



A Thief in the Night – The Last Judgment

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The movie, “A Thief in the Night” which came out in the 70’s sort of became the catch word for speaking of the “Rapture.” This was a doctrine that basically said that Christ would return to extract His own out of the world before the anti-christ came and the really bad tribulation would come. In the 24th chapter of Matthew, Jesus had just finished giving the disciples a somewhat detailed “here is what is going to happen” and what signs to look for when He returned, and that was well into the great tribulation that was to take place. Essentially, he warned them that many would come in His name to deceive even the elect. Yet, He gave specific signs that would indicate that His return is nigh and “at the door.” Yet, he refrained from giving a specific time, a specific day. This is important and for our good, despite the fact that many people down through history have made attempts to predict when Christ would return. Even back in the early Church this was going on as can be seen in a quote from St. Augustine:

A man makes as it were a calculation with himself: “Lo, so many years have passed since Adam, and the six thousand years are being completed, and then immediately according to the computation of certain expositors, the Day of Judgment will come;” yet these calculations come and pass away, and still the coming of the Bridegroom is delayed, and the virgins who had gone to meet him sleep.

St. Augustine, Sermon 43

Nothing is new under the sun. However, there are some serious problems with the manner in which these have tended to be interpreted, for they invariably tend to focus on that which our Lord specifically didn’t want us to focus on...a specific day and time. To this end, Jesus Christ gives us a few parables that direct us not only to focus on something other than the time of His coming, but also on how we are to be using that time.

But of that day and hour, knoweth no man, no, not the angels of Heaven, but My Father only. (Matthew 24:36)

After giving them signs and the parable of the fig tree to indicate that when they see these things taking place, to know that His coming is at the door and that this generation will not pass away until these things be fulfilled, he gives them this notice, that only the Father knows the day and hour of the end. There are two reasons He does not give them the day. 1. So that they will not be looking for a specific day (which has not stopped too many people) and 2. because that day is not the same for everyone, but all will have their day.

It is amazing how many in direct violation of what God has put forth still attempt to figure out the day and hour of His return based on all sorts of calculations and such. How many have there been through history? More than we know, yet we know of plenty. Yet, it was exactly this fixation upon this that Christ wanted to avoid. This is what the parable of the thief in the night is pointing us

towards.

Jesus tells us straight forward that He is coming as a thief in the night. This is not going to be announced or ads appear in the paper announcing His return. Rather, it will be sudden and unexpected, when we think we are secure and safe. So, why doesn't Jesus want to tell us the day and hour? The first answer the Fathers give is because if we knew the day and hour, we would not be watchful but lazy. If we know the day and hour, then we will be watchful **during that time** and that time alone, but ignore Christ otherwise. No, Christ wants us to be watchful all the time, and the only way that can happen is if we do not know the day or hour.

In order therefore that they may strive, not at that hour only, therefore He tells them not either the common hour, or the hour of each, desiring them to be ever looking for this, that they may be always striving. Wherefore He made the end of each man's life also uncertain.

St. John Chrysostom, "Homilies on Matthew", Homily 77

The next point is mentioned in St. John's quote here. There is a "common" hour when Christ returns as the Bible states, but there is also the "hour of each" and here he speaks of our physical death.

Art thou young? Do not be confident in thy youth, nor think that thou hast a very fixed term of life, "For the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night." On this account he has made our end invisible, in order that we might make our diligence and our forethought plain. Dost thou not see men taken away prematurely day after day? On this account a certain one admonishes "make no tarrying to turn to the Lord and put not off from day to day," lest at any time, as thou delayest, thou art destroyed.

St. John Chrysostom, "Demons do not Govern the World," Homily 2

Fear the uncertainty of the future. "As a thief in the night," so death comes: and not merely as a thief, but while we sleep it sets upon us, and carries us off while we are idling. To this end has God made the future uncertain, that we may spend Our time in the practice of virtue, because of the uncertainty of expectation.

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, Homily 23

"The day of the Lord," says the Apostle, "will come as a thief in the night." Therefore watch thou by night that thou be not surprised by the thief. For the sleep of death — will ye, or nill ye — it will come.

St. Augustine, Sermon 43

To this end the rest of the parables fill in the details, not only what to expect as to when it might take place but also by what it is we are to be focused on during this time before the Last Judgment we each face. How are we to be watchful?

In Matthew 24:45-51 we have the parable of the wise and faithful servant contrasted with that of the "evil" servant. The faithful servant is so because he **gives** the meat in its due season. St. John Chrysostom notes this as he does with most everything in these parables as speaking of alms giving and that the evil servant is evil because instead of giving out what the master gave him for the benefit of all, he makes use of it himself.

