

## Mathison on Acts 1:9-11 – Responding Further The Absent Master Parables and Christ’s Return

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**I**N MY PREVIOUS INSTALLMENTS I asked the reader to consider the incredible Christological significance of Acts 1, and how that theme is greatly overlooked by so many commentators. Keith Mathison wrote a lengthy article positing Acts 1 as a yet future, end of time event. Yet, his article ignored the Christological aspect of the Ascension and how it has a bearing on the proper view of Acts 1, from the angle that Christ would come “in like manner.”

In this installment—and there is so much more that could be said—I want to focus on yet another relevant issue related to the Ascension—and the promised Parousia—that is commonly overlooked in the literature, namely, that Acts 1 is the depiction, undeniably so, of the departure of the Nobleman to go to a far country and there receive the kingdom as depicted in Luke 19:11ff:

*Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately. Therefore He said: “A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, ‘Do business till I come.’ But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We will not have this man to reign over us.’ “And so it was that when he returned, having received the kingdom, he then commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. Then came the first, saying, ‘Master, your mina has earned ten minas.’ And he said to him, ‘Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.’ And the second came, saying, ‘Master, your mina has earned five minas.’ Likewise he said to him, ‘You also be over five cities.’ “Then another came, saying, ‘Master, here is your mina, which I have kept put away in a handkerchief. For I feared you, because you are an austere man. You collect what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.’ And he said to him, ‘Out of your own mouth I will judge you, you wicked servant. You knew that I was an austere man, collecting what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow. Why then did you not put my money in the bank, that at my coming I might have collected it with interest?’ “And he said to those who stood by, ‘Take the mina from him, and give it to him who has ten minas.’ (But they said to him, ‘Master, he has ten minas.’) ‘For I say to you, that to everyone who has will be given; and from him*

*who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. But bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me.”* (NKJV throughout)

What we find here is the depiction of The Absent Master and his return in judgment. This is an amazingly common theme of Jesus’ parabolic teaching and is, in important ways, paradigmatic for understanding Jesus’ eschatology. It is interesting to me that so few commentators make the connection between Luke and Acts 1. But notice the direct parallels.

- Both Luke 19 and Acts 1 depict Jesus going away to the far country.
- Both have Him going away to receive the kingdom.
- Both have Jesus bestowing gifts / responsibilities to His citizens.
- Both have some of His servants rejecting His rule and reign (See Acts 13:31ff / Rom 10 / 1 Thess 2:14-16, etc.).
- Both have the Master returning in judgment of the rebellious citizens. (No one that I am aware of would deny that the promise of Christ’s return in Acts 1 would be the judgment).

The parallels here are precise and cannot be ignored. It is widely, all but universally, agreed that Luke 19 is based on the historical situation that had transpired in Israel. When Herod the Great died (who had himself traveled to Rome to receive the kingdom), his grandson, Archelaus, went to Rome to implore the emperor to bestow on him his grandfather’s dominion and territory. However, the Jews, who had suffered tremendous hardship and cruelty under Herod, fearful (with good reason) that things would not improve under Archelaus, sent an embassy to Rome, imploring the emperor (Augustus) to not put Archelaus in charge. Augustus bequeathed only half of Herod’s territory to Archelaus and reduced his authority from king to that of an “ethnarch.”

Jesus’ parable would have resonated effectively with His audience and dispelled the idea that with His arrival in Jerusalem the messianic Kingdom would be established immediately.

The application of Luke 19 to Acts 1:9-11 should be clear. Jesus ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father, to rule in the midst of His enemies, but He would return, as King of kings and Lord of lords, to judge the rebellious and wicked nation that had cried out, “*We have no king but Caesar!*” (John 19:15). And given the perfect parallels between Luke 19 and Acts 1, this is strong proof that the coming of Christ “*in like manner*” of Acts 1 was to be His return in the judgment of Jerusalem in AD 70.

But Luke 19 is only one of *four* “absent / returning” master parables found in the synoptics (Matt 21:33f [paralleled in Mark 12:1-12], Matt 25:14-30, Mark 13:34, and Luke 19). Not only is Luke 19 related to the other “Absent Master” parables, I suggest that this parabolic motif underlies the New Testament doctrine of Christ’s ascension to the Father, his “going away to prepare a place,” “he ascended in glory,” and similar motifs. This suggests then that the return of the Absent Master is the key to all the passages that speak of Christ’s return.

The other parables of the Absent Master need to be examined.

**Matthew 25:14f:**

*For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.' "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.*

One can hardly fail to see the parallels between this parable and that in Luke 19. Commentators have long recognized that while there are some minor variations, there are no substantive differences that would force the idea that they are speaking of two different things.

G. R. Beasley Murray said: "There can be little doubt that in these two parables we have two versions of a single parable."<sup>1</sup> I believe he is correct and if that is true, it should impact our overall understanding of eschatology.

Thus . . .

