

PDF version of the lesson notes.

I. Background Issues

- Last week we covered Joseph Smith–Matthew which is the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 24. Today, the King James Version of the Bible is once again are primary text in our coverage of Matthew 25.
- The chapter division between chapters 24 and 25 is artificial. They are not distinct literary units. Matthew 25 is a continuation of the eschatological discourse by Jesus that starts in chapter 24. The contents of chapter 25 are part of the discussion that begins when the disciples ask, "And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:3).
- **Outline of Matthew 25:**
 1. the parable of the ten virgins or bridesmaids,
 2. the parable of the talents,
 3. and the final judgment.
- Matthew 25 is very well known. I think each of the sub–sections are among many peoples favorite New Testament pericopes.

II. The Faithful Servant

- Actually, Jesus tells three parables in a row. The first parable is told at the end of chapter 24 and it is the parable of the faithful and wicked servants (slaves). However, I think because of the chapter divisions we forget that all three parables are connected and are told relative to the apocalyptic backdrop of chapter 24. The fact that the JST of Matthew 24 (Joseph Smith—Matthew) is in the Pearl of Great Price probably makes it even more difficult to see the continuity.
- Read Matthew 24:45–51:

(45) Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? (46) Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. (47) Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods. (48) But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; (49) And shall begin to smite his fellowservants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; (50) The lord of that servant shall come in a day

when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, (51)
And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the
hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

- This pericope is not specifically part of today's lesson so I want to keep the focus narrow. *How is this parable related to the parables that follow: the parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the talents? What does this parable have in common with the two parables in Matthew 25?*
- *What about the theme or motif of judgment? How does this theme connect or run through these three parables?*
- I guess maybe the most readily apparent commonality is the contrast in all three parables of the wise and foolish and faithful and unfaithful. *In fact, I wonder if the first parable frames the main question of all three parables: "Who then is a faithful and wise servant?"*
- *Does this parable have a unique point relative to the other two parables that follow? Is its focus different than the other two parables?*
- It seems like there is a different focus in terms of the responsibilities of the servant or bridesmaids in the parables. In this parable the servant is responsible for fellow servants. The responsibilities are a bit different in the other two parables. *Do you think these differences in role and responsibility are important? Are the differences meant to emphasize different aspect of discipleship?*
- *On the other hand, maybe the point is fulfilling or discharging our responsibilities faithfully and not the specifics of what the servants or wedding party are responsible for? Maybe each parable just reinforces the point of the need for faithfulness?*

III. The Ten Virgins

- The parable covers 13 verses but I still think it make sense to read the whole parable. Read Matthew 25:1–13:

(1) Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. (2) And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. (3) They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: (4) But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. (5) While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. (6) And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. (7) Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. (8) And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. (9) But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. (10) And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the

marriage: and the door was shut. (11) Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. (12) But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. (13) Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.

- Note, scholars point out that the "lamps" mentioned in this parable are probably better understood as torches because "one could see nothing outdoors with a first century lamp." [1]
- *Do you think the kingdom of heaven is like unto ten virgins or do you think the kingdom of heaven is like the story about the ten virgins? Is that a meaningful distinction?*
- **Allegory.** One question that quickly sprung to my mind as I read this parable and the parable of the talents is how much allegory was originally intended by Jesus when he told these parables. Is each element a metaphor or symbol? Only a few? Or is it one metaphor? Of course, ultimately it is probably impossible to tell with any degree of certainty. Also, maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe the the "best" interpretation is the one that spiritually strengthens or moves you the most. I think the danger of viewing all the elements allegorically is that we might miss the focus or primary points of the parable. Thus, I think it is worth pondering and thinking carefully about which elements you think are allegorical. *Which elements do you view as allegorical? Why?*
- The bridegroom is usually seen as representing Christ. It is also a symbol used in Matthew 9:15:

(15) And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.

How are the bridegrooms actions consistent with other parts of this discourse (Matthew 24 and 25)? Do the bridegrooms actions help us understand the message of Matthew 24 better?

- *Do you think it is important that the bride isn't mentioned?*
- *What about the bridesmaids? In what sense are they a good symbol of the Christian community that awaits the arrival of the Lord? Why is a wedding an apt symbol of the Savior return?*
- *What role of discipleship is emphasized in this parable? Do all three parables together give us a more comprehensive picture of what it means to be disciples and what is expected? Do you think that could be one of the reasons why these three parables are told together?*
- It strikes me as interesting that all the virgins go to sleep. They aren't watching for the bridegroom. They just respond to the call of the watchman. I think this is particularly

striking given that in other parts of the Matthew watching and sleeping are contrasted with each other. Think about when Jesus finds the disciple sleeping in the garden (Matt 26:38–41). This is also an important contrast in other gospels:

(35) Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning:
(36) Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. (37) And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch. —Mark 13:35–36

Why this detail? What does it focus are attention on? Why is sleeping okay in this parable?

