

EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 24:45-51:

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THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SERVANT AND THE WICKED SERVANT

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It shows how to use **parenthetical references** rather than footnotes. Note that there is a **Reference List** at the end, not a Bibliography.

Use Times New Roman with 12 point font. No **BOLD** font on the title page.

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THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SERVANT AND THE WICKED SERVANT

Introduction: What should God’s servants do in the time between Christ’s first and second advents? Matt. 24:45-51 provides a straightforward and simple answer—an answer that is at the same time deeply challenging. Those who hope to receive eschatological blessing from the Lord must be disciplined and diligent in doing the work assigned to them by their master.

Macro-context: the broad context in which the pericope appears. This Matthean pericope appears within the context of eschatological teaching (Matt. 24:1-31). The eschatological events foretold are the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:1-2), various woes (Matt. 24:3-14), the great tribulation (Matt. 24:15-28), and the coming of the Son of Man (Matt. 24:29-31). Our passage (Matt. 24:45-51) appears within a block of subsequent passages (Matt. 24:32-25:46) which amount to exhortations about how to live presently in light of that eschatology. The passages before and after “The Parable of the Good Servant and the Wicked Servant” contain repeated cautions that, while the consummation is foreseen, no one knows the actual time of the end (Matt. 24:36, 42, 44; 25:13). These exhortations apply to the time of the delay between the first and second advents of Christ, the time during which the master has gone away on a journey before he returns (Matt. 25:14, 15, 19), as it is described in the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30). Since the time of the second coming of the Son of Man is unknown, the servants of the Lord are instructed to be wise (Matt. 24:32-35) and prepared (Matt. 24:36-44; 25:1-13).

Micro-context: the historical and literary contexts of the contents of the pericope itself. In the Gospel according to Matthew, the setting is Jesus' last days in Jerusalem (Matt. 21:10). The Passover celebration will happen in just a couple of days, followed shortly by his betrayal and arrest (Matt. 26:2).

In literary form, our passage is a parable for three reasons. (1) Although Matthew does not explicitly call it a parable, Luke does introduce it as a parable (Luke 12:41). (2) In Matt. 24:32, the evangelist signals the shift from eschatological discourse (24:1-31) to an elaboration of its implications using a series of parables beginning with the parable of the fig tree (Matt. 24:32-35). The parables continue until Matthew turns to a narrative of the events of Jesus' passion (Matt. 26:1ff). (3) The paragraph heading of the *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (Aland 1987, 266) and various biblical commentators also view our passage as a parable (Tasker 1961, 228; Hagner 1995, 723-724; Bailey 1992, 112; Stein 1981, 24).

Matthew's "Parable of the Good Servant and the Wicked Servant" has only one parallel and it is found in Luke 12:41-46. In Luke's use, the setting is different: Jesus says this parable during the travel narrative, somewhere between Galilee and Jerusalem (his travel south to Jerusalem began in Luke 9:51, 53 [cf. 13:22] and was completed by his entrance to the city and temple in Luke 19:41-45). Since this pericope has no parallel in Mark and since Luke and Matthew use the tradition in different contexts, Matthew and Luke have most likely selected this parable out of the traditions they found in the source called Q (Hagner 1995, 723; Nolland 1993, 699). Although Luke has arranged the parable differently by placing it in the travel narrative, he has adapted the parable in the same general way as Matthew—connecting it to Jesus' eschatological teaching (Luke 12:40) and applying it to the disciples and their behavior during the period between the two advents of Christ (Jeremias 1972, 67).

In this manner, we see Luke and Matthew practicing the editorial principles of selection, arrangement and adaptation of a saying of Jesus that came to them in the Q tradition and without a specific context (Fee 1993, 118, 127).

An alternate view is that these two parallel passages represent a double tradition: they are “distinct versions and events because of differences in content and setting” (Bock 1994, 230-231). What Bock means is that Jesus spoke the parable at two different times—once in Galilee and once in Jerusalem—creating two different (oral) versions of the parable that correspond to two different settings in the life of Jesus. Luke preserves the former while Matthew preserves the latter. While Bock’s view is possible, it overlooks or at least downplays three matters. (1) The actual differences in content are not great at all. Between Luke and Matthew, there are two sentences that contain exact agreements in the Greek wording (Matt. 24:46, 50, 51a; Luke 12:43, 46a) and in other sentences the differences are minor ones and probably come from Lukan stylistic modification of Q (Gundry 1994, 496-497). This amounts to meager evidence of “differences in content.” (2) There is also the fact that there is a complete agreement in the order of the pericope’s sentences. Such exact agreements are harder to explain if Matthew and Luke are recording two different traditions that reflect two different settings in the life of Jesus. If there was a double tradition, one would expect more evidence of different wording and a different development of the parable. It is more likely that both evangelists are using the same single source (Q)—preserving it precisely at some points and slightly modifying it at other points. (3) There is the mutual application of the parable to the Lord’s eschatological teaching by both evangelists. In conclusion, both the differences and the agreements between the Matthean and Lukan