For to this servant are they like, who have money, and give not to the needy. For thou too art steward of thine own possessions, not less than he who dispenses the alms of the church. As then he has not a right to squander at random and at hazard the things given by you for the poor, since they were given for the maintenance of the poor; even so neither mayest thou squander thine own. For even though thou hast received an inheritance from thy father, and hast in this way all thou possessest: even thus all are God's. And then thou for thy part desirest that what thou hast given should be thus

carefully dispensed, and thinkest thou not that God will require His own of us with greater strictness, or that He suffers them to be wasted at random? These things are not, they are not so. Because for this end, He left these things in thine hand, in order “to give them their meat in due season.” But what meaneth, “in due season?” To the needy, to the hungry. For like as thou gavest to thy fellow-servant to dispense, even so doth the Lord will thee too to spend these things on what is needful. Therefore though He was able to take them away from thee, He left them, that thou mightest have opportunity to show forth virtue; that bringing us into need one of another, He might make our love for one another more fervent.

St. John Chrysostom, “Homilies on Matthew,” Homily 77

Then note that the evil servant is caught unaware of the master’s return. If he had known, he would have prepared, yet he did not and the key phrase “My lord delayeth his coming” shows forth the reason for his evil actions. Thinking the master’s return was not yet to happen, and thinking that he somehow knew the hour was not yet, the hour comes upon him and he is caught in a lack of virtues. The wise and faithful servant, however, is the one who is doing what he is suppose to be doing all the time so he is ready at any moment for the lord’s return. You will note that using the word “wise” here is repeated in the next parable, for it is foolish to assume when the Lord will return since we know not the day or hour. Yet many even if they do not sit down and calculate out the day from Biblical prophecy, will by their actions act as if the Lord’s return is a long ways off still. This is folly of the most serious kind because of the consequences of being wrong.

Matthew 25:1-13 – Parable of the ten virgins

In this parable we have ten virgins, five foolish and five wise. The foolish virgins were foolish because they failed to bring enough oil for their lamps so that when it was announced that the bridegroom was coming, they awoke and found that their lamps were on the verge of going out. The five wise, not willing to give up there own, tell them to go out and buy some more, but they are too late and in coming back find the door shut and no one will let them in.

There are several points to this parable that could be mentioned but here are some key ones. What is the general interpretation you have heard as to what the oil represents here? Have not many of us, especially those from Protestant backgrounds, always heard that the oil was the Holy Spirit? It was the Holy Spirit that these virgins were running out of. So, in looking into the Fathers I sort of expected to find that understanding, if not by all at least by some. However, I didn’t find one Father who made that connection. Rather, they made a quite different connection, one that I can understand why many Protestants would want to avoid. The oil is, according to the Fathers, virtue, good works, and St. John Chrysostom specifically says it is alms giving. Here are some excerpts:

...as the oil of piety was deficient in the five foolish virgins mentioned in the Gospel, when they, on account of their having extinguished their lamps of divine knowledge, were shut out of the bride-chamber. Wherefore he who values the security of his soul will take care to be out of danger, by keeping free from sin, that so he may preserve the advantage of his former good works to himself.

“The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” Section 3, #14

The gospel teaches us this in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins; the former of whom enter into the bride-chamber of the bridegroom, while the latter are shut out from it because not having the oil of good works they allow their lamps to fail.

St. Jerome, Letter to Demetrias

Now the oil represents wisdom and righteousness; for while the soul rains down unsparingly, and pours forth these things upon the body, the light of virtue is kindled unquenchably, making its good actions to shine before men, so that our Father which is

in heaven may be glorified.

Methodius, "The Banquet of the Ten Virgins," Discourse 6, chp. 3

And indeed the foolish virgins took no oil in their vessels, but the wise ones took oil in their vessels with their lamps (Matthew 25). Now our lamps are good works; of which it is written, Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Matthew 5:16). And we then take oil in our vessels with our lamps, when we seek not the splendor of glory for our good deeds from the adulation of our neighbors, but preserve it in the testimony of our conscience.

St. Gregory the Great, Book 11, Epistle 45

In this last quote, you will also see another qualification mentioned, that it is works done not for the praise of men, but only to God. St. Augustine makes this point as well:

Do you then carry it with thee, carry it within where God seeth; there carry the testimony of thy conscience. For he who walks to gain the testimony of another, does not carry oil with him. If thou abstain from things unlawful, and doest good works to be praised of men; there is no oil within. And so when men begin to leave off their praises, the lamps fail. Observe then, Beloved, before those virgins slept, it is not said that their lamps were extinguished. The lamps of the wise virgins burned with an inward oil, with the assurance of a good conscience, with an inner glory, with an inmost charity. Yet the lamps of the foolish virgins burned also. Why burnt they then? Because there was yet no want of the praises of men. But after that they arose, that is in the resurrection from the dead, they began to trim their lamps, that is, began to prepare to render unto God an account of their works. And because there is then no one to praise, every man is wholly employed in his own cause, there is no one then who is not thinking of himself, therefore were there none to sell them oil; so their lamps began to fail.

