

Paul then concludes the letter with what is described as “a passionate defence of his position and authority”.

Brother Ashton’s exposition of 2 Corinthians needs to be read to appreciate the thread of these three sections, and in doing so the reader will be treated to some fine background and Scripture study. Most speaking brethren who have based a Sunday morning talk on 2 Corinthians will have found that there is usually a theme which can be developed into a helpful exhortation. And so such themes as “comfort in tribulation”, “triumphal processions”, “letters of commendation”, “fading glory”, “an earthly tent and a heavenly house” and “the problem of mis-mating” are all delightfully expounded within the context of the whole letter.

When he comes to the middle section about the collection for the poor Jewish ecclesias, Brother Ashton goes outside 2 Corinthians and gives the wider picture, including the information that there is in Acts 20. This adds to the interest of the exposition. One short quotation gives a flavour of this part:

“But why was it so important for him to reach Jerusalem in time for Pentecost? Under the Law, it was the practice during the feast to provide ‘two wave loaves . . . baked with leaven’ (Leviticus 23:17). True believers would

see the significance of these as representing the Jewish and Gentile parts of the one loaf in Christ. There could be no more appropriate time for Paul and the other brethren to present the gift collected from among the Gentiles to succour their Jewish brethren” (p. 224).

Even in the final section of the letter, where Paul is defending his apostleship, there is much exhortational material. Jeremiah 9:23,24, used in the first letter, is used again to remind us of the eternal principle that human wisdom, riches and might are nothing in comparison to our understanding of the lovingkindness, judgement and righteousness of our God. Paul again goes back to Genesis 2, this time to justify his role as the friend of the bridegroom, anxious to present his bride to him as a chaste virgin. There are wise words about the third heaven, and Paul’s thorn in the flesh.

In conclusion, then, this book is highly commended to the Brotherhood. All those who desire to see the ecclesias united in their love for our Lord Jesus Christ and for each other should read it and benefit from the labours of the author. He has faithfully expounded these sometimes difficult letters, and has been able to comfort us with “the comfort wherewith [he himself has been] comforted of God” (2 Cor. 1:4).

(Concluded)

Using our abilities in the service of the Truth

Lessons from Matthew 25

Carlo Barbaresi

In Matthew 25 our Lord Jesus showed us by means of parables how we may use spiritual and natural resources to overcome the flesh and occupy ourselves in the work which our heavenly Father has given us to do.

THE PARABLES of the Ten Virgins and the Talents in Matthew 25 relate back to the wise servant that Jesus spoke of in 24:45-47: “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods”.

The Parable of the Virgins

The virgins typify the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; cf. Rev. 19:7,8). They are waiting to meet the bridegroom, which links with Matthew 24:44: “Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh” (cf. Lk. 12:35-38).

In the parable the virgins have lamps, and vessels with their lamps to contain oil. The oil represents the Spirit Word. How important therefore are the daily readings, that we might imbibe the Word! But more is required than this. In the parable all the virgins had oil in their lamps, but the wise ones had oil in their vessels also.

Oil is obtained by shaking down the olives from the tree and beating the olives. Effort is required to imbibe the oil of the Word; the injunction is, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God" (2 Tim. 2:15). This is worked out in the ecclesia, where there is a mixture of good and evil, "not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour".

If we would be vessels of gold and silver, we must purge ourselves from the influence of the dishonourable vessels (vv. 20,21). To do this we need to be filled with the Word of God. We need oil in our vessels to deal with the plausible arguments used to support false doctrine. We need to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude v. 3). As the olive had to be beaten in order to produce oil, so "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). It is in this way that we purge ourselves from the influence of the dishonourable vessels.

Not only do we need the oil of the Word in our vessels, the light of the Truth should shine out from us also. A notable example of this was John the Baptist. He was "a burning and a shining light" (Jno. 5:35). His austere way of life and his fearless denunciation of the Pharisees and Sadducees manifested the greatness of his character. His fearlessness before Herod because he took his brother Philip's wife led to him being beheaded for the sake of the Truth. The Master also fearlessly denounced the scribes and Pharisees to their face, as we read in Matthew 23, even though he knew that they would put him to death for it.

The same was the case with the apostles, as we see from Matthew 5:14-16: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father Which is in heaven".

The sense of "candle" is 'a portable lamp', and the meaning of "candlestick" is 'lampstand'. The apostles were fearless in their witness to the Truth, but their good works led to men glorifying God (Jno. 15:8; Phil. 1:11). Those who responded to their word glorified God. But those who did not hated them, and they suffered severe persecution and were imprisoned and beaten because of their witness, so that the Apostle Paul was led to say, in 1 Corinthians 4:13, "being defamed, we intreat:

we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day".