**If it is true that Matthew 25:14f and Luke 19:11f are parallel parables, and,**

**If it is true that Luke 19:11 is about the coming of Christ in judgment of Old Covenant Jerusalem / Israel, then,**

**It must be true that Matthew 25:14f is about the coming of Christ in judgment of Old Covenant Jerusalem / Israel.**

It is of more than passing interest that some futurist commentators seek to use Matthew 25:14f to prove that the time of Christ's "Second Coming" was unknown and unknowable.

Kenneth Gentry offers this on Matthew's parable:

"His return has not been imminent since the ascension"; "The New Testament teaches, however, that the Lord's glorious, bodily return will be in the *distant* and *unknowable* future. It has not been *imminent* and will not be *datable*. Theologically 'distinctive to [Postmillennialism] is the denial of the imminent physical return' of Christ."— "Jesus clearly taught: 'While the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept (Matt 25:5). For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. . . . After a long time, the Lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them (Matt 25:14, 19). There is no expectation here of an any-moment return—there is quite the opposite."<sup>2</sup>

What is so ironic about Gentry's comments is that he is quite vocal in his rejection of dispensationalism because they reject the objective imminence of the New Testament language of "*at hand*," "*quickly*," "*shortly*," etc. He is insistent that those time statements communicated objective temporal imminence. What the reader of Scripture will note is that the New Testament states repeatedly that the time of the judgment of the "living and the dead," which is nothing other than the resurrection, had arrived—2,000 years ago (1 Pet 4:5-17). Thus, Gentry's claim that the New Testament does not speak of the imminent eschatological consummation is false.

We must realize that the "far journey" and the "long time" absence of the Master in Matthew 25 is delimited to the lifetime—the generation—of those to whom he gave the gifts. There is not a hint that the Master's return would be delayed for millennia! As a matter of fact, Jesus actually condemned those who argued and believed that the Absent Master had delayed his coming.

In Matthew 24:44-48, Jesus told another parable that contains the motif of the absent Master / Lord:

*Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards . . .*

The parallels between this "parable" and the Absent Master parable in 25:14f are too clear to be denied. Notice then that in this parenthesis by Jesus, He warned them of thinking that His coming would be delayed interminably. He condemned the idea of thinking of an extended, prolonged delay that might give rise to

laxity and immorality. Ironically, the very message of so many futurists today who say Christ has delayed His coming is the very message Jesus told about the wicked servants who said “*The Master delays his coming.*” (Clearly most futurists live lives of dedication to the Lord, to the best of their ability and knowledge. They do not take the delay as an excuse for rebellion and antinomianism. I am not suggesting that. However, their message of the delay of Christ’s coming is nonetheless what Christ condemned).

**Mark 12:1-11 / Luke 21:33f:**

*Then He began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now at vintage time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty handed. Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully treated. And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some. Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those vinedressers said among themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they took him and killed him and cast him out of the vineyard. “Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.*

While there are some elements found in this parable, and the other parables as well, that are different from Luke 19, there are *no substantive differences* that would force us to conclude that the parables speak of radically different times or events.<sup>3</sup> Notice the direct parallels:

- In these parables we have the Absent Master. In Matthew 21, 25, and Luke 19 the Master goes on a “*long journey,*” “*to a far country.*”
- We have the bestowal of authority / gifts / responsibilities to the servants.
- We have the abuse of those privileges and the gifts given and the rejection of the authority of the Master. In each of the parables there is the motif of the “dishonoring” of the Master which demanded that the Master take judgmental actions to re-establish his glory.
- We have the rejection of the authority of the Master. This is manifested in Matthew 21 by the abuse and persecution of the Master’s servants—his representatives. To reject the servants sent by the Master was to reject him. It was a huge dishonor.<sup>4</sup> Walvoord and Zuck—citing J. D. Grassmick—took note of this:

The rejection of the owner’s son was really a rejection of the owner who would come with governmental authority and kill the murderous tenants and give the vineyard to others. Likewise the Jewish leaders’ rejection of John the Baptist and of Jesus, God’s final Messenger, was a

rejection of God Himself. This would inevitably bring His judgment on Israel and would transfer their privileges to others temporarily (cf. Rom. 11:25, 31).<sup>5</sup>

So, once again,

- In Matthew 21, 25, Mark 12, and Luke 19 we find the Master leaving to go on a long journey.
- In all the parables the Absent Master returns. Notice that in Matthew 21:40 the Absent Master would “come” (*elthe*, a cognate of *erchomai*, a word commonly used of Jesus’ Parousia; cf. 2 Thess 1).
- In the parables the returning Master judges and destroys the rebels who rejected his authority.