St. Augustine, Sermon 43

Also, we see again the concept of "midnight" as we did with the thief and this is considered an indication that the virgins had fallen asleep in physical death and that the Lord comes and awakens them referring to the resurrection. So, the need to have adequate oil before going asleep is emphasized here, because after that you will not have a chance to buy more.

What then is the meaning of they "all slept"? There is another sleep which no one escapes. Remember ye not the Apostle saying, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep," that is, concerning them which are dead? For why are they called "they which are asleep," but because they are in their own day? Therefore "they all slept." Thinkest thou that because one is wise, he has not therefore to die? Be the virgin foolish, or be she wise, all suffer equally the sleep of death.

St. Augustine, Sermon 43

"Then, while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept." He shows that the time intervening will not be short, leading His disciples away from the expectation that His kingdom was quite immediately to appear. For this indeed they hoped, therefore He is continually holding them back from this hope. And at the same time He intimates this too, that death is a sleep. For they slept, He saith.

St. John Chrysostom, "Homilies on Matthew," Homily 78

St. John brings up another interesting contrast with the earlier parable. For the evil servant thought that his lord would be delayed in his coming, and he came sooner than expected. Here, the foolish virgins thought that the bridegroom would be coming quickly and so did not have enough oil with

them to last until His return. In the other parable, Christ says to expect it at any moment, and this parable He tells us that we need to expect it will take a long time and so never give up on striving for the virtues. In other words, we really don't know the day or the hour! It could be today, it could be hundreds of years from now, but for each of us it will be at the end of our lives, when we fall asleep and then awake to the Lord's return. Will we have the oil we need then?

Note also what Christ's answer is to the foolish virgins who return and bang on the door to be let in. "I know you not!" Going back to the parable of the sheep and goats, how was it that Christ knew the sheep? Because they fed Him, they clothed Him and visited Him. They gave of themselves, and that is the essence of what St. John speaks of when he talks about giving alms, for the other works are glued together by our stewardship of what we have been given.

And after these virtues let us seek, which together with our own salvation will be able in the greatest degree to profit our neighbor. Such is almsgiving, such is prayer, or rather even this latter is by the former made efficacious, and furnished with wings. "For thy prayers," it is said, "and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God." But not prayers only, but fasting also hath its strength from hence. Shouldest thou fast without almsgiving; the act is not so much as counted for fasting; but such a one is worse than a gluttonous man and a drunkard; and so much worse, as cruelty is a more grievous thing than luxury. And why do I speak of fasting? Though thou practice self-denial, though thou practice virginity, thou art set without the bride-chamber. if thou hast not almsgiving. And yet what is equal to virginity, which not even in the new dispensation hath come under the compulsion of law, on account of its high excellence? But nevertheless it is cast out, when it hath not almsgiving. But if virgins are cast out, because they have not this in due abundance, who will be able without this to obtain pardon? There is no man, but he must quite of necessity perish, who hath not this.
St. John Chrysostom, "Homilies on Matthew," Homily 77

It is to this last point that Christ now turns to instruct us further by one more parable.

Matthew 25:14-30 – Parable of the talents

The master goes away and leaves his servants with some of his goods. To one he gives ten talents, to another five and to another one. While the master is away, the first two double their amounts through investing, but the one hides his away in fear of losing it. When the master returns, he commends the two for doubling what he gave them, but denounces the servant who hid his in the earth.

Implied in this parable is still the concept that we have seen that no one knows the day or hour, so keep watch. Yet, this is from a different angle than the others, for it focuses on the one who is preoccupied with other things, and takes what God gives in the way of grace and does nothing with it. It is likely that on one hand he does nothing with it because he also does not feel the time is upon him, that he has time to do something with it. Yet, even more, is the sense that it was something that he didn't want to deal with, he thought he had more important concerns and so he hid it. He no longer had to look at it and face what to do with it. In this, the root cause is his view of the master as "hard" man, and so the servant did not want to deal with this "hard" man.

For, of course, when he was required to deliver up to his Lord that which belonged to him, he should have acknowledged the kindness of him who gave it, and the value of that which was given. For he who gave was not a hard man, had he been so, he would not have given even in the first instance; neither was that which was given unprofitable and vain, for then he had not found fault. But both he who gave was good, and that which was given was capable of bearing fruit. As therefore 'he who withholdeth corn in seed-time is cursed,' according to the divine proverb, so he who neglects grace, and hides it without culture, is properly cast out as a wicked and unthankful person.

St. Athanasius, "Festal Letters," Letter 3

How can we then properly be a steward of what God has given us if we fail to look upon Him as a loving and merciful master who will help us to invest His grace into our lives and the lives of others? For that is what the talents we have been given are to be used for, they are the "good works" and virtues used to minister to the whole Body of Christ.