- I guess what stuck out to me is that the bridegroom expectations aren't unrealistic. He doesn't expect them to stay up all night waiting for him. He expects the virgins to have enough oil for their lamps. It seems unrealistic to expect everyone to stay up and wait for the bridegroom individually. Instead the responsibility is delegated or placed on the shoulders of an unnamed and unseen watchman.
- The five virgins without enough oil for their lamps are clearly foolish and unprepared. But in some sense it seems like their actions aren't that bad. I mean it just a wedding party and they try to rectify their mistake. The actions of the wicked servant in the last parable seems much worse. When the servant perceives that the master is delayed he beats his fellow servants. It seems to be a much stronger image of unfaithfulness. *Is what the foolish virgins neglect to do really that bad? Does it makes sense to compare the actions of the wicked servants in the previous parable to the foolish virgin?*
- Parables often have unrealistic or unexpected elements. For example, a mustard seed grows into a great tree instead of bush (Matt 13:30–31). *Do you think the fact that bridegroom does not come until the middle of the night is one of those details? Is it meant to stick out?*
- It certainly seems strange to me as a modern reader. It all seems very strange. Maybe that is the point. On the other hand, Donald Hagner points out that a delay is "far from unknown in rabbinic and current accounts of the Near Eastern wedding" and that the delay could be caused by financial negotiations related to the marriage.[2]
- *Actually, I wonder if part of the point is that there really is no delay, only a perceived delay?* Malina and Rohrbough suggest the following about ancient Mediterranean society:

"on time" is whenever the significant personage arrives. Thus there is no delay of Jesus parousia [second coming] since whenever Jesus comes as Messiah is on time.

- *Should we see the oil in the lamps allegorically? What might it symbolize? Could viewing the oil as allegory distract from the main point of the parable? Could it add to or*

enhance that main point?

- *Suppose, the lamps aren't allegorical. How does the story use the lamps to illustrate the importance of being prepared and the important aspects or elements of being prepared and faithful?*

IV. The Parable of the Talents

- In the parable the master gives talents to three different servants. The first servant is entrusted with 5 talents, the second 2 talents, and the third one talent. One talent was a considerable sum of money. One talent was equal to 6,000 denarii and one denarii was the daily wage of a common laborer.[3] This would put value of a talent somewhere in the ballpark of 1/2 million dollars by today's standard. The first two servants double their initial amounts but the third does nothing and returns 1 talent to his master. The master declares that the first two servants "are good and faithful" and the master says that, "thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." The last servant is declared worthless (unprofitable) and is thrown out.
- The parable seems filled with important symbols. The master stands for the Savior and the servants for disciple or the Christian community. Once again, the master is gone for a long time. Thus the parable once again reflects the eschatological backdrop of the Matthew 24–25. *However, what about the talents themselves? Are they allegorical? Is there a danger in viewing them allegorically? Is there a benefit?*
- Read Matthew 25:15

(15) And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.

- *Does verse 15 help answer the question? If the talents are a symbol then what might they symbolize? Do personal abilities or spiritual gifts make the most sense? Is there any other possibilities that would be consistent with the fact that the servants are given the talents according to their ability?*
- Read Matthew 25:19:

(19) After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them.

- Verse 19, of course, reaffirms the running theme of "delay" or that the second coming will happen after a long time. *Is this "delay" or long length of time important in the parable itself? Does the delay affect the parable or move the parable forward in a different way than it did in the first two parables?*

- It strikes me as an important element in the parable because it allows or gives the servants sufficient time to trade and invest their talents and achieve a substantial return. This also seems like a unique element of this parable. *I wonder if this is a general point? Might it suggest a reason why the "delay" of the second coming is important?*
- *Are the large amounts important? Is it an important detail that the master entrusts his servants (slaves) with such great sums of money?*
- *Do you think it is important that the response to the first two servants is exactly the same in verse 21 and verse 23?*

"His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

- *What do you make of the fact that the master says the first two servants have been faithful over a few things even though both servants were dealing with large amounts of money?*
- *Do verses 21–23 connect this parable to the first parable at the end of chapter 24?*
- The return of the first two servants is impressive. They double their money. The parable seems to imply their return is impressive relative what could be made from lending (at least that's how I read the master's rebuke that the worthless servant should have at least put the money in the bank). I'm a finance professor so what came to my mind is that the first two servants must have taken on considerable risk to get such a high return. *Could this be an important detail? Could the Savior expect his disciple to take "risks" in some sense of the word or is this something that only a finance professor would read into the text?*
- I'm actually not inclined to think that some concept or notion of risk versus reward is the focus here. I think the point is that the first two servants have been faithful and worked hard to achieve their return and that the rate of return is largely irrelevant. I think it is irrelevant in the same sense that the initial or starting amounts are irrelevant. However, I am not completely willing to dismiss a notion of risk is in the background. The third servant epitomizes taking the safe route (he buries the the talent). The first two clearly took on risk. They could have failed; they could have lost money. *I am just not sure how to map that into faithfulness as a disciple?*
- I also think the rate of return may be relevant in the sense that it represents a miraculous or unexpectedly large rate of return. Thus possibly even though the parable emphasizes the effort of the servants there may be some notion of grace or divine help in the background.
- Read Matthew 25:24–28:

(24) Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I

knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: (25) And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. (26) His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: (27) Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. (28) Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents.

- The master is called a "hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed." "A hard (Greek: *skleros* man is one whose eyes/heart, mouth/ears, and hands/feet are rigid, nonfunctioning, arrogantly inhuman." [4] This is hardly a flattering description, but that master seems to agree with the description. *Why such an unflattering image? What is the point?*
- *What do you make of the fact that the master suggests the servant should have at least allowed the money to be lent out so he would have received interest. Is this fact surprising? Does it tell us something about the master?*
- *The master calls the third servant wicked. Doesn't that seem too strong?*
- There is something unsettling about the parable. In some sense the rich get richer and the poor get poorer in the parable. *Do you find the aspect of the parable unsettling or is that a coincidence and not really the point? Or maybe it is the point but it is not unsettling?*

Endnotes

1. Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 122.
2. Hagner, Donald A., 1988, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14–28*, Nelson Reference and Electronic, 729.
3. Hagner, Donald A., 1988, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14–28*, Nelson Reference and Electronic, 734.
4. Malina, Bruce J., and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, 2003, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress Press, 122.