

The Words of Eternal Life

"It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful"—1 Corinthians 4:2

It is often the simplest lessons that are the hardest to learn, because they cut so deeply into our lives. They cut deeply into, and uproot, the basic principles that the world operates upon, and regards as fundamental wisdom.

The teaching of Jesus was addressed to the task of breaking into this taken-for-granted and almost impervious bottom layer of false human wisdom, and completely clearing the ground so that a unique and different kind of life, based entirely on spiritual principles, might be developed in men for God's eternal use and pleasure.

The actual, recorded words of Jesus are comparatively few. Therefore their individual importance is great, for in this brief body of teaching alone lies life.

"The words that I speak unto you, they are Spirit and they are life" (John 6:63).

Let us not be misled by the *apparent simplicity* of Jesus' words. They will be found to be the deepest, most piercing, and most revolutionary words ever spoken. Once they come into a man's life, and begin to actually *take hold upon it*, they will gradually rob him of everything that the world regards as desirable and worthwhile, but as they clear away the empty, worldly things they will fill his life with satisfactions infinitely more desirable.

It is only those, says Jesus, who lose their lives that truly find life. The life of Jesus cannot be veneered on to the surface of a prosperous, worldly life. It must be a fresh, new creation. New wine cannot be put into old bottles, nor can new patches be put on old worn-out garments.

The words of Jesus before us (Matt. 25) are the parable of the virgins, the parable of the talents, and a description of the day of judgment. Let us weigh every word with the greatest care, and absorb into our lives the life-giving lessons they contain.

Upon these words our eternal destiny depends.

These three incidents teach 3 related but differing lessons. Simply interpreted, the parable of the virgins declares that to be accepted, we *must* have a constantly-maintained supply of the Spirit of God in our lives, thoughts and actions. We must have a spiritual reservoir, so that our lives will continually give forth a pure, steady, godly light.

The parable of the talents declares that all man's possessions and abilities are the property of God; that they must be used faithfully in God's service; and that a strict accounting of them will be required when life is done.

The judgment scene teaches that unless our life is dedicated to the benefit of others rather than our own advantage and interests, we shall be rejected at the final day.

Let us then consider these vital words of life more particularly. And let us not regard this consideration as an interesting diversion or a pleasant spiritual relaxation. That is the complacent spirit in which Christendom settles into their cool and comfortable pews to have their ears gently tickled. *Properly comprehending these teachings is a matter of life and death.*

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"Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened to 10 virgins."

When? *Then*—in that day described in the last two verses of the previous chapter. *Then* the importance and meaning of these words of life will be clear to the dullest perception.

They *all* took their lamps; they *all* went forth to meet the Bridegroom. There is clearly therefore no saving virtue in this alone. They saw a good thing and they wanted to share in its advantages. They joined themselves to the bridal party, and complied with all the *external* requirements.

The foolish ones may have wondered in a light, passing way what the heavy, extra vessel was with which some of the virgins were burdening themselves; or they may have smiled knowingly to themselves that these other fearful ones seemed so absurdly concerned to carry along such a huge, unnecessary supply of oil; or they may have been annoyed by the thought that the others were trying to make *them* look careless and unprepared; or they may not have noticed at all. All such viewpoints exist.

"Five of them were wise, and five were foolish (v. 2).

Jesus never minimizes the seriousness of the issues involved. The reverse side of the picture is always clearly and prominently presented. There is no blurring of the edges to make it less painful and upsetting to the fleshly mind.

To the foolish virgins the brief message was, "*I know you not.*" That was all. Just that—and a closed door. No second chance—no heed to tearful and doubtless very sincere repentance and intensive resolve to do better. The time had passed for that. Where is the loving and gentle Jesus, who desires all to be saved, and who came to patiently seek out the lost? *That* Jesus is calling *now*, urging and pleading for adult, mature wisdom and work instead of childish foolishness. Could he do more than lay down his life in intense suffering to emphasize the vital seriousness of the words he said?

To the lazy, self-pleasing servant the verdict was, "*Take everything he has from him, and cast him out.*" Where is the kind and compassionate Savior of men? Who is this dreadful, pitiless figure who casts out his professed and pleading servants?

"Thou knewest that I was an austere man" (Luke 19:22).