Of course, in both Luke 19 and the parallels of Matthew 21 / Mark 12, the object of the return of the Master, his return in judgment of the rebels, was the coming of Christ in judgment of Israel<sup>6</sup>—the Vineyard of the Lord (cf. Isa 5) of Matthew 21 and Mark 12. Matthew 21 makes it indisputably obvious that it was the leadership of Jerusalem, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Scribes, and the lawyers who controlled the people, i.e. the Vineyard, that Jesus had in mind. And make no mistake, *that is precisely how those leaders understood Jesus’ parable*:

*And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away (Mark 12:12).*

Thus, just like in Luke 19, where the rebels who said, “*We will not have this man to rule over us*” were judged and destroyed at the return of the Master, so in Mark 12 we find the identical motifs, the same context, the same prediction. The coming of the Lord in view is absolutely not some imaginary “end of time” literal, physical coming of Jesus out of heaven riding on a cumulus cloud. It was Him acting as King of kings and Lord of lords, coming “in the glory of the Father” to judge Old Covenant Jerusalem / Judea / Israel.

**Mark 13:32-36:** This text is particularly significant in the discussion of the Departing / Absent Master motif:

*But of that day and hour no one knows,<sup>7</sup> not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning—lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. (Mark 13:32-36).*

In this version of the Olivet Discourse, what should grab our attention is that Mark (and Luke) make it clear that the disciples did not ask about the “end of the world.” They asked about when the Temple was



to be destroyed and the sign of that event. This suggests then that the language of Matthew 24:3, since it is directly parallel to Mark and Luke, was not about what so many commentators claim. In other words, since the disciples in Mark and Luke's versions did not ask about the end of the age or Christ's coming, and yet, the language of both of those accounts is virtually identical to Matthew's account, this means that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was perceived to be the end of the age and the coming of the Lord by Matthew. If in fact Matthew was including a discussion of a far distant coming of Christ at the end of time, should he not have distinguished that event from the near events that Jesus was predicting?

The point here is the issue of the Absent Master. Is this "going away into a far country" the same going away of John 14: "*I go to prepare a place for you*"? We can be certain that this going away is the departure of the Nobleman who was going away to receive a kingdom. That is Christ's departure to the Father who would send the Spirit in John 16. That going away for the sending of the Spirit is inextricably linked to the establishment of the kingdom in Acts 1, and, I suggest, it is directly related to the giving of the talents in both Matthew 25:14f and Luke 19.

Is this "going away" not what is referenced in Ephesians 4:8, "*when he ascended on high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts to men*"? Is it Christ's entrance into the Most Holy Place of Hebrews 9:24-26? Is this departure into the far country—heaven—what is referenced in Acts 3:19f: "*Whom the heaven must receive until the restoration of all things*"? If these texts speak of a different departure, a different purpose, a different time, where is the indication of that?

The parables we have examined are not all of the "Absent Master" texts in the New Testament. In truth, all of the New Testament prophecies of Christ's coming / return are passages *based on His departure to receive the kingdom*. We should also point out that in the New Testament, Psalm 110 is quoted some 33 times. That Psalm is about the ascended Lord sitting at the right hand of the Sovereign, as He receives the kingdom, and waits to return to judge His enemies and establish His reign among the faithful. This is the very thing depicted in each of the "Absent Master" parables.

I suggest that unless one can prove that the Absent Master / Returning Master parables depicted a different departure, and a radically different return from that in Acts 1, and a totally different judgment from that in the parables, that this proves that no matter what our concept of "in like manner" might be, it must conform to the context, the framework, the purpose, and the time of the return of the Absent Master found in the parables. And that coming, that return, was in AD 70 when Jesus, having received the kingdom, came as King of kings and Lord of lords, in judgment of the nation that had rejected him.

Thus, Mathison's appeal to Acts 1 as a refutation of the truth of preterism fails: Objection Overruled! ✚

1. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, Paternoster, 1986), 215.

2. Kenneth Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, Tx.; Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 331-332.
3. I find it interesting, and a bit perplexing, that in a survey of several commentaries, I did not find *even one* that directly conflated Mark 12 with Luke 19. It may well be that I simply did not find any that did, however, I consulted a good number of critical commentaries in my Logos program as well as several in my print library.
4. The idea of “representative” authority was powerful in the ANE (Ancient Near East). Several times Jesus told His disciples that if anyone rejected them, they were rejecting Him, and who ever accepted them, accepted Him. See John 13:20 especially.
5. J. D. Grassmick, In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, Mark, Vol. 2*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 161. It is to be noted that Grassmick, a dispensationalist, claims that the rejection and judgment was to be temporary, when nothing in any of the parables supports that claim.
6. Very specifically, the judgment caused by the rulers of the people.
7. Of course, it is widely argued that since Jesus said no one “*but the Father*” knows the day or the hour of His coming that this somehow mitigates all of the “*at hand*,” “*shortly come to pass*,” “*in a very, very little while*” language of the New Testament. The problem with that assertion is that Jesus spoke those words *prior to the sending of the Spirit*, from the Father, which was for the express purpose of revealing “*things to come*” (John 16:7f). It is anachronistic therefore, to apply Jesus’ words in Mark 13 to the statements made after the sending of the Spirit. For instance, Revelation 1:1-3 makes it clear that the Father, *who knew the day and hour*, was informing the Son, and the Son the churches, that “*the time is at hand*” and “*these things must shortly come to pass*.” What was formerly unknown even to Jesus, was now being revealed.