

Topic 7: Evil king or bad servant?

Verses: Luke 19:11-27; Matt 25:14-30

Chong Ho Yu

Differences between three accounts

- Luke wrote about the background of the parable: “He (Jesus) was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.” But Matthew didn’t talk about the background information in this passage.
- In Luke the wealthy man is a man of noble birth. He went to a distant country to be appointed King. Matthew didn’t talk about these.
- In Luke the wealthy man gave minas to each of the ten servants. In Matthew it was done differently. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, depending on the servant’s ability.
- Luke wrote that the subjects hated this man and didn’t want him to be the king. Matthew didn’t mention whether people liked this man or not.
- In Luke the servants that earned more money were awarded cities. In Matthew the master put them in charge of many things and they could share the master’s happiness.
- In Luke the last servant kept the money inside a piece of cloth whereas in Matthew he dug a hole to hide it.
- In both Luke and Matthew the servant said the master is a hard man. He took out what he didn’t put in and reap what he didn’t sow.
- In both Luke and Matthew the verbal responses of the master are similar. He called the servant “the wicked servant.” In Matthew the master added two more words: “lazy” and ‘worthless.’ The master wondered why the servant didn’t put the money into the bank to earn at least some interest.
- In Luke there was a bystander showing his amazement when the king took away his money and gave it to the servant who already had ten minas. But in Matthew this character is missing.
- In both Gospels the actions of the master are similar. He took the money away from the servant and gave them to the one that had earned most money. In Luke the king killed those people that were opposed him. In Matthew the master threw the servant into darkness.

Theme of Matt 24:36-25:13

In this passage Jesus said that the end day is imminent. It might come at any time and thus it is better to be well-prepared. Jesus used two parables: some foolish servants thought that because the master was gone he could do anything, but the master surprised him by a sudden return. The virgins who didn’t acquire enough oil walked away to buy oil, and as a result they could not attend the wedding banquet.

These two parables are related to the parable of the servants in the sense that Jesus urged people to be well-prepared. The Son of Man, like the master, might come back at any moment. People must wisely use their skill to accomplish their job, otherwise the Lord would be angry at those who didn’t do what they are supposed to do.

Theme of Luke 19:11

- Jesus told this parable because he was near Jerusalem. Entering Jerusalem is the climax of His ministry (the passion and the resurrection).
- People thought that the Kingdom of God was going to appear. It seems that the parable is related to the upcoming Kingdom of God.
- The parable is about a returning king. But that is a bad king. Apparently Jesus was not comparing himself to the brutal and unpopular king. The parable should be related to the kingdom of God in some other ways.

Form and setting

The form of this passage is a **parable**. There are several characteristics in a parable. First, it is a brief narrative. Second, the meaning is so vague that it provokes the hearer's attention and contemplation. Usually there is more than one point to be made and thus the richness of the story cannot be reduced to a statement. Once the disciples asked Jesus, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" Jesus replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them... This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." (Matt 13:10-11, 13-14). Hence, the function of a parable is both **to reveal and to conceal**. This ambiguous story is exactly doing these.

According to Carroll (2012), the parable in Luke is so complex that it has two plots. One is about a royal reign conferred to be the king (v. 12), faced opposition (v. 14), and then reasserted his kingship with violent suppression (vv. 15a, 27). The other is about appraising the service performed by that king's slaves during his absence. Whether this is one coherent story or two merged stories is open to debate. Nonetheless, it is common that a parable might have **multiple connotations**.

There are different interpretations of this parable. The traditional interpretation is that Jesus urged people to be well-prepared and productive because the Kingdom of God would be coming soon. If this is correct, the setting of this story in the early church may simply be preaching the imminent return of Christ. However, there is a problem. It is strange to compare to the cruel master in the story to a loving God. In addition, early Christian ethics disprove amassing wealth. It is plausible that this story is used to criticize against the greedy and power-hungry men who abuse their servants. The message may be: the kingdom of God is near and therefore do not abuse the poor.

Attitudes toward money

The first-century Palestine economy was viewed as a limited good society, in which the "pie" is fixed and those who take a larger share of the pie deprive other people of accessing the same resources. Merchants could amass wealth but the duty of farmers was simply to maintain what they needed for day-by-day living. In the Greek culture Aristotle viewed trade as an unnatural way of acquiring wealth. In the Jewish culture it was considered evil to loan money to people while charging the borrower interest.