Austere *to whom*? Those to whom he says, "Come, ye blessed of my Father"—will *they* regard him as austere—cold, distant, unfriendly, implacable in anger? Not at all. His appearance of austerity will depend entirely upon the record of the individual who faces him.

And to those in the last scene who claimed to be his servants, and who had selfishly sought all his benefits, without giving their lives to help his cause and his brethren, come the most terrible words of all—

"Depart from me, **ye cursed**, into everlasting (aionian) fire."

No, Jesus did not at all minimize the seriousness of the issue. This heart-piercing teaching of Jesus created two classes among his hearers, just as he intended. There were those that said, "*These are hard sayings; how severe, how discouraging!*"—and they walked no longer with him. Where did they go? Did they find something better or more satisfying?—an easier way to life?

That was the majority—and Jesus let them go. He made no effort to persuade them to stay. He had shown them the power of God, and the way of life—and it annoyed them to consider the change and effort it involved. He had revealed to them eternity—and it was too big for them. They preferred to slip back into the easy darkness. *And he let them go.*

But there was another class. Very few; just a handful. Consider their answer when he turned and put the choice to them:

"Where SHALL we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life."

This was the way of life, and there was no other. So they gave their whole heart and soul to laying hold of it, and *did not complain about its hardness, or about "discouragement."*

The cost of the Pearl of Great Price was "*all that he had*" (Matt. 13:46). There are two classes of people illustrated by these parables. There are those who are anxious to pay the price and wish they could give more; and there are those who begrudge it and would like to get it cheaper.

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"Five of them were wise, and five were foolish."

He does not say "good" and "bad," but "*wise*" and "*foolish*." The Spirit through Solomon says—

"Forsake the foolish, and live. If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself: but if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it" (Prov. 9: 6, 12).

God ceaselessly urges men to wake up and look at the real facts of life. *Foolishness simply injures the doer of it, and benefits no one.* The course of life He prescribes is the course of wisdom and peace. But they stare emptily at Him and continue in their childish amusements. Does not this show that natural man is the most foolish of all the animal creation?

The Scriptures tell us that many creatures—the ox, the ass, the ant, spider, coney, locust—all are wiser than man.

"*The ox knoweth his owner*"—man knows not his Maker.

"*The ass knoweth his master's crib*," but man does not recognize the Source of all his benefits.

"*Go to the ant*," says Solomon, "*Consider her ways, and be wise.*" The ants take advantage of a time of opportunity, and prepare for the future. But man—busy about passing things—fails to store up the one thing that will be any good to him when the Bridegroom comes—the spiritual oil in his vessel.

"*The conies make their houses in the rocks*," but man prefers to build his vast edifices on the shifting sand.

"*The locusts go forth all of them by bands.*" United and irresistible, nothing can stop the locusts or turn them from their purpose. But how few men display these characteristics in the pursuit of eternal life—the highest possible purpose!

"*The spider taketh hold with her hands, and is in kings' palaces.*" The patient, tireless, spinning industry of the spider. But how few men really and earnestly take hold with their hands, and how few will ever attain to the King's palaces!

Of these four weak creatures, Solomon declares, "*They are exceedingly wise.*" They represent in Solomon's allegory the wise virgins, the ones who at present store in their lives and minds the divine treasures of spiritual wisdom which will cause their lamps to shine forth brightly in the day of judgment.

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"For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants and delivered unto them his goods" (v. 14).

The heart of this parable lies in those last two words—*HIS goods*. If we grasp the depth of the significance of that expression, and apply it to our lives, we have gained the life-giving wisdom that the parable teaches.

We are "*his servants*" and all things we possess are "*his goods*." He has a great purpose in hand, and "*his servants*" are directed to use "*his goods*" exclusively for that purpose.

There are several instructive lessons in these particular "words of eternal life." First, pride and self-esteem are completely ruled out as foolish ignorance. As Paul says—

"What hast thou that thou didst not receive? Why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (I Cor. 4:7).

If to glorify ourselves on account of what we have been given is foolish, what shall we say of glorifying ourselves on account of *sinful misuse* of those things? If we use God-bestowed talents and abilities for our own *personal comfort and advantage*, what will the Lord of those servants say to us when he comes for the reckoning? Jesus says (Luke 16:11)—

"If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?"

