

13. The Persistent Widow (Lk 18:1-8) and the Separation of Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46)

These final two parables in this study deal with the coming of the Lord and the consequences to humankind. The persistent widow illustrates the need for prayer and the relationship of prayer to faith. The separation of the sheep and the goats illustrates the need for doing what is good to all men while we are here on this earth. Both parables deal directly with the second coming of the Lord, and as parables, they teach principles that are true in their components: the second coming, the judgment, the reward, and the punishment.

The Persistent Widow

Luke 18:1-8: 18:1 *Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'*

4 *"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"*

6 *And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"*

Jesus states directly the teaching intent of the parable of the persistent widow. The parable teaches that disciples are always to pray and not give up. Prayer is the sustaining force for struggling Christians. Later when the disciples are sleeping while waiting for him in the garden, Jesus said in Matt 26:41, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Just as the widow who cried out to the unrighteous judge received an answer, much more so shall Christians who cry out to God receive an answer to their prayers. Our cry must be persistent. We should cry out to God day and night if we expect his justice.

To pray in this manner requires continual prayer and thanksgiving. In Eph 6:18, Paul taught, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." Paul also gave the Thessalonians a similar admonition in 1 Thess 5:16-18, "Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Justice will be delivered now and with the coming of Jesus. Paul wrote in 2 Thess 1:6-10:

6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power 10 on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

The last statement of the parable shows a connection between prayer and faith that cannot be severed. Jesus concluded, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" The key to maintaining our faith is continual, fervent prayer.

The Separation of the Sheep and the Goats

Matt 25:31-46 31 *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45 "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

In this parable of the separation of the sheep and the goats, the Lord once again relates the events described to when the Lord comes. All the parts of a parable being true, we are to understand that when the Lord comes it will be for judgment and the throne upon which he sits will be the "his throne in heavenly glory." The scene described is the same scene as the one above in 2 Thess 1. Rev 22:1-5 describes the throne and its glory:

22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Rev 5:6-14 shows the Lamb on the throne and the inclusion of the righteous in the glory of the throne:

6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. 8 And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. 10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. 12 In a loud voice they sang:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!"

13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

14 The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

However, just as the reward is eternal, real and awesome, so the punishment is eternal, severe, and awful. The eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels is the destiny of the unrighteous. The conclusion of all things evil begins with Rev 19:20:

20 But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur.

The fate of the devil and his minions includes the same lake of fire in Rev 20:12-15

12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. 14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. 15 If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Finally, there is the destruction of all the wicked in Rev 21:6-8:

6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

The separation of the righteous and the wicked—the sheep and the goats—occurs based on the most easily done of good works. "For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me," Jesus said. These good works are things that we can all do. In Gal 6:7-10, Paul similarly taught:

7 Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. 8 The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. 9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Conclusion

These two parables connect two areas of living the Christian life to the reward that will come to us in the last day when the Lord comes. Will he find us faithful in doing good works and will he find us faithful in petitioning our heavenly father? The reward is awesome in heavenly splendor, and the penalty is awful in its fiery and eternal punishment.

Study Questions

1. What is a parable?
2. Are the elements of a parable true or untrue?
3. What was the main subject illustrated by the teachings of all the parables?
4. Can you draw a diagram to illustrate how parables work to teach a spiritual lesson?