

## **“Engage in Business until I Come” (Luke 19:11–27)**

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“You’re on the wrong side of history!” Have you heard that before? That line was being said a few years ago against anyone that would dare say that marriage has a fixed definition: it is a complementary union of a man and a woman, a relationship that is meant to last a lifetime. People who wanted to redefine the institution of marriage assumed that they were “progressive” and “on the right side of history.” Anyone who stood in their way, who held to the definition of marriage that the Bible states clearly, the one that God created and Jesus affirmed (Matt. 19:4–6), was somehow on “the wrong side of history.” They were likened to people who tried to stop the abolition of slavery (or desegregation in schools or in any other public place).

“You’re on the wrong side of history!” is a nice bit of rhetoric. It’s a threat, really. After all, who wants to be on the wrong side of things? And who wants to be viewed as some regressive, backwards bigot? I doubt that any of us want to be viewed that way.

But think about that argument for a moment. What does it even mean to be on the wrong side of history? Does it mean we’ll be viewed as on the wrong side in a year or two? What does that matter? Imagine that Adolf Hitler had said, at the beginning of World War II in 1939, that all who opposed the Third Reich were on the wrong side of history. That might have appeared the case for a year or two. But it certainly wasn’t the case after D-Day, in 1944. At that time, people might have said, “Hitler, you’re on the wrong side of history!” Less than a year later, he committed suicide and Allied forces celebrated victory in Europe. And it would be hard to imagine how Hitler could possibly be vindicated at any later date. So, it seems that at any point in history after 1945, Hitler will be on the wrong side of history.

But there are many cases that aren’t so clear cut. How do we know when to judge people as being on the wrong side? Do we pronounce such judgments twenty years later? Fifty years later? One hundred years later? Even then, we could be mistaken.<sup>1</sup>

Take the case of Christianity. Obviously, when Jesus died, many people probably thought he was on the wrong side of history. But Jesus rose from the grave on the third day, so it’s hard to say that he’s on the wrong side of history or even death. Still, many people don’t believe that

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<sup>1</sup> For an assessment of the “wrong side of history” argument, see Kevin DeYoung, “What’s Wrong with the ‘Wrong Side of History’ Argument?” *The Gospel Coalition*, August 5, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/whats-wrong-with-the-wrong-side-of-history-argument>.

Jesus rose from the grave. Christians were persecuted at different times in the Roman Empire. It would have been easy for unbelieving Jewish leaders to say of the first group of Christians, who were also Jews, that they were on the wrong side of history. Gentile pagans could have said that Christians were on the wrong side of history. A little over thirty years after Jesus died on the cross, Christians faced persecution under Emperor Nero. There was another wave of persecution in the late first century under Emperor Domitian. As late as the early fourth century, almost three hundred years after Jesus died, there was another outbreak of persecution under Emperor Diocletian. At any point in time during those years, Romans could have said that Christians were on the wrong side of history, and that might have seemed plausible.

But history is a funny thing. Fast-forward a couple of millennia, and there are supposedly two billion Christians in the world. I think the number of true Christians is significantly less, but the point is that there are a lot of Christians in the world. And, last time I checked, there is no Roman Empire.

My point is that you can't really know what's going to happen in history. How do we know what will happen throughout history? How do we know where history is going?

Different worldviews say different things about history. It used to be that many people thought that history was cyclical. The Stoics, a group of people who held to a certain Greek philosophy, believed that the world was destroyed in a series of fires. History goes in cycles, round and round again. Their view of history has been summarized this way: "Once upon a time, there was nothing but fire; gradually there emerged the other elements and the familiar furniture of the universe. Later, the world will return to fire in a universal conflagration, and then the whole cycle of its history will be repeated over and over again."<sup>2</sup> It's hard to see how anything would matter in such a view of the world. There could be no lasting progress or achievement. You just go round and round on history's carousel.