The above background information illuminates the meaning of this parable. In the Westerner's perspective the demand of the master is reasonable. It is better to make more money by investment than doing nothing. However, what the so-called "wicked and lazy" servant did was nothing wrong in

the cultural context of the first-century Palestine. Instead, the master was considered mean and evil because of his greed.

Redactional differences in Matthew

In Luke the master gave each servant the same amount of money, but in Matthew the master distributed different amounts to different servants, according to their ability. This principle is found in Matthew 13:12: "Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them." In an alignment to this principle, Matthew added the detail to illustrate **good stewardship**. According to Utley (2000), "this parable shows the need not only for initial salvation but for ongoing responsibility. Profession is confirmed by lifestyle. No fruit—no root!" (p.207)

Further, France (2007) argued that Matthew's passage is an expansion of the Markan account. Mark 13:32-37 briefly mentioned the "unknown day and hour." But Matthew expanded this line of thought with three parables from 24:45 to 25:46.

Redactional differences in Luke

Unlike Matthew, Luke added **the role of a king** to the master. In the story the master went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to oppose the appointment. At the end this man killed all those who opposed him. It is possible that when Luke edited this story, he had Herod and Archelaus in mind. Herod the Great (40 B.C.) and his son Archelaus (4 B.C.) went to Rome to receive the right to rule Judea. Both Herod and Archelaus were unpopular with the Jews. Herod the Great fought against opposition until 37 B.C. before his kingdom was securely under his control. Also, fifty representatives from the Jews went to Rome to oppose Archelaus (Keener, 1993). The parable has a violent end: The king massacred all his opponents. Carroll (2012) suggests that when Luke edited this passage, he was reflecting the destruction of the Temple by General Titus in 70 AD.

In Luke the servant told the master, "I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow." The servant didn't ask for forgiveness. Rather, he explicitly pointed out the flaw of his master. However, what does it mean when the servant said the master took out what he did not put in and reap what he did not sow? Didn't the master give the servant money and ask him to put this money to work?

The action of the master, according to Carroll (2012), "turns the values and practices of the realm of God upside down" (p.381). Jesus asked his disciples and those who want to be his disciples give up wealth to people who lack, instead of making investment and amassing wealth. This parable does not show the characteristics of the Kingdom of God.

It is very likely that in this parable the mean and brutal master represents the king of Judas. He didn't give his people anything. Rather, he was the puppet of the Roman Empire that oppressed the Jews. Taking the above background information into account, it is plausible that the redactional feature of the king is to emphasize the message that the kingdom is near and the returning Christ would punish the oppressor.

Another possible interpretation is that many Jews expected a dramatic coming of the Messiah and the setting up of the Age of Righteousness with Jews in charge. However, Luke's Gospel emphasizes a **delayed Second Coming** and this parable may be an anti-climax in which the returning "king" would bring about a horrible consequence (Utley, 2004).

Non-traditional perspective

Rohrbaugh's approach allows him to give a non-traditional interpretation of the parable, because he observed that **Jesus didn't approve what the master or the king said**. Rohrbaugh did a cultural and historical survey about people's attitude towards wealth in the first century Palestine. Indeed this information concurs with what Davids (1992) found. According to Davids, Judaism did not have a problem with wealth, and amassing possessions was not necessarily viewed as evil. Rather, the stories of Abraham, Solomon, and Job showed a connection between wealth and God's blessing. This is known as the **piety-prosperity equation**. However, Jesus saw wealth as an obstacle to entering the kingdom of God and pronounced that the blessed are those who are the poor. If we interpret that in this parable Jesus sided with the profit-minded master and disapproved the servant, then this parable and other Jesus' teaching are contradictory. Rohrbaugh cited early church writings (e.g. The Gospel of Nazoreans) to argue that indeed the Nazorean version of the story approved the behavior of the third servant.

Bibliography

Carroll, John T. *Luke: A Commentary. New Testament Library*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012.

Davids, P. H. "Rich and Poor," In *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Ed. J. B. Green (Ed.), 701. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992.

France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew. New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.

Keener, C. S. *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Rohrbaugh, Richard L. "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds: A Text of Terror?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 23(1): 32-39, 1993.

Utley, R. J. *The First Christian Primer: Matthew* (Vol. Volume 9). Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2000.

Utley, R. J. *The Gospel according to Luke* (Vol. Volume 3A). Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2004.