

“Dirty Dishes”

Matthew 24:45-46; 25:24-27

by

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When I was a kid, often times, my parents, before leaving our home, would tell me and my siblings, “Have the dishes cleaned before we get back.” They would then leave the house and be gone for several hours. Inevitably, my siblings and I would revel in the novelty of having the house all to ourselves. We would play games, watch television, eat, eat, and still eat, with no attention being given to the dirty dishes in the kitchen sink.

On one of these occasions, I vividly remember our playing games together only to hear the family car pulling in the driveway without our having even begun cleaning the dishes. In fact, we had completely forgotten about the dishes!

At that moment, we realized that our worst fears were about to become a reality. Put simply, we were going to be in “deep” trouble. To avoid this, we quickly put into motion the most laser-focused, neck-breaking, chaotic, and yet simultaneously, organized team strategy that could have been imagined for us at that time. My sister would wash, I would dry, and my brother would put away the dishes. We scrambled and hustled because there was no way possible that our parents were going to walk in and find that the dishes hadn’t been cleaned.

Years later now as an adult, when I reminisce about this frantic experience in my adolescent years, I’m reminded of a bumper sticker I once saw which said, “Jesus is coming...Look busy.” As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we have spent nearly 160 years wrestling with this concept of readiness for Christ’s Second Coming. Yet, readiness for the Second Coming goes much deeper than seeing car headlights flashing into a window from a driveway or running into a kitchen to clean dirty dishes. Enthusiasm, eagerness, and preparation for Christ’s soon return have everything to do with Stewardship.

Now while we frequently talk about Stewardship as Adventists, we don’t often talk about Stewardship in the context of the Second Coming. Yes, we all know what Stewardship means - the responsibility to manage God’s resources for the sake of building up of God’s kingdom. Yet, I believe that there are some key components of Stewardship that, when examined closely, would help us become better managers of God’s great gifts and opportunities in preparation for His imminent return.

In Matthew 24:45-46 and 25:26-27 respectively, Jesus speaks about both Stewardship and the importance of readiness for His Second Coming. In the first passage, He indirectly speaks about Stewardship while directly speaking about the Second Coming. He says:

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.¹

¹ Matthew 24:45-46, NIV.

In the latter passage, Jesus does the converse and speaks directly about Stewardship, but indirectly speaks about the Second Coming. He says:

Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. "Master," he said, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you." His master replied, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest."

In the setting for both of the aforementioned texts, Jesus is sharing His final and parting words with His disciples, and is about to submit Himself to the most humiliating, dehumanizing, and excruciating experience imaginable in that of His trial, crucifixion, and death.

The disciples are concerned with the end of time and the signs of Jesus' Second Coming. And while Jesus has promised that He will return to get them and they will forever live with Him, they want to know more. So Jesus reveals the prophecies concerning earth's final days, and in doing so, clarifies for them the state of affairs, not only in the secular, political, and natural world, but also in the spiritual world.

As Jesus describes earth's eschatological events, He employs these two Scriptural parables to illustrate the tension between the Second Coming and the temptations in everyday life and the accompanying cares of this world. He also shares the difference between those who have prepared accordingly and sufficiently for the Second Coming versus those who have not. Both parables are also related to Stewardship, as they both teach distinct lessons about the use of God's entrusted resources to us through our time, talents, and treasury.

In both narratives, the master leaves and goes away for a prolonged stay. When considering the element of time, the servants, in the master's absence, have a responsibility to fulfill their assigned duties. Embedded within both stories is the reality of the tremendous opportunities that we're given each day to make effective use of our time. The Psalmist said, "teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom."² With each day, we have 24 hours, 1,440 minutes, or 86,400 seconds of time. Additionally, we're promised 70 years of life by God's grace.³

Given this sum of time, God expects us to effectively and efficiently manage our time to do our best for the sake of kingdom growth. It is essential that we number our days, coupled with planning, thinking, and governing our time in such a way that acknowledges our limitations, while making good use of our time until the Lord comes. When speaking of His Godly mandated earthly work, Jesus said, "I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day: for when night cometh, no man can work."⁴ When referencing His Second Coming, Jesus said, "Occupy till I come,"⁵ which means carefully using the time that has been given to us, not in idle frivolity, but rather in industrious service while there is still time left.

² Psalm 90:12, KJV.

³ Psalm 90:10, KJV.

⁴ John 9:4, KJV.

⁵ Luke 19:13

The parables also point to the Stewardship of our talents. In Matthew 25:26-27, the master chides his servant, not for making a mistake, but rather for failing to act. Both parables support the notion that the master actually trusts the servant. This trust is rooted in the masters' confidence in their servants' abilities and gifts to perform the tasks that have been set before them.

There are two popular adages that come to mind here, "use your head for more than a hat rack," and "a mind is a terrible thing to waste." Through these sayings, we're reminded that within each individual, God has implanted unique gifts, talents, abilities, intellect, skills, resources, tools, ingenuity, ideas, and innovation so that we might apply that which has been given to us to solve problems, to make a difference, to improve ourselves and others, and to change the world!

God said to Moses, "What is in your hand?"⁶ This command to Moses is also a command to us to use what we have. God never asked us to use what we didn't have. He asks us to use what we do have. Use the gifts you have. Use the talents you have. Use the mind that God gave you. Use the strength that's in your body. Use the inner resources that God has placed inside of you to make things happen. While it is true that God made our hands without our hands, it is also true that God wants to use the hands He made to bless others.