That may seem like an odd view, but it's not totally different from the view that some people have today. Those who believe in reincarnation believe in some form of cyclical history. Some believe we are in the midst of a countless number of big bangs and big crunches of our universe. These people believe that there is no god, and no purpose to life. While not all atheists share that view of an endless series of big bangs and big crunches, all atheists believe we're here because of some accident. Somehow, the universe got started, without a creator or a designer,

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 81–82.

and it has developed throughout a long period of time, improbably leading to all the complexity of life we find today. But it will all end, at least in our solar system, when the sun dies, billions of years from now. Whatever we've accomplished ultimately won't matter. A famous atheist, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell believed that the world is "purposeless" and "void of meaning."<sup>3</sup> He says that we are "the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms," that nothing "can preserve an individual life beyond the grave," that "all the labors of the ages" and "the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins."<sup>4</sup> In an equally cheery passage, Russell writes, "The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain . . . One by one, as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death."<sup>5</sup>

Strangely, Russell didn't seem to be bothered by this. He thought it was noble to carve out some meaning for one's life, even if there really is no ultimate point. He wrote, "Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only . . . to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces" that will trample over him one day.<sup>6</sup> It's hard to see how self-made shrine bound for destruction is worthy of worship.

If there's no purpose to life, there is no goal of history. If history has no goal, no final day of reckoning, there's no wrong side of history. There's no right side of history, either.

So, is history just an accident? Perhaps Macbeth was right when he said:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Touchstone, 1957), 106.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 117–18.

<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* V.v.

Or perhaps history is not an accident, and not an endless cycle, but perhaps it's going somewhere. Perhaps history has a certain beginning and a certain ending. Perhaps it has meaning and purpose.

But how can we know that? How can know where it's all going? We would need God to tell us. And God has told us. When we look to the pages of the Bible, we see that God has given us a broad outline of all of human history. It has a certain shape, marked by significant events. It has a definite beginning: God created the universe to be his temple, a theater to display his glory, and the great actors in that theater are human beings, made in God's image and after his likeness (Gen. 1:26–28). We were made to worship God, love him, serve him, represent him on Earth, reflect his greatness, and obey him. But after Creation, the first act of the great drama of the Bible, comes the second act, the Fall. The first human beings decided that they didn't want to follow God's script. They didn't want to obey God. They didn't trust that God was good. They wanted to be like God. And as a result, everything in this world has become polluted, cracked, broken, tainted. Once there was no hate and war, and not even a hint of death. But now, when sin entered the world, everything changed. When humans turned away from God, the source of light, love, beauty, truth, and life itself, God gave them over to their desires. He said, more or less, "You don't want me? Fine. Go your way." And when we turned from God, we found the opposite of light, love, beauty, truth, and life. We found darkness, hate, ugliness, lies, and death.

The whole story of the Bible is basically a rescue mission, an adventure story of how humanity can get back to God. The path back to God truly opens up again with the third act, Redemption. God sends his Son into the world to fulfill his design for humanity. Only God the Son, who is truly God and also becomes truly a man, lives the perfect life. He is the perfect image of God. And though he lived a perfect life, he dies in place of his people. He takes their punishment so they can be forgiven. He is sealed in a tomb so that they can go free. He is exiled so that they can come back home.

It's a wonderful story, and it's potentially a sad one. It would be a tragedy it not for the fact that Jesus rises from the grave on the third day, triumphing over sin and death. His resurrection shows that he defeated sin on the cross. Death can't stop him. And all who are united to Jesus by faith will rise from the dead in bodies that can never be destroyed. But that great day of resurrection is in the future, in the final act of the Bible's story, Consummation. We only get glimpses of what life will be like when all is restored, when God's plans are

consummated. But what we understand is that all God's people will live with God forever in a world that has been remade, purged of all evil, cleansed of all sin, recreated so that there is only peace and life, not conflict and death.

But there's a long period of history between Jesus' resurrection and the resurrection of his people. There's a long period of time between the coming of the King of kings to inaugurate his kingdom, and the return of that King, to establish his kingdom fully. We live in those in-between times. And what do we do during that time? We use what Jesus has given us for his purposes, to the glory of God.

