants, but 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.

(S) The return of the master is completely unexpected. Not only the day, but also the exact hour is totally unknown! In this parable, the same manager is pictured as either faithful or unfaithful. The return of the master will have completely different effects for the faithful manager on the one hand and for the unfaithful manager on the other hand.

(T) Commendation if he is faithful. If this manager is faithful in his task and eager to do the will of his master, at his return the master will put him in charge of all his possessions. He 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.

(S) Condemnation if he is unfaithful. However, if this 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 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 the manager to pieces and assigned him a place with the unbelievers, because he had abused the trust given to him and was thoroughly unreliable. According to Revelation 21:8, "the place of unbelievers" is hell, called "the lake of fire".

(T) **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

The context of the parable may consist of *the setting* and *the explanation or application* of the parable. The setting of the parable may state *the occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the parable. What is the context of this parable?

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 try very hard to be a faithful and wise manager." And to illustrate what he meant, Jesus told the parable of the faithful and unfaithful manager.

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

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. According to Luke 19:17,19, he will reward the faithful, but according to Luke 12:47-48, he will punish the unfaithful. Some will be punished lightly, because although they did not know the master’s will, *they still did things deserving punishment*. Others will be punished severely, because they not only knew the master’s will, but defied him and did things deserving punishment.

(S) POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.

Jesus Christ did not intend every detail in the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the message of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the parable. Jesus does not give any of the details in this parable any particular meaning.

The faithful and wise servant is relevant, because he is the key to understanding this parable. But the kind of food he gives to the other servants is not explained and is therefore not a relevant detail. The fact that the master finds this servant doing his assigned task when he returns is a relevant detail, because it defines what faithfulness means. But the kind of possessions over which his master puts him in charge is not a relevant detail. The fact that no one knows the time at which the master returns is a relevant detail, because it shows the need to be faithful at all times right up to the Second Coming of Christ.

(T) POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.

The main message of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson or message, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the main message of the story.

The parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants in Matthew 24:45-51 teaches about *servanthood 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 that he has entrusted to him.

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

(S) POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.

The truth in all the parables also has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct and clear teaching of the Bible.

(T) I want to consider some parallel Bible passages that teach the same truth as this parable.

First. 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.”

Second. 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.”

Third. Not a single servant knows when his master will return and evaluate his servanthood. 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, 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.”

(S) I want to compare the parable with some important passages in the Bible concerning servanthood.

First. Why should Christians serve? Matthew 20:25-28 teaches that to serve is the true measure of greatness in God's kingdom. Philippians 2:5-7 teaches that to serve is Christlike: it is following the example of Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 teaches that to serve is the only way to win people for Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 4:10-11 teaches that to serve is the way to glorify God. Finally, John 12:26 teaches that to serve will bring a reward.

Second. Whom should Christians serve? 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 says that Christians should serve Jesus Christ. Hebrews 6:10 says that they should serve other people. Christians serve Jesus Christ by serving people in accordance with the instructions of Jesus Christ. Luke 16:13 teaches that it is impossible to serve two different masters at the same time. Galatians 1:10 teaches that Christians serve people not according to what *those people want*, but according to what *those people need*. 2 Corinthians 4:5 teaches that Christians serve people not for their own sake, but for the sake of Jesus and his glory. Ephesians 6:5-8 teaches that Christians serve people in submission to the authority that is placed over them. And Romans 14:13-18 teaches that Christians serve people not according to the letter of the law, but through the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit.

(T) I want to compare the parable with some other important passages in the Bible concerning servanthood.

Third. In which areas should Christians serve? Matthew 24:45-51 teaches that Christians serve by giving food to people in their household in the proper time. 2 Corinthians 8:1-4 teaches that Christians serve by giving material things generously to needy Christians everywhere. 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 teaches that Christians serve by proclaiming the gospel to non-Christians everywhere. Acts 6:1-4 teaches that Christians serve by teaching and building up Christians in the word of God. Luke 1:74-75 teaches that Christians serve the Lord spiritually by worshipping him without fear and in holiness and righteousness throughout their lifetime. Matthew 25:14-30 teaches that Christians serve by putting to work the talents, that is, the abilities and opportunities, which Christ has entrusted to them and gain more such talents. 1 Peter 4:10-11 teaches that Christians serve by using whatever spiritual gifts they have received to build up the Church.

