

How Should We Wait for Jesus?

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My son has always been on the hungry side. When he was 3, he would follow his mommy around in the kitchen when it was getting close to mealtime. There was no point in telling him, "Dinner is in 10 minutes, dear." He had no concept of 10 minutes or delayed gratification. He wanted food!

By D.A. Carson

Sometimes I, too, was waiting for dinner. But my waiting was different. I was in my study, finishing work on the perennial dissertations that would come across my desk. I would think, *Ten more minutes. Am I going to finish this in time?*

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 describes different ways that people wait for Jesus' return. It says that believers are to wait for the Lord Jesus as slaves commissioned to improve their Master's assets, to advance His Kingdom. In our waiting we are not to be passive. We are to grow, to carefully manage and to develop the resources God entrusts to us.

In the ancient world, slaves had diverse functions: manual laborers, household slaves, accountants. Some even ran the master's industry or farm. The master assessed a slave's ability and distributed tasks accordingly.

So we read in verse 14 that the Kingdom "will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents" (Matthew 25:14-15).

The word *talent* in the original text does not refer to skills and abilities. It is simply a unit of weight often used for money. A talent of silver was the equivalent of about 20 years of a day laborer's wages—something like \$800,000 today. A talent of gold was worth much more.

The man who received five "bags of gold," as some translations say, immediately put his money to work and gained five more. A second man, who was given two bags of gold, also gained two more. But a third man, who received one bag, dug a hole in the ground and hid the money. Remember, these trusts were given according to the master's assessment of each slave's ability.

After a long time, the master returned and settled accounts. The man who had received five bags of gold said, "Master, you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more" (Matthew 25:20).

The man with two bags did the same. And the master answered each with the same words: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:21, 23).

The reward in both instances was increased responsibility. In the first place, they were given quite a lot of responsibility—bags and bags of gold. But that is nothing compared to what they would be given. In the consummated kingdom, they would be given very large responsibility. Not only that, but they now share in their master's happiness.

The man who had received one bag of gold says, "Master, I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you" (Matthew 25:24-25).

This servant charged the master with exploitation: Others did the sowing, but *he* reaped. The master replied, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest" (Matthew 25:26-27).

In the Western world, we're not too keen on slavery. But Jesus was not sanctioning slavery any more than He was sanctioning theft when He talked about returning like a thief in the night. He was using a social structure that made His point. But there is another element.

In the New Testament, human beings are either slaves to sin or they're freed from that slavery to become slaves to Christ. Slavery to Christ is a joyful slavery. It is a slavery that we delight in, because this Master is so good, fair and right. But make no mistake, it is a Master-slave relationship.

The third slave's sin is that he thinks he has the right to make his own judgments. But if he is the slave of the master, not undertaking the task and instead putting the money in the ground is flagrant disobedience.

The other two slaves are delighted to serve this master. They act with faithfulness and immediately make their investments. This third fellow wants to go his own, independent route.

So the master judges him, not even on the deeper principle that the slave is supposed to obey the master, but on the fact that this chap is not only slothful, he's wicked. He pretends that the problem is the master's harsh attitude.

The master commands that the bag of gold be taken from him and given to the man with 10 bags. Those who have, because they've invested and made things grow, will be given more. Those who have not worked at all, even what they have, will be taken from them. The worthless servant is thrown outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Our task while we wait for the Lord Jesus is not to improve our own assets. Oh, I know we have social and family responsibilities that are laid upon us in the Word of God. But if we focus all of our energy and attention on increasing our own assets, what will we have to show the Master when we die? We can't take any of our own assets with us.

While we wait, we are to be laying up treasures in Heaven, where moth and rust do not corrode, where thieves do not dig through and steal (Matthew 6:19).

In the parable of the virgins, which precedes the parable of the talents, the foolish virgins failed by thinking their part was too easy. This third slave fails because he thinks his part is too hard.

What does faithful service look like? Well, four chapters later, Jesus gives the disciples the Great Commission: to improve the Master's assets by proclaiming the Gospel.

The parable of the talents is not saying that somehow if you try hard enough, you will get into the Kingdom. Paul says it like this: We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God working in us, both to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13). That's the glory of Christ: He gives us work to do and tells us how to improve His assets. When we've done it—through His strength and because we are His—then He says, "Well done!" We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, but grace and faith are ever at work transforming our character, so that we want to improve the Master's assets.

If someone is waiting so passively for Jesus that he or she sees no obligation to improve the Master's assets, whether through suffering, evangelism, loving brothers and sisters in Jesus or growing in conformity to Christ, that person is thrown outside, where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

It's not as if there are three kinds of people here—those who are willing, cheerful, fruitful slaves; those who are in rebellion; and those who are somewhere in between, waiting but not working. If you're merely waiting, you're not improving the Master's assets. This is unthinkable for a real Christian.

So wait, then, for the Lord Jesus as slaves commissioned to improve the Master's assets. We are talking about the end of the age. Jesus is coming back! If not in our lifetime, we will meet Him when we die, and we will give an account.

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