We've been studying the Gospel of Luke, one of four biographies of Jesus found in the Bible. Today, we'll look at one parable that Jesus told, a story that tells us some important truths about the kingdom of God. Jesus was about to go Jerusalem, and his followers thought that he was the Messiah, the descendant of the great king of Israel, David. The Messiah was the one who was going to make everything right. He was going to defeat all powers that were against God and his people. He would overthrow all opposing forces, which in their minds included the Roman Empire. Jesus tells this story to correct their expectations.

Let's now take a look at today's passage, Luke 19:11–27:

<sup>11</sup> As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. <sup>12</sup> He said therefore, "A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return. <sup>13</sup> Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Engage in business until I come.' <sup>14</sup> But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.' <sup>15</sup> When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business. <sup>16</sup> The first came before him, saying, 'Lord, your mina has made ten minas more.' <sup>17</sup> And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities.' <sup>18</sup> And the second came, saying, 'Lord, your mina has made five minas.' <sup>19</sup> And he said to him, 'And you are to be over five cities.' <sup>20</sup> Then another came, saying, 'Lord, here is your mina, which I kept laid away in a handkerchief; <sup>21</sup> for I was afraid of you, because you are a severe man. You take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.' <sup>22</sup> He said to him, 'I will condemn you with your own words, you wicked servant! You knew that I was a severe man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? <sup>23</sup> Why then did you not put my money in the bank, and at my coming I might have collected it with interest?' <sup>24</sup> And he said to those who stood by, 'Take the mina from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas.' <sup>25</sup> And they said to him, 'Lord, he has ten minas!' <sup>26</sup> 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will

be given, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.  
<sup>27</sup> But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them,  
bring them here and slaughter them before me.’”<sup>8</sup>

Most of that passage is a long parable about a king and his servants. That story could be interpreted in many different ways. The only clue that Luke gives us is verse 11. He says that Jesus tells this parable “because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.” Jesus had already said, “the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21). God’s kingdom is wherever God’s people are under God’s rule and blessing, where God is present with them. The God-man, the King of kings, was there in their midst, so he could rightly say the kingdom of God had come. But it wasn’t going to arrive in its fullest form when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. He wasn’t going to receive a golden crown, sit on a glorious throne in a palace, and command an army to defeat all his enemies. Instead, he was going to go away. And while he’s gone, he expects his followers to be engaged in a certain kind of business.

The story itself isn’t too hard to understand. There’s a nobleman who leaves to go to a “far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return.” Before he leaves, he gives ten servants one mina each. A mina was a coin worth about three or four months of wages. So, the nobleman left them all a very significant amount, but not a massive amount, perhaps equivalent to \$10,000 to \$15,000. Then, the nobleman tells his servants to “engage in business until I come.” We’re not told how long the nobleman is gone, but he expects his servants to use that money to make more money.

Before continuing with the story, let’s think about how this relates to Jesus. Jesus is the nobleman who, after dying on the cross and rising from the grave, will go to a “far country,” heaven, to receive his Father’s kingdom. In a sense, the Son of God always possessed this kingdom, but the New Testament says that upon Jesus ascending into heaven he is exalted. As God, Jesus has always possessed the kingdom. As a man, the Davidic King, he sits on his throne when he goes to heaven. His work has been accomplished.

While away, Jesus has given his servants a task to do. He has given all Christians different callings and different spiritual gifts. We may not all do the exact same thing for Jesus, but we are all expected to engage in Jesus’ business while he is away. We have no idea how long

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<sup>8</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

he'll be gone. He might return in a few years or in a millennium or more. But while he's gone, he expects us to use what he has given us.