Let us ever remember those two vital expressions: "*his servants—his goods*." Paul says (1 Cor. 4:2)—

"It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful."

That is the first, essential quality that is required in those entrusted with the goods of another—a rigid faithfulness to resist the temptation to minister to personal desire and gratification, and to see that *all* the entrusted goods are used for the master's purpose.

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

All activity must have some incentive. The secret of getting anything done is to *create the incentive*. The incentive in spiritual things lies in a strong, ever-present perception of the reality of the future. Of Jesus it is recorded (Heb. 12:2)—

"For the joy set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame."

That was his incentive—his driving force. His teaching is largely concerned with creating an incentive in men to follow the course of divine wisdom; impressing them with how much is to be gained by following the right course—how much to be lost by following the wrong—how much more *desirable* is the beauty of holiness than the ugliness of the natural mind.

The time of reckoning is bound to come. It will either be a glad opportunity to lay before the Master the fruits of a life of loving labor, or else it will be a time of intense remorse and regret for past neglect and foolishness. Jesus is trying in these parables to get men to think about that time, and get ready for it. His words are hard words—*certainly* they are hard words! Would it be kind for him to give smooth and comfortable words, when only hard and clear words truly and fairly reveal the facts that must some day be faced by all?

The unfaithful servant is called for his account. His first words are, "I knew thou art a hard man." *He is obsessed with this idea of "hardness."* He has no real love or enthusiasm for his master's work. He resents being told what he must do, or having his pleasure interfered with. He did not realize that the master was concerned solely with the servants' own welfare, and was just *testing them as a basis for future gifts and honor*.

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"Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom" . . .
"Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire" (vs. 34 & 41).

There are the two sides of the picture. Some brethren and sisters will hear one, and some the other. This is a terrible reality, and we should live constantly in the shadow of it. There is no need for *anyone* to hear the latter message. That is the great pity of it. God desires that none should be rejected. This part of the picture is so utterly unnecessary and avoidable. These words of Jesus are words of life—to *some*, the wise.

What constitutes the difference between the two classes in this scene? It is this. One group fed, clothed and visited Christ's suffering brethren; the other did not. These are simple words, but let us not be deceived—they go right to the roots of life. They do not mean just making a pleasant hobby of a few visits and acts of charity. They refer to a basic, consistent, full-time *course of life*—a course that is related to the storing up of the spirit oil and the faithful use of the master's talents.

The natural man serves himself. His basic law is to do well by himself. He is primarily concerned with his own welfare and security. His labors are directed toward the gratification of his lusts, greed and pride. This is not only regarded as legitimate and commendable, but it is taken for granted as a first principle of life. The natural man is *self-centered*. With the spiritual man, *God* is the center, and his own present advantage or profit is incidental.

The natural man is wrapped up in his own interests; the spiritual man is wholly absorbed with the things that *God* is doing. He is so obsessed with the glories of the future, so anxious to learn all about God's ways and be useful in the working out of them, that passing things hold little interest for him.

These are the two classes Jesus is speaking of. The accepted are surprised at his warm words of commendation, for they are painfully aware of how little they have actually done. The others are terribly surprised at their rejection. They had been so wrapped up in their own perfectly legitimate interests and activities that they had never stopped to think about the possible application of this parable to themselves. They were "in the Truth," they attended the meetings, they knew the sick were being visited fairly regularly and they even occasionally visited them themselves. And not only that, but out of their comfortable surplus they had given the Master back what *they* considered was a very generous percentage of his own talent!

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Let us remember that it was just two days before his crucifixion that Jesus spoke these solemn words of life. He had said,

"Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 16:25).

The power of Christ's words lies in the life—and the death— by which he illustrated them. That life and death we meet each week to remember. The purpose of this institution is to remind us of the tremendous sacrifice he made for the sake of the things he believed and taught.

Having, by his own life, put the divine and more excellent way into perfect practice, he gave that life to lay a basis for the acceptance of those few among men who should faithfully follow in his steps.

Let us store up in our hearts his words of life about the foolish virgins, the unfaithfully-handled talent, and the rejected brethren and sisters at the judgment seat. —G.V.G.