God forbid that Jesus comes and we have failed to put our hands on the plow, roll up our sleeves, use some "elbow grease," use some sweat equity, and use our heads to make things better. God has given each of us talents and gifts that He has designed that we would use for His glory. Everyone can't preach. Everyone can't teach. Everyone can't sing. Everyone can't be an administrator. But we can all do something. It was Martin Luther King Jr. who said:

*If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well. If you can't be a pine at the top of the hill, be a shrub in the valley. Be the best little shrub on the side of the hill. Be a bush if you can't be a tree. If you can't be a highway, just be a trail. If you can't be a sun, be a star. For it isn't by size that you win or fail. Be the best of whatever you are.*⁷

The apostle Paul says, "Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might."⁸ "Whether you eat or drink or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God."⁹ God will be praised, and God will be glorified when God's children use their hands, apply their minds, stand on their feet, and do something to help build God's kingdom and change someone's life.

And then there's the third Stewardship element, treasure. This is significant because when the master left, he physically imparted to his servants certain resources that were of material and

⁶ Exodus 4:2, KJV.

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Street Sweeper."

⁸ Colossians 3:23, KJV.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:31, KJV.

intrinsic value. This speaks to the reality that some of the things with which we have responsibility over demand a watchful eye because they can deteriorate or be lost. Without careful management, these material resources will waste away and fail to do anyone any good.

But God is calling us to be good managers, good stewards, of His money. The money we have doesn't belong to us. The Bible is clear, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."¹⁰ The cattle on a thousand hills are all the Lord's.¹¹ God owns everything. One of the greatest deterrents to effective Stewardship is the correct understanding of ownership. We're living in a time when society is absolutely consumed with ownership. To be clear, I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't be owners, but in many cases, our fascination and obsession with ownership can be in conflict with our calling to Stewardship.

Ownership has an inward focus; Stewardship has an outward focus.

Ownership is temporal; Stewardship is eternal.

Ownership can put its emphasis on you; Stewardship puts its emphasis on others.

What we have been given from the Master is our responsibility to use for His best good and to increase on the Master's behalf until He returns.

This doesn't mean that we stockpile, scheme, and connive for the sake of the highest returns. This means we are mindful that everything we have belongs to God and it's our responsibility not to squander it. We are not to use God's resources for things that are foolish or deleterious, but rather we are to use and manage them in a way that makes the kingdom of God grow. Please understand, however, that God isn't glorified simply by saving, but when we count the cost, and we plan for the building of God's kingdom, we must also utilize the resources available for the sake of honoring God and bringing in a bountiful harvest. I say it all the time, "Salvation is free, but ministry takes money." Jesus said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."¹²

I love it that both parables are careful to address the reward. When we're faithful, God honors our faithfulness, and we will be able to share in eternal joy and blessing. Nevertheless, it's also important for us to remember that the reward is the Master's responsibility. We don't believe in righteousness by works. "For it is by grace you are saved, through faith, it is the gift of God and not of works."¹³

At the beginning of the parable, when the master leaves, it is his choosing who gets the gifts. And when the master returns, it is also his choosing gets the reward. And likewise, it was God's choosing that we were to become His servants. We are saved because the Master chooses to let us into His kingdom. The Master could have chosen that our work was not good enough. The Master could have chosen that our labor was insufficient. And if we are honest, we know

¹⁰ Psalm 24:1, KJV.

¹¹ Psalm 50:10, KJV.

¹² Matthew 6:19-21, KJV.

¹³ Ephesians 2:8, KJV.

that our righteousness is but as “filthy rags.”¹⁴ But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.¹⁵ We have been chosen by God!

All of our good deeds are by grace.
All of our successes are by God’s grace.
All of our fruitfulness is because of God’s grace.
Every good thing you see in me is because of the grace of the Almighty God of Heaven.
I have no righteousness of my own.
I have no goodness of my own.
I have no ingenuity of my own.
I have no innovation of my own.
But every good and perfect gift is given by the grace of God for my good and His glory. If we ever do anything good, it is because of God’s grace. “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.”¹⁶

I thank God for His grace and mercy.
I thank God for His love.
I thank God that He gave us these wonderful gifts and talents.
I thank God that He’s given us tools and resources, money and buildings, cars and houses, and churches and technology.
But most importantly, I thank God for His grace!
He died that we might live!
He just wants us to live and use the resources He has given us to bring Him glory and to grow His kingdom!

There were too many occasions when my parents expected me and my siblings to finish our chores before they got home and we disappointed them. Without the multiplicity of words, I’ll just say that you didn’t want to disappoint Mom and Dad by not doing what they had instructed you to do before they returned.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to disappoint the Master. I don’t want Jesus to come and what He commanded me to do I have not done. I don’t want Jesus to come and the gifts and talents and resources that He gave me be unused and unaccounted for. But I want to be ready and watch the “car pull up in the driveway,” and stand there with a smile, knowing that I did what the Lord created me to do – “dishes cleaned,” house in order, time used wisely, talents utilized properly, and treasury expended correctly.

And when the clouds roll back in the sky like a scroll, I want to look up into the clouds and say, “Lo, this is our God we have waited *and worked*, and He has come to save us!”

¹⁴ Isaiah 64:6, KJV.

¹⁵ Romans 5:8, KJV.

¹⁶ Galatians 2:20, KJV.