accounts can be explained more easily by the evangelists' selection, arrangement and adaptation of a single (Q) tradition.

The structure of the pericope follows a simple pattern: introductory question (v. 45), the blessed servant (vv. 46-47), and the unfaithful servant (vv. 48-51). The case of the unfaithful servant is more lengthy in order to describe not only his dereliction but also his presumptuous misinterpretation of his master's delay and the judgment meted out to him.

Major Problems or Questions in the Verses of Your Passage.

Verse 45. Jesus' subject is the "servant" (*doulos*)—a term that commonly appears in Matthean parables but can also denote Jesus' own disciples (Matt. 20:27). In both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture, the family servant might work within the home and have responsibility for other servants. In Greco-Roman society a servant was often the manager of a household or an estate (Bartchy 1986, 539). In light of the master's return, this servant must be "faithful and wise" (*pistos* and *phronimos*) as he carries out his responsibility to give out food to the other servants ("them", v. 45; the "fellow-servants," v. 49). The word "faithful" is used just three times in Matthew and all three uses are in the parables of chapters 24 and 25 (24:45; 25:21, 23)—in parables expressly given to disclose proper behavior in the time until Christ's return. "Wise" appears seven times in Matthew: it primarily denotes a person who acts with discipline and responsibility in the present so as to secure felicity in the future (7:24; 24:45; 25:2, 4, 8, 9). It also is used to characterize the disciples' spiritual acumen that prepares them for the challenges of their ministries (Matt. 10:16). Thus the faithful and wise servant stands for the disciple of Jesus, especially one who has responsibility over others, and the servant's "master" (*kurios*) is Jesus.

The word “household” (*oiketeia*) is used only here in the New Testament and it means the sphere of responsibility normally assigned to a servant who is in charge of a household composed mainly of other servants. In his parallel (Luke 12:42) instead of *doulos* Luke uses a cognate noun, *oikonomos*, to denote the person in charge of the master’s slaves (*therapeia*). All three terms point in the direction of a symbolic representation of a disciple’s responsibility which amounts to a ministerial function of delivering the provisions to those within the household.

Verse 46. “Blessed” (*makarios*) is the same word repeated nine times in the opening lines of the “Sermon on the Mount” to signify the present spiritual state of the person who lives in harmony with God’s will (Matt. 5:3ff). It is also used of Peter who is presently “blessed” (*makarios*) because he has been the recipient of divine revelation (Matt. 16:17). But “blessed” here has eschatological value since it is reckoned at the coming of the master. The servant is blessed because he is found “doing” (*poiounta*; cf. Luke 12:43), at the time of the Lord’s return, what the Lord had required all along.

Verse 47. “Truly” (*amen*) signals the solemnity of the subsequent pronouncement. The faithful and wise servant’s performance warrants increased responsibility in that the returned master puts the faithful servant over “all” his property.

Verse 48. Attention now turns to the other servant who is “evil” in his heart. Here the “evil” must include the servant’s thought which was not right, as indicated by his deliberate rejection of the master’s will during the time of the master’s delay (“my master is delaying,” *chronizei*).

Verse 49. The evil servant abuses (his fellow-servants)—those to whom he should feel closely allied—by not only neglecting his assigned duties but also by actively harming

them by “beating” them. Then he takes up social intercourse with outsiders and gives them the attention that is rightly due his fellow-servants. These people lack discipline and responsibility and instead indulge their senses and appetites with excessive consumption. And the evil servant aids them in their sin and possibly provides them resources which had been intended for the fellow-servants (Keener 1997, 355).

