

# THE BIBLE



## Biblical Parables *and the Public Square* | BY JANIS LOWRY

I am not a theologian. In the world of theological scholarship, I am a consumer rather than a producer. However, I do read and teach the Bible in my Philosophy of Healthcare classes, and I especially love the stories of the Bible. There are times, though, when I wish that the church and some of its theologians weren't so industrious about turning the stories of the Bible into lifeless doctrine. Doctrine seems to have a strange flattening effect on story. It takes story/narrative which is large and elastic and turns it into something less vital and less inclusive. Story is a form to which the reader surrenders, taking it in with eager eyes and ears, absorbing the images, and imagining the plot and characters as we read.

In Western culture the Public Square has usually been thought of as an open area, bordered by important public buildings, which typically included a church. For Jesus the "Public Square" seemed to be more of a moving target. The Public Square of Judaism might arguably have been the temple, with its impressive Herodian buildings and open spaces. While Jesus did spend time in the temple and its courtyards and did speak there, he was more often on the hillside and lakeside drawing in crowds with his parables and healings. The outdoors was Jesus' Public Square and stories were his teaching method of choice. For Jesus, the Public Square was people and society in general.

This article looks at four stories in Matthew 24 and 25, and seeks to discover whether or not they can help Adventists determine how to be more effective in impacting the Public Square before Jesus' return. For the past fifty years at least, society has been evolving at a very rapid pace. Unfortunately, methods employed by the church to reach people with the story of Jesus' certain return have not kept pace with those changes. Fifty years ago people had lots of relationships but not much

information. The church had a very informational model of outreach, which fit well. People were exposed to far less information and thus craved it, and the church model of preaching and teaching got good responses.

However, the Public Square has done a 180-degree turn in recent years, and now there is a glut of information. Where people once had many close relationships, they now have hardly any. This has affected even my chatty family. My wise sister-in-law, observing us together in the family room one evening, all of us hunched over iPads and laptops, observed, "Oh, look we're all alone, together." The church has seen a declining response because people now long for relationships, but the church still uses the same "informational model of evangelism."<sup>1</sup>

I find in the stories of Matthew 24 and 25 a helpful approach to the "good news" of Jesus' return that can help us with this problem. The stories imply a more effective way of impacting the Public Square.

One wonders if these four interdependent illustrations or stories, located at the end of Matthew 24 and finishing in Matthew 25, were presented as a cluster in the same way that closed-circuit TV cameras are set up, in order to capture a variety of angles on the same general area. One view alone cannot possibly capture the complexity of what must be seen in order to understand what is happening or has happened. All of the illustrations in the Olivet Address are centered on the certainty of both the return and the delay of the Master. That is not to say that Jesus never spoke of preaching, teaching and baptizing, since he clearly does in Matthew 28:19. Each of the stories in Matthew 24 and 25 approaches the Second Advent differently, pointing to the need for complete engagement by the principle characters in their work. Significantly, the "work" in these stories seems to be fairly mundane earthly work. None of the work appears to

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advance or speed up the return of the Master. It is not “work” of the kind that church leaders have presented frequently in sermons and church literature. The Olivet Address is not about preaching, knocking on doors, handing out truth-filled literature or holding evangelistic crusades. The work is far more practical and relational than that.

It is important to point out that in Matthew 24 Jesus does speak about signs in verses 4–31; he also says “but the end is still to come.”<sup>2</sup> Those events, traditionally read as signs of Jesus’ return, concern both the suffering of the earth and the suffering of people—but these things in themselves “cannot be signs of the imminence of the end.”<sup>3</sup> That this passage finishes with four stories or parables seems to be especially significant when put together with verse 36, where Jesus is recorded as saying “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”(TNIV) Jesus seems to be preparing His listeners for something different from suffering and signs as a signal of the end and his return—he is preparing them for engaging in work during that period of time which they will experience as “waiting” or “delay.”

The four stories, The Unfaithful Servant, The Ten Virgins/Bridesmaids, the Bags of Gold, and the Sheep and Goats, have several common elements. Matthew has placed these stories together at the end of the Olivet address, following Jesus’ assertion that the timing of the coming of the Son of Man is not only unknown to anyone but the Father, but that the coming may/will be delayed (24:36–44). The disciples ask the question “when and what shall be the signs?”—each of the pericopes speaks instead of a delay, and of the work to be done as Jesus’ followers wait by feeding their fellow servants, lighting a wedding procession and investing the master’s resources.

In each of the illustrations the Master does return. So to underline the certainty of Jesus’ return is important. Despite the certainty of the return, in each of the illustrations there is

a character or group of characters that are not prepared, although for different reasons. In literature, two characters or sets of characters who, although to all appearances are completely equal, make choices that lead to vastly different outcomes in story, are referred to as foils. It is useful in our reading of the stories of the Bible to think about the choices we are making, and how those choices impact our place in the larger story.

