

## Prayer

I thank You, Living Lord, for giving me a life to live, a day to fill, a home to occupy, and a work to do. You have ordained my life to be what it is, with its content and surrounding, and although I sometimes wish that things different, You bless me each day through what You have given me. Thank You, good Lord. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Seasons

*Pray for those who find the season of winter (northern hemisphere) or summer (southern hemisphere) difficult for contrasting reasons! Pray for the Lord's mercy of those who suffer.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for those suffering from the cholera epidemic in Africa*
- *Give thanks for the joys of preparing for a coming feast!*
- *Pray for all who will experience hardship this Christmas time*

## Meditation

If you listen to someone and do not speak too readily,  
They might appreciate the attention you give them,  
Or they may fear you are trying to see right through them.

If you give someone your undivided attention,  
They may open up and share themselves with you,  
Or they might think you have a reason to try and use them.

If you offer compassion and love for someone who is hurt,  
They may, with time, appreciate the help you offer,  
Or they could remain in fear they might be abused.

But if you love someone so much that you die for them,  
Would they trust you enough to accept you really care?  
And change their minds?

## Bible Study - Matthew 24:45-51

<sup>45</sup> *'Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has given responsibility for his household, for the other slaves and for the provision of food on time? <sup>46</sup> Blessed is that servant who is found doing these things when his master arrives. <sup>47</sup> Amen, I say to you, he will place him in charge of all his resources.*

<sup>48</sup> *But if that servant is wicked and says to himself, "My master is a long time coming," <sup>49</sup> and then begins to beat his fellow servants, and eat and drink with drunkards, <sup>50</sup> then the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not expected; at a time of which he knows nothing. <sup>51</sup> He will punish his severely and put him in his place with the hypocrites, where there will be great distress and anguish.'*

## Review

At the end of yesterday's reading it was obvious that Jesus told His disciples to wait for His coming again, though they would not know when it would happen. However, Jesus had said little about how disciples should be prepared. Clearly they are to be obedient, especially in the ordinary things of life (24:40,41), and faithful to all that Jesus taught. In this parable we have read today (and the three which follow), Jesus tells us more about the obedience which prepares us for the Parousia.

The parable of the faithful and wicked servants initially seems to say little to us that is not found in chapter 24. However, it describes the consequences of neglecting what God requires of us, and the awful consequences of this. Jesus used a typical teaching method to do this by contrasting two extremes. The contrast of the 'wise' and the 'foolish' man is a frequent feature of wisdom language in scripture (see Proverbs, e.g.14:1, 15:20 etc), and it is a short step from Jesus' contrast, used elsewhere, of the 'faithful' and the 'wicked' man.

**The faithful and wise servant** The parable begins with a question; 'who then is the faithful and wise servant whom his master has given responsibility for his household ...?' It takes only a little reflection to recall that in scripture, the answer is undoubtedly Joseph. Joseph was the archetypal 'righteous person' who was sinned against by his own family and yet remained obedient to God in practical goodness and forgiveness when faced with His brothers in their own distress, years later. Remember, Joseph was sold into slavery and became a servant in Potiphar's house (Gen 39). Potiphar found in Joseph a man of character, faith and hard work, and therefore gave him responsibility, placing him in charge of all his household (Genesis 39:4,5,6).

In this parable, Jesus presents us with a guessing game of 'what if' about Joseph. We all know that Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph; but 'what if' things were different. What if Joseph had been found merely doing his work, and incriminated by the woman? Then Joseph would have been further elevated in the household; 'blessed is the servant who is found doing these things (providing for the household, as he should) when his master arrives ...' (v46).

**Service and leadership?** That is not all there is to the story. Is this a description of a disciple in general, or that of a leader who has responsibility for others? the mention of authority over other servants and providing for the needs of others suggests that a leader was in mind (24:45). But are we really to think that when Jesus comes, He will give good church leaders even greater responsibility? Jesus had earlier taught against the whole idea of hierarchy in heaven (Matt 20:20-28).

It is better for us to find different meanings in this parable for each of us. We all carry some degree of responsibility, and most of us have some family responsibilities, for example, in cleaning, the provision of food, or caring for other family members. We also have a responsibility for each other before God, apart from the care we might expect from a local church. I suggest that how we express our responsibilities for each other in our homes and families is of the highest importance to God, and if we are found performing our service properly in the home when our Lord comes, then He will lead us on to greater things.

#### **The wicked servant**

The wicked servant interprets the 'signs of the times' as a form of delay, and says to himself, 'My master is a long time coming' (24:48). This is precisely the problem many Christian people have today with the Parousia. They look at what is happening in the world and conclude that the Lord's coming is not happening yet, and that they will only need to consider meeting God when they die (commonly regarded as a long way off). This, of course, is an admirable excuse for people to do whatever they want in life before facing the consequences before God.

The warning of this parable is that if you fail to see the signs of Jesus' coming, or have decided either by calculation or presumption that it is a long way off, then you will be

tempted to abuse the responsibilities God has given you; the servant 'begins to beat his fellow servants ...'. In Jesus' day, wealthy landowner's were renowned for drinking to excess and beating their slaves, so the picture Jesus paints of the wicked servant is that having time to himself, he begins to behave like an evil landlord. The disciple had now turned into an agent of wickedness, and this brought about the severest punishment when the Lord returned. The final punishment for the wicked servant came soon enough, and was the worst thing imaginable. He would have to 'take his place with the hypocrites ...' (24:51), and remember, hypocrisy was Jesus' charge against the Pharisees. As one who had chosen his own way not God's, he was thrown out and separated from Almighty God, in 'great distress and anguish' (24:51).

Finally, what Jesus says is like another 'what if' from the story of Joseph. 'What if Joseph really believed Potiphar's wife and Potiphar was delayed, and he then succumbed to the temptations provided by his wife. Whatever happened in the household, Joseph would not have been put in prison and thence found himself in court leading Egypt, where God wanted him to be in order to save his own family from drought! He would quite simply have dropped off the pages of the Bible, and of history.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In your group, ask each other to summarise the message of this passage as you each see it.
2. Do you believe God rewards us in heaven for specific acts of good done in this life? Why?
3. Why do you think Jesus is so damning of those who ignore His coming again, describing them as wicked servants? Is this really what God does?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*Some people will say that it is impossible to be aware of the Lord's presence all the time, and so it is impossible to live at all times as if the Lord is about to return. Personally, I reckon this is a matter of commitment, time and the development of Christian character. Of course we are all distracted by the demands, ups and downs of life, but I see no reason why we cannot have our hearts set on doing the Lord's will at all times and insofar as our humanity allows; and it starts at home in the little things of life. This is what the Lord sees, and this is what the Lord rewards at the Parousia*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Ask yourself whether you are ready for the Lord's return at any moment. You will undoubtedly feel that there is more for you to do in life, but think of this as a spiritual challenge. Would your heart be able to rest with this, or be agitated?*
- *Fast and pray about the Lord's return. Take the opportunity to give time to God and wait on Him. Let Him speak to you about this and challenge you if you need to be challenged, or reassure you if you need reassurance. Let Him do His merciful work.*

## Final Prayer

All praise belongs to You, Jesus Christ; Lord, Saviour, Master, Guide, Comforter, Protector, Light of the World, Shepherd of the Sheep, Counsellor of the needy; Wisdom Incarnate, and Holy God. You constantly amaze us with who You really are! AMEN