For no virtuous action can be very exalted, when it doth not distribute its benefit to others also: as is shown by him who brought the one talent safe, and was cut in sunder because he had not made more of it.

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, Homily 25

Knowing then these things, let us contribute alike wealth, and diligence, and protection, and all things for our neighbor's advantage. For the talents here are each person's ability, whether in the way of protection, or in money, or in teaching, or in what thing soever of the kind. Let no man say, I have but one talent, and can do nothing; for thou can not even by one approve thyself. For thou art not poorer than that widow; thou art not more uninstructed than Peter and John. who were both "unlearned and ignorant men;" but nevertheless, since they showed forth a zeal, and did all things for the common good, they attained to Heaven. For nothing is so pleasing to God, as to live for the common advantage. For this end God gave us speech, and hands, and feet, and strength of body, and mind, and understanding, that we might use all these things, both for our own salvation, and for our neighbor's advantage. For not for hymns only and thanksgivings is our speech serviceable to us, but it is profitable also for instruction and admonition. And if indeed we used it to this end, we should be imitating our Master; but if for the opposite ends, the devil.

St. John Chrysostom, "Homilies on Matthew," Homily 77

St. John speaks of a more evangelistic focus to our ministry:

But this does not suffice for our safety, unless by teaching we amend others, since he who produced the one talent, restoring as he did the whole portion committed to him, was punished, because he had not enriched that with which he was entrusted.

Wherefore, let us not regard this point, that we ourselves have been set free from this sin; but until we have delivered others from it, let us not desist; and let every one offer to God ten friends whom he has corrected; whether thou hast servants, or apprentices: or if you have neither servants, nor apprentices, you have friends; these do thou reform.

St. John Chrysostom, "Homilies on the Statues," Homily 20

And yet, it is not so much the quantity, for to everyone who has been given much, more is required and this parable tells us that again, for as St. John Chrysostom notes:

Thou hadst one talent. Thou aughtest then to have brought one besides, and to have doubled the talent. If thou hadst brought one in addition, thou wouldst not have been blamed. For neither did He say to him who brought the two, Wherefore hast thou not brought five? But He accounted him of the same worth with him who brought the five. Why? Because he gained as much as he had. And, because he had received fewer than the one entrusted with the five, he was not on this account negligent, nor did he use the smallness [of his trust, as an excuse] for idleness. And thou aughtest not to have looked to him who had the two; or rather, thou aughtest to have looked to him, and as he having two imitated him who had five, so aughtest thou to have emulated him who had two. For if for him who has means and does not give, there is punishment, how shall there not be the greatest punishment for him who is able to exhort in any way, and does it not? In the former case the body is nourished, in the latter the soul; there thou preventest

temporal death, here eternal.

Ibid., Homilies on Hebrews, Homily 30

The parables here help us to deal with the reality of the Last Judgment in our current life. What does it mean to us? What are we to be looking for, what are we to spend our time doing? Are we to try and figure out the day and hour? Are we to sell our belongings and sit on a hill awaiting the return? Are we to spend our time acting as if His coming is a long ways off and will not happen today? Each of these are addressed here and the point is made that we are to live as if it were happening today or tomorrow, and to live as if it was some ways off into the future. In either case, it is due to the fact that we do not know when it will come, and this was done specifically so that we would focus on what we are suppose to be doing, not upon other things. This gives us reason to keep watch, to live a life devoted to God and not our own interest and concerns. It forces us to give of our selves for the benefit of the whole Body of Christ.

But He seemeth to be here hinting also at those that live in luxury, since for luxury too there is laid up a great punishment. "For He eateth and drinketh, it is said, "with the drunken, pointing at gluttony. For not for this purpose didst thou receive, that thou should spend it on luxury, but that thou shouldst lay it out on alms. What! are they thine own things which thou hast? With the goods of the poor hast thou been entrusted, though thou be possessed of them by honest labor, or though it be by inheritance from thy father. What, could not God have taken away these things from thee? But He doth not this, to give thee power to be liberal to the poor. But mark thou, I pray thee, how throughout all the parables He punishes them that lay not out their money upon the needy. For neither had the virgins robbed other men's goods, but they had not given their own; neither had he that buried the one talent embezzled, but he had not doubled; neither are they that overlooked the hungry punished, because they seized the possessions of others, but because they did not lay out their own, like as also this servant.

St. John Chrysostom, "Homilies on Matthew," Homily 77

We are commanded to give. It can be a difficult call for we all have our financial concerns, yet we are called to give what God has given us, to invest it in other rather than hoarding it in the ground and building bigger barns. We are see and act towards others as true images of Christ. In this way, we are to spend our time until our own end on this earth comes about or the Lord returns. All of us will have our day, but will we have the oil needed for our lamps to shine with God's glory? May God have mercy on us. Amen.

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