Fourth. How do Christians become servants? John 12:26 teaches that a person becomes a servant by following Jesus Christ as his disciple. Romans 12:1 teaches that a person becomes a servant by making himself available to God. Mark 13:34 teaches that a person becomes a servant by doing the task that Jesus Christ has assigned to him. Luke 16:10-13 teaches that a person becomes a servant when he fulfils his entrusted task faithfully. 1 Timothy 3:10 teaches that a person should only become a servant in a leadership position when he has first been tested in his ordinary life and in doing smaller assignments. 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 teaches that a person is a servant when he works hard for Christ, is willing to suffer for Christ, and faces the daily pressure of caring for the church. Hebrews 6:10 and 10:32-34 teach that a person is a servant when he helps suffering Christians and stand at their side. 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 teaches that a person is a servant when he perseveres in all kinds of hardships. And Acts 20:19 teaches that a person is a servant when he is humble in success.

(S) I want to consider the question why the servant, who did not know his master's will, should be punished at all.

First. The criterion of judgement is knowledge. No human being can claim that he had no knowledge of God or of the will of God, because ignorance is never absolute. This is what Romans 1:18-21 and 2:14-16 teach. The God of the Bible has revealed his existence and power in his creation and he has revealed his moral will in the heart and conscience of all his human creatures. God will judge people in complete justice according to their knowledge and behaviour.

Second. The criterion of judgement is faith. John 3:16-18 teaches that he who believes will not perish, but he who does not believe is condemned already. God will judge people according to their faith or unbelief, and this includes how they lived their life in faith and righteousness or lived their life in unbelief and wickedness.

There has always been unfaithful managers among God's people. The Levitical leaders Dathan and his colleagues in the book of Numbers chapter 16 (16:1-35) rebelled against God's appointed leader and institutions. Diotrephes in the third letter of John (3 Jn 9) was a church leader who loved to be the first, who would have nothing to do with the apostles and who opposed other workers in God's kingdom. Such unfaithful managers will not escape God's judgement.

(T) I want to compare the parable with several passages that deal with the return of the master of the servants, that is, with the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-3 says that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will be sudden and unexpected. No human being will be able to escape that momentous event!

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 and 3:6-12 teaches that Christians should not wait for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in the spirit of feverish nervousness, like the people of Thessalonica did.

Revelation 3:14-22 teaches that Christians should not wait for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in the spirit of nauseating lukewarmness, as the people of Laodicea did.

And Revelation 2:8-11 teaches that Christians should wait for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in the spirit of *active faithfulness*, like the people of Smyrna did. The only right way of waiting for the Second Coming is *to continue to serve Jesus Christ faithfully!*

(S) POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parable.

All people must know what God or Jesus Christ is like. Jesus Christ has entrusted each Christian with certain tasks and responsibilities. At his Second Coming, he will certainly judge people according to their faithfulness or unfaithfulness!

(T) Christians must know what they should be like. Every Christian has the duty to be faithful to the task that Jesus Christ has given him to do on this earth. Not only pastors, and elders or teachers, but every Christian has an assigned task and Jesus Christ expects him to be faithful. Besides any specific task, every Christian is expected to do the will of the Master and to care for the people in need.

Luke 19:17 and 19 say that at his Second Coming, Jesus Christ will assign to each faithful Christian certain specific tasks in the new heaven and new earth. He will say, "Well done, my good servant! Because you have been trustworthy in a small matter, take charge of ten cities." Each task will be in harmony with the individuality of the servant and with his faithfulness while still on earth.

The talents God has given to people must be used, the time must be redeemed, the opportunities must be improved. No one has the right to be lazy. No one has the right to live for himself alone. A person must live for others (1 Corinthians 9:22) and for God (1 Corinthians 10:31)! 1 Corinthians 9:22 says, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." And 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Christians are called "God's fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3:5-9). What a great privilege it is to know that everyone of God's servants has been given a specific task to fulfil in the total of God's work on earth!

(S) ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parable of the talents. As preparation, please read Matthew 25:14-30.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom and www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".