In Matthew 24:45–51, the wicked servant thinks he can predict when the Master will return. His strategy is to enjoy himself at the expense of his fellow servants, with whose care and feeding he was charged by the departing Master. The Unfaithful Servant grows so arrogant in his belief that he can predict the time of the master’s return that he “beats his fellow servants and passes his time in eating and drinking” (verse 50). The illustration says clearly that in this case the master will come on a day when the unfaithful servant does not expect it. Although he felt certain he could predict the time and get his act together in order to greet the Master wreathed in smiles, he failed to anticipate either the timing of the return or how seriously the Master would take his dereliction of duty. The unfaithful servant seemed not to have really known the master and his end is a most unhappy one. But what about the work he was assigned? It was simply feeding his fellow servants at “the proper time.” Davies compares this story to that of Joseph in Potiphar’s house.<sup>4</sup> Joseph’s work was not glamorous either, but it was his work that made Potiphar’s work for the pharaoh possible. Keener draws a parallel between the exploitative servants and ministers who use “the flock for their own interests.”<sup>5</sup> The servant’s work in Matthew 24 mirrors the title of Eugene Peterson’s book, borrowed from Nietzsche—*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Faithfully caring for one’s fellow servants, the ordinary tasks of life, make possible both simply being in the Public Square, and having some larger role in the



Public Square. The unfaithful servant is not called to a starring role—merely a supporting one. Feeding is as mundane as it necessary.

The behavior of the unfaithful servant is contrasted with that of the faithful servant. When the Master returns “It will be good for that servant,” because he is faithfully doing what he was assigned. As a result, the returning master puts him in charge of “all his possessions.” For the faithful servant, busy doing faithful things and being faithful to the master, the master’s return is not an interruption but a continuation and an enlargement of what he has already been doing. So, upon the master’s return he is promoted. This suggests that our work after Jesus’ return is in some way a con-

tinuation of what we were already doing. The returning master enlarges our work instead of ending it or abandoning it for something else. Note that the faithful servant was doing faithful things, not giving speeches.

The Bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1–13 were charged with lighting the procession to the wedding banquet. To be asked to participate in the joyful celebration of the wedding procession was an honor, and being asked implied a close relationship to the bride and or groom.

All ten of the bridesmaids were given the same responsibility—but this story seems to turn on knowing what

could happen, as well what the job was. The job implied the need to understand eventualities and contingencies. The job description was relatively simple, lighting the procession. But the five bridesmaids, referred to as “wise,” prepared for a delay. They prepared to wait. One might also speculate that their handbags had cab fare, a sewing kit, a spare pair of hose, and possibly a granola bar.

The five bridesmaids, who earn the unenviable appellation of “foolish,” find that their supply of oil for the torches to light the procession is dangerously low when the cry that announces the arrival of the bridegroom goes up (verse 6). Finding a place to purchase additional oil does not seem to have been a prob-

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lem (verse 9), but it is too late. The Bridegroom announces that he does not “know” them when they arrive late at the bridegroom’s house. Timing had a lot to do with the job. If you missed out on the timing, you had missed out on the job. They simply got along without you. The procession had arrived at the location for the banquet before the Foolish Bridesmaids returned—the procession was underlit because of their unpreparedness. If the five foolish bridesmaids had been there and had done the job of lighting the procession at the appointed time they would also have enjoyed the banquet that followed.

All the bridesmaids were certain that the bridegroom would come. But the wise bridesmaids also understood that there could be a delay and they prepared for it—the foolish did not. Regrettably one cannot borrow preparedness,<sup>6</sup> nor even the cautious mindset that entertains the idea that things often take longer than we think when many people are involved. We can and should prepare for the worst case scenario, which also results in our being prepared for the best case.

Waiting for the bridegroom didn’t seem to be worrisome or a chore. The bridesmaids were all relaxed, and confident that the bridal



party would arrive. This story once again invites us to read ourselves into the plot. It reminds me that though I love my younger brother and his family with all my heart, and I am ready to join their excursions the moment they arrive to collect me, I know that they are often late. My handbag and shoes are in readiness by the door but I factor in an overage of 15–20 minutes in the departure time for each person included in the excursion. But let the record show that I am also ready for them to arrive at the announced time, because sometimes they surprise me! If we understand who we are waiting for we are not bothered by the wait, but we are also prepared for it. No amount of talking or harrumphing on my part

will change the situation. Note that, like the faithful servant in the preceding story, the wise bridesmaids focused on the work assigned, in their case lighting the procession, and not on making speeches.