Ezra was "a ready [quick, skilful, diligent] scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD [Yahweh] God of Israel had given" (Ezra 7:6); and we read of him in verse 10, "For Ezra had *prepared* his heart to *seek* the law of the LORD [Yahweh], and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments". Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of Yahweh; he practised it himself and taught it to Israel. He had the oil of the Word in his vessel. In contrast, King Rehoboam "did evil, because he *prepared not* his heart to seek the LORD [Yahweh]" (2 Chron. 12:14).

We are at the very epoch of the return of the Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ. How important it is that we trim our lamps, that is, put them in proper order, and fill our vessels with the oil of the Word, preparing our hearts that we might be ready for him when he comes! We read in Matthew 25:10, "the bridegroom came, and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut". If we do not fill our vessels with oil, the door will be shut on us, as the door of Noah's Ark was shut, and it will be too late (vv. 11-13).

The Parable of the Talents

In the Parable of the Talents, which follows, the Master is showing the necessity of using the abilities we have, and the resources at our disposal, in the service of the Truth. It is important that we are occupied in the work of the Truth. If we are not, the danger is that we shall go astray. This was the case with David. He failed to go out to fight the warfare of Yahweh, and by remaining at home went astray over Bathsheba. We have to fight the warfare of the Truth (2 Tim. 4:7).

A talent was originally a unit of weight and money, but later came to mean a gift or ability. We all have different gifts or abilities, but whatever we have is given to us by God. We see this in 1 Corinthians 4:7: "what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (cf. Jno. 3:27). In a general way, our wealth (if we have it), our house, our car, even our phone, can all be used effectively in the service of the Truth. Then there are specific gifts, namely artistic ability, musical ability, culinary ability; indeed all the skills that we individually possess.

A disability or illness can be a gift to help us to comfort others (2 Cor. 1:3-7). The Apostle Paul's thorn in the flesh was a gift (12:7-10). In

one sense, the Apostle Paul's strict upbringing under the Law was a gift, in that it enabled him, above all the apostles, to show the transition from Judaism to Christ. Therefore Ananias was told, "he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15).

We read in Romans 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service". Although we do not have the Holy Spirit, let us apply to ourselves in principle the words in verses 4-21. We have been given gifts in differing degrees and we are to use them as faithful servants. The verb translated "trade" in Matthew 25:16 means 'to work, toil or labour' (Young) and in its noun form is rendered "work" in 26:10 in regard to Mary's anointing of Jesus. Here we see her using her resources for the work of the Truth, showing her love and faith to the Master. We need therefore to channel all our gifts, all the resources in our hands, into the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The lord in the parable says, "Well done, thou good and *faithful* servant" (25:21). How important it is that we are faithful, trustworthy, dependable! Moreover, the faithful servant has been "faithful over a few things". It is not in the great things, but in the few things, that our faithful service can be shown. However, the faithful servant will be made "ruler over many things".

This principle is shown in the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16. The rich man dismissed the steward because he had wasted his goods. The steward, in order to be received into the houses of his lord's debtors, went to them and reduced the debt they owed his lord. This was unjust, but there is a lesson to us, as we see from verses 8-12. As the steward was dismissed, so we have left the world. But we must use the resources at our disposal to make friends, that is, use them in service to one another and in the service of the Truth.

An example of how we do this can be derived from 1 John 3:17: "But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?". If we do the opposite we will be laying up in store for ourselves "against the time to come" (1 Tim. 6:17-19), or, in the words of the Master in Luke 16:9, we will be "receive[d] . . . into everlasting habitations" in the Kingdom of God.

The lesson from the unfaithful servant

There is a lesson in the words spoken by the servant who only had one talent (Mt. 25:24,25). This servant had a wrong understanding of the Almighty. He thought he was "an hard man, reaping where [he had] not sown". The Almighty was the opposite of this, for He made the servant who had been faithful over few things ruler over many things.

An example of someone like the wicked servant is seen in Saul. When he was challenged by Goliath he was afraid and could do nothing. In contrast, David was not afraid. He recognised the love and mighty power of Yahweh and associated himself with Him, and in faith and courage, with the few resources at his disposal, namely five pebbles and his sling, overcame the giant. Fear made Saul inactive, and fear can also make us inactive. As we look over our life, do we not find that it is strewn with missed opportunities because we have been afraid to take a course of action? We must be fearless whatever the consequences, as David was. Because he used his abilities he eventually became king. If we use our abilities faithfully we shall eventually become kings and priests in the Kingdom, and will be set over cities, as was the faithful servant in the parable.

The Master is the pre-eminent example of the faithful and wise servant. He came in the flesh and thus is able to sympathise "with the feeling of our infirmities" (Heb. 4:15). But he was also the Son of God. He used all the resources available to him, and set his face like a flint to fulfil the work of salvation which his Father had given him to do.

The words of the lord to the wicked servant in Matthew 25:27 are noteworthy: "thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury". At the breaking of bread we come to the Lord's table, and we see that we have been bought with a price, even the precious blood of Christ. May we always see his work of redemption and use our lives in his service:

"... forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot . . . Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently" (1 Pet. 1:18-22).