Now, back to the details of the parable. After the nobleman leaves on his journey, his citizens get together a delegation and they go to the authority who is going to give this nobleman his kingdom. This delegation expresses what the citizens are thinking: "We do not want this man to reign over us." The story has some parallels to something that happened in history about thirty years earlier. After Herod the Great died—he was the ruler of Judea when Jesus was born, and he was the one who had the infant boys of Bethlehem killed—his kingdom was divided among his three sons. His sons had to have their rule confirmed by the Roman Empire. So, Archelaus, one of the sons, went to Augustus, the Roman Emperor at the time. Before he left for Rome, Archelaus entrusted his castle and his wealth to his officers. After leaving, the Jews revolted. They didn't want Archelaus as their king. They sent a delegation of fifty men to Rome to oppose Archelaus. Augustus decided that Archelaus wouldn't be called a king, but instead he would be an ethnarch, a ruler of his people, until he could prove himself to be worthy of the title of king. When Archelaus returned, he removed the high priest and replaced him.

What does this have to do with Jesus? Well, perhaps Jesus is saying, "You know what happened with Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great? That's kind of what will happen with me." The details of the Archelaus story, and the details of this parable, can't be mapped onto Jesus' story exactly. That's not how parables work. But there are certainly many people who don't want Jesus to be their king. Of course, they can't send a delegation to God the Father to complain. And they wouldn't want to do that, anyway. But they rebel against God and his Son all the same.

Well, what happens when this nobleman returns? He checks the work of his servants. Did they engage in business while he was away? One servant was able to take his mina and make ten minas in profit. And he receives a commendation: "Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities." He took his relatively modest sum of money and made a ten-fold profit. And as a reward, he has authority over ten cities. He has proven that he is responsible, and he is given more responsibility. Something similar happens with another servant. He has made five minas, and he then is rewarded with authority over five cities.

Then, there is a third servant. When called to account, he says that he hid his coin. He didn't put it in a bank, or even bury it in the ground, but wrapped it in a cloth. That's not the best

kind of safekeeping. And he offers a lame excuse as to why he didn't do anything with that coin. Then he says that did this because he was afraid of the nobleman. He calls him a "severe man" who takes what he didn't deposit and reaps what he didn't sow. Think about his: if this servant really was afraid of the nobleman, he would have worked hard to make something with the money he had been given. Also, the nobleman has just rewarded two servants with positions that far outweigh what they had made for him. So, it doesn't appear that he is harsh or greedy. So, it seems this servant is making a very poor excuse. In reality, he doesn't know, trust, and love the nobleman. And, as a result, the coin he had is taken and given to the one who had made ten minas.

What does this have to do with Jesus? When Jesus returns in glory, he will judge everyone who has ever lived. And we will have to give an account for our lives. As I've said before, I don't know exactly how this will work. We're not given all the details. But what we've done in this life will be examined. As the apostle Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 4:5, when "the Lord comes," he "will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God." Those who have served Jesus will be given some kind of reward. But that reward isn't probably what most people think. We tend to think in terms of money. But notice that the servants who made money weren't given money. They were given authority. The truth is that all Christians will receive the greatest reward possible: God himself. There is nothing greater than God. All Christians will be in the direct presence of God for eternity. You can't top that. But we're given some hints that Christians will have different positions in eternity, perhaps some who have been particularly faithful in this life will have greater responsibilities.

Perhaps we can think of an analogy in sports. Those who work hard in practice will be rewarded with more playing time. The quarterback who learns the playbook thoroughly and works hard to execute the plays exactly as the coach imagined them will be rewarded with a starting position. The one who is lazy and doesn't do what the coach wants will be but cut from the team. In that way, "to everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

What does this have to do with us? If you're truly a servant of Jesus, you'll do what he wants during this time in history when he is "away," in the "far country" of heaven. And when he returns, he will reward your work. The reward may simply be, "Well done, good and faithful



servant.” It might mean that you will have some wonderful things to do in eternity in the new creation. Whatever it is, Jesus will acknowledge your work. What you have done will not be have been done in vain.