Matthew 25:14–28 is referred to in the TNIV as the Parable of the Bags of Gold. In this parable we have three servants entrusted with the wealth of the master as he leaves on a journey. The amounts entrusted are different—according to the ability of the trustee (verse 15). The story is told somewhat differently in Luke 19,<sup>7</sup> where readers are informed that the amounts of money are the same for all the servants. There are no specific directives given by the departing master in this story but there may be something implied by the assignment itself. They are each given gold, an important resource. The first two servants immediately set to work with their bags of gold investing on behalf of the master. The third servant is concerned only with “keeping” the gold entrusted to him.

After a long time the master returns and “settles accounts” (verse 19). Each of the first two servants increased the amount entrusted to them, earning both approving words and additional responsibilities from the Master. The third servant duly presents what was entrusted to him—nothing is missing—the original amount is still there intact, unused. He tells the master, “I knew you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered,” which appears to be a gross distortion. This is not a very promising start to their verbal exchange. The servant then proclaims his fear of the master and says, “See, here is what belongs to you” (verse 24).

The unfaithful servant commits at least three serious blunders: (1) misunderstanding the true character of the master, (2) not using the resources in useful ways to advance the interests of the master, and (3) then seeking to excuse himself by saying it’s because he believed the master to be harsh. It is difficult to say whether the master reacts from his actual character or whether he reacts based on the servant’s assess-

ment of him. Nonetheless, the master says—be judged both by your lack of action and by your harsh assessment of *my character!*

Commitment to the master and the proper investment of his resources is rewarded by more participation with the master in his business affairs. A lack of commitment and participation leads to being totally cut off from resources and relationships, which the lazy servant apparently didn’t understand anyway. The worthless servant is thrown outside, “into the darkness, where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (verse 30, NIV). Again, this story is about doing and being rather than talking and sharing information.

The last illustrative story is a judgment scene—a reminder at the end of this cycle of stories that there is a real return of the Son of Man and a real judgment. Once again there are two groups of characters; but this time it is the Son of Man who does the dividing. Those designated as Sheep are placed on the right and the Goats on the left. The Sheep are identified as “blessed inheritors of a kingdom long in preparation for them since the creation of the world” (verse 34). The Son of Man speaks of the “actions” that identify them as inheritors—they fed, clothed, invited, and visited *him*. The sheep are taken aback. While they may remember doing these things for others they have no recollection of doing these things for the Son of Man. The King replies that by faithfully serving the “least of these brothers and sisters of mine” (verse 40) they have fed, clothed, and comforted Him.

The Goats gathered on the left are undoubtedly also waiting for approving words and a place in the Kingdom, and are startled when the King announces quite a different recompense for them. They apparently had been looking very hard for The Son of Man, but had failed to see him embodied in the “least of these.” Unfortunately, by neglecting to feed, water, clothe and visit the “least of these,” they had also missed The Son of Man dwelling among them in the very forms of those to whom they failed to give care.<sup>8</sup>

So are any of these interrelated stories and

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sayings useful for instructing us on how Adventism should be relating to the Public Square? The Public Square in the twenty-first century is enormous and it is no longer just one or even several physical places. It is many—wherever people are assembled becomes a kind of Public Square. Additionally, it has expanded to include a huge variety of media as well. The Public Square has become a very noisy place. There are many competing and conflicting voices and many of them are raised voices—vying for attention. Adventism of the didactic kind is being drowned out.

Each of the stories in Matthew 24 and 25 is about action and activity, about doing and being rather than speaking; and each of these interdependent illustrations are about characters making choices that result in very different outcomes. For me this is the refreshing part of applying these stories to the Public Square. These passages emphasize the certainty of Jesus' return! These illustrations also indicate that our role as servants of the Son of Man, anticipating the return of the master, is that of working, doing, feeding and investing in others. There is enough noise in the Public Square and many people, even Seventh-day Adventist church members, are choosing to tune out the noisiness. I need stories that instruct me on how to wait and that remind me there is dignity in the work I do as I anticipate Jesus' return.

The Public Square will find us if we care enough for people. It has certainly found us recently as one of our number attempts a run for the highest public office. I think Seventh-day Adventists should be bothered by this line from a recent New York Times article by Alan Rappeport, when he said Seventh-day Adventists "tend to be vegetarians, and they continue to wait patiently for the Second Coming and the end of the world."<sup>9</sup> The church should be unhappy about being identified by what we eat instead of being identified as those who "feed others," either literally or figuratively. Nor should we be unconcerned about the last half of that sentence, "they continue to wait

patiently for the Second Coming and the end of the world." This assessment is too passive, too disengaged and lacks anything relational.

If Seventh-day Adventists are the active, engaged presence presented in the stories of Matthew 24, and 25, then we will be in the Public Square not as a noisy, clamorous source of information. We will be there as servants seeing to the needs of "least of these." Active, relational engagement does not go unnoticed. In response to the question, "Why do you serve?" faithful servants can answer, "We serve because of the Master!" ■

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