Verse 50. The evil servant will not know the “day” (*hemera*) and the “hour” (*hora*) of the master’s return (cf. vv. 42-44; 5:13)—the major premise of these parables. Such ignorance only heightens the folly of the servant’s evil. The inference we are to make concerns the timing of the master’s return—don’t think that it will delay. His soon return will surprise you. The opposite point is made in the next parable, the “Parable of the Ten Virgins” (Matt. 25:1-13). In that parable the problem is that half of the virgins thought that the bridegroom would come soon and were unprepared for his delay. These two parables set in juxtaposition create balance by emphasizing both imminence and delay in the possible time of the master’s return. Thus the point is made: the reader must guard against both extremes.

Verse 51. For the expression the master will “cut him to pieces” (NIV), Matthew and Luke (12:56) use the exact same word *dichotomeo* (from which English gets “dichotomy”) which appears only these two times in the New Testament and means to “cut in two” as with a sword (Bauer 2000, 253). This term is more graphic than simply “punish” (RSV); it means severe punishment (Bock 1994, 233; Carson 1984, 511; Liefeld 1984, 967). What is left of the evil servant will be put in the “place” (*meros*) of the hypocrites. The word *meros*, in Matthew’s other three uses, refers to a political district, a place where people reside (Matt. 2:22; 15:21; 16:13). The people of this place are the “hypocrites” (*hypokrites*; the “unfaithful,” Luke 12:46). In Matthew, the term “hypocrites” is consistently used as an

epithet to condemn those who have the outward form of religion but who fail in basic obedience to God. The hypocrites' true misery in this place is brought out by the "weeping and gnashing of teeth"—a common Matthean symbol of eschatological judgment outside of God's kingdom (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 25:30; cf. Luke 13:28).

Interpretation of the Passage. A master's servant can be either good or bad. Here all humanity is pictured as potential servants. The good servant shows his nature by his behavior—by being faithful and wise. He will fulfill his responsibility and will care for the Lord's household. This good servant stands for the disciple of Jesus (Bock 1994, 232; Carson 1984, 510; Nolland 1993, 703). The good servant then represents a general set of servants which includes the leaders of the church (Keener 1994, 355-356; Gundry 1994, 495-497) who have received a responsibility within the Lord's household, the church. The person who proves himself to be a faithful servant will be recognized and rewarded with eschatological blessing. To the contrary, the evil servant proves his nature by his selfish choices which are manifest in his evil behavior. He fails to do the master's bidding and turns to personal indulgence of the kind typical of unbelievers. Unfaithful service will also be recognized but it will be severely condemned and punished. So, the master in the parable is Jesus. The faithful and wise servant is the believer. The evil servant is the unbeliever.

The parable shows two ways that belief become action—on the one hand, positive action, and, on the other hand, negative action. The main point or response that the parable (and the other parables around it) is supposed to elicit is readiness, watchfulness, responsibility, preparedness, and faithfulness in light of the unknown time of the master's return. In the time of delay, exemplary servants are faithful, as proved by their submission to the Lord's will. Likewise the unfaithful servants will be proved as such by their rebellion.

The severe punishment of the unfaithful servant must not be allegorized into evidence that a believer can lose his salvation—a loss of eternal security. The severe punishment is meant simply to portray how a “servant” (a human being) with an evil heart demonstrates, by his evil action, that he is not really a servant of the master and his actions result in an “evil” end.

Conclusion/Application. The original intent of this pericope transfers well into our present situation. If anything, its message is more acute than it was originally since church history has advanced nearly two-thousand years, thus proving the reality of the delay of the Lord’s return. In such a case, the temptation to question or doubt the speed of the Lord’s return is greater (2 Pet. 3:9) and the possibility of dereliction of duty is also greater. The fact of the Lord’s coming must motivate the true servant, not some estimate of the time of his coming.

On the positive side, the faithful and wise servant today is the one who steadily and continuously performs the duties that the Lord has given, whatever they might be. The modern Christian who seeks to be faithful and wise should maintain a constant vigil in which he or she seeks to fulfill the responsibility placed upon him or her by virtue of their relationship with the Master. On the negative side, the attractions of the modern world are plenteous: cheap and easy forms of entertainment (television, cinema, video, the Internet, email, and cell phones); and new forms of sensual indulgence such as designer drugs, consumerism, greed, living together outside of marriage, homosexual behavior, and illicit forms of hetero-sexuality. Then there are also the intellectually and philosophically sanctioned icons of atheism and individualism. These are perhaps no more grievous than those mentioned in the passage (physical abuse, excessive eating and drinking) but they are

more numerous and stylish today. Those who allow themselves to be obedient to these attractions also show themselves disobedient to the Master.

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