In this parable, the third servant showed he wasn't a servant at all. He made a lame excuse. And what he had been given was taken away. There are some people who think they're Christians. They think they're Christians because they believe some statements about Jesus are true. But Satan knows those truths even better than Christians do (James 2:19), and he won't be with God for eternity. Just because someone has said they believe in Jesus doesn't mean they're truly a Christian. Just because someone has been baptized doesn't mean they're truly a Christian.

Salvation is a gift. It is not something earned. But, salvation is a work of God, and it's not just about having sins forgiven. That's a huge thing, but that's just one facet of salvation. Salvation also includes being regenerated by the Holy Spirit, being a new person. When God saves a person, he starts to transform that person. So, a real Christian should, over the course of his or her Christian life, have some works to demonstrate that change. The apostle Paul said we're saved by grace through faith, and this is not our work. But he says we're saved to do good works (Eph. 2:8–10). James, the brother of Jesus, says that a so-called “faith” without works is a dead faith. It's not real at all (James 2:17). Faith is demonstrated by works (James 2:18). Works are not the root of our salvation, but they are fruit of our salvation.

So, on judgment day, I expect that there will be many who thought that they were Christians who are surprised to learn that they never really trusted Christ. If they truly loved him, they would obey him (John 14:15, 21, 23).

And, speaking of judgment day, in this parable, the noble man will punish those who were opposed to him, the ones who said, “We do not want this man to reign over us.” And we're told Jesus will do the same. Now, some people think Jesus would never do such a thing. But the Bible doesn't flinch away from punishment. In the Old Testament, several men of God slaughtered God's enemies. Joshua killed five Amorite kings (Josh.10:16–27). Samuel killed Agag, the king of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:32–33). Elijah slaughtered hundreds of prophets of Baal (1 Kgs. 18:40). Don't think that this is just some Old Testament violence. The book of Revelation portrays Jesus as a greater Joshua, slaying those who refuse to repent (Rev. 19:11–21). That's just one picture of condemnation (similar to 2 Thess. 1:5–10). Another is sending people into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:30).

Another picture is the damned being thrown into a lake of fire (Rev. 20:14–15). These are all images of a reality that is too awful for us to fully appreciate. It's what we deserve. We are all like those people who say, "We don't want this man to be our king!" If God hadn't changed our hearts, we would reject him still.

If you think all of this is too harsh, you need to understand how serious our sin is, how great a rejection of God it is. And you need to remember that Jesus himself subjected himself to violence. He volunteered to become a man, to be hated, rejected, betrayed, arrested, tortured, and killed in a gruesome way. His death wasn't an accident. It was the triune God's plan, so that sin could be crushed without having to crush all sinners.

Jesus isn't a harsh King. He's a king who sacrifices himself so that we can live. He's a King who will richly reward us for our service to him. He has given us a modest amount of time, a modest amount of money, a modest amount of talents, a small amount of opportunities and spiritual gifts. He expects us not to receive those things and hide them. He wants us to put them to use. We may not all do massive things for the kingdom of God. Living a quiet life of humble obedience to Jesus may not look great in the world's eyes. But doing that is huge in God's eyes. And he will reward us.

Our reward will be to live with him forever, and to have even greater responsibilities in the new creation. What will that be like? I don't know. But this life is a shadow, and the substance is eternity, a never-ending existence. Will we serve God in his kingdom or will we be cast out into darkness forever? If you want to serve in God's kingdom forever, you will serve in it now. Your refusal to serve now is an indication that you won't be with God forever. Jesus is warning us not to be like that third servant, the one who truly didn't love, trust, and even know the king. That servant was no servant at all, and what he thought he had, he lost.

Let us use the gifts that Jesus gives us now, because all of history is pointing to him. Several people, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., have said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."<sup>9</sup> The idea is that justice will certainly come, even if it takes a long time to get there. More recently, one Christian author corrected this line: "The arc of history is long, but it bends toward Jesus."<sup>10</sup> Let us get ready for that day when we stand before Jesus by using what he has given us.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of-universe>.

<sup>10</sup> Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 204.

Let's be on the right side of history by being on the right side of Jesus.