

The Ant and the Raven

By Cornelius R. Stam

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Should Christians Lay Up Store for the Future?

A CONTRADICTION?

Proverbs 6:6-8: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, Provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest.”

—King Solomon

Luke 12:24: “Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap: which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: How much more are ye better than the fowls?”

—The Lord Jesus Christ

Here is one of those seeming contradictions in the Bible—and our use of the word *seeming* should not be taken as an indication that we intend to explain anything away. On the contrary, we agree at the outset that these two passages teach exactly opposite ways of living.

The sin of trying to explain away plain statements of Scripture is just what skeptics have so long accused theologians of doing. Nor are problems really solved by such methods.

We can almost hear some theologian, guilty of this practice, insisting that we are to draw spiritual lessons from *both* these passages, for while one teaches that we should not be slothful or careless about tomorrow’s needs, the other teaches us not to be anxious either, since God cares for His own.

Granted! But this is merely bypassing the heart of the problem. Whatever spiritual lessons we may gather from these and other portions of the Bible, the fact remains that if we should hear one of the above statements from the mouth of God, should take Him at His word and make it our rule to live by, we should live in a very different manner than if we had heard the other.

It would be impossible to practice both these programs at the same time.

TWO OPPOSITE PROGRAMS

Both Solomon and our Lord deal with the question of laying up material store for the future.

Says Solomon: You had better make provision for tomorrow. It will not always be summertime. The storms of winter are coming. “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise.”

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Says our Lord: Do not be concerned about tomorrow's needs. Tomorrow will take care of itself—God will provide. "*Consider the ravens...which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them.*"

Or, to put it more briefly:

Says Solomon: Consider the ant; she lays up store for the future.

Says our Lord: Consider the ravens; they don't! Yet God takes care of them.

This is just where some theologians attempt a solution by trying to explain away facts.

They say that our Lord's words as recorded by Luke do not actually mean that we should not *prepare* for tomorrow's needs—only that we should not *worry* about them. They argue that the "*Take no thought,*" of Verse 22, means only, "Take no *anxious* thought."

But this explanation is utterly unsatisfactory, for in Verse 29 the Lord adds: "*Seek not* ye what ye shall eat..." while in Verse 33 He goes so far as to command His followers: "*Sell that ye have, and give alms....*" Strange that these things are not *practiced* by those who preach that the teachings of Christ on earth are for our obedience!

No, all attempts to neutralize our Lord's explicit directions are illegitimate attempts to escape difficulties. Sincere and honest men will far rather leave problems unsolved and await further light than to resort to strained interpretations and forced solutions.

We do not see how it can be fairly denied that the ant and the raven are used by Scripture to teach exactly opposite ways of life as far as economic practices are concerned.

How shall we explain this? Can it be explained? Shall we say: "*Behold, a greater than Solomon is here!*" and simply prefer our Lord's words to Solomon's? Surely not, for *both* statements are equally inspired by the Holy Spirit. *Both* are God-breathed.

THE ANSWER

The simple solution to the problem is again a dispensational one—a matter of "rightly dividing the Word of truth."

When we obey II Timothy 2:15 and recognize the fact that from time to time God has changed His dealings with men, this difficulty vanishes.

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In quoting from Luke 12 we purposely passed over the words of our Lord which are the key to the whole passage:

“But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you.

“Fear not, little flock for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

“Sell that ye have, and give alms...” (Vers. 31-33).

Lest there should be any question as to the character of the kingdom here referred to, we quote Luke 22:29, 30:

“And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto Me;

“That ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Surely this is not taking place today, but refers to the personal, physical reign of Christ on earth.

This is the key to the problem.

Our Lord's exhortation to His disciples to consider the ravens and stop being concerned about tomorrow's needs, was given in view of the fact that the “kingdom of heaven” or the establishment of the rule of heavens on earth was at hand.

“How do you suppose we would fare...if we...lived like the ravens?”

John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus and the twelve apostles all did a great deal of preaching, but ask Matthew what was the *theme*, the *subject* of their message and he will tell you so plainly that there can be no question about it.

Matthew 3:1, 2 “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matthew 4:17 “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matthew 10:5-7 “These twelve Jesus sent forth and commanded them....preach, saying: the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

The Ant and the Raven

By Cornelius R. Stam

This glorious Kingdom of Heaven, the earthly establishment of the Kingdom of God (Dan. 2:44) was the very theme of our Lord's message.

He taught His disciples to PRAY for it (Matt. 6:10).

He sent them to PREACH it (Matt. 10:7).

He told them to PRACTICE it (Matt. 10:8-10).

A CHANGE IN PROGRAM

Ever since David this glorious kingdom had been *prophesied*. During our Lord's earthly ministry it was *proclaimed* "at hand." After Pentecost it was actually *offered*. Acts 3:19, 20 records Peter's memorable proposition to the "men of Israel":

"Repent...the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and He shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you."

Israel's answer?

Read Acts 4 to 7.

Read especially Acts 7:59-8:3:

"And they [the council] stoned Stephen....And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the Church which was at Jerusalem....As for Saul he made havock of the Church...."¹

Messiah had been officially rejected, not only in incarnation, but in resurrection.

And the favored nation stood by her rejection of Christ too, while Jews from Jerusalem to Rome confirmed what their leaders had done.

Surely the reader can see why the world's unrest continued as before, yea, has increased until this day. *Christ had been rejected and is rejected still*, not only by the Gentiles but even by His own chosen people.

How can there be peace without the Prince of Peace? How can there be justice and prosperity until He reigns? How do you suppose we would fare in "this present evil age" if we sold our investments, distributed the proceeds to the poor and lived like the ravens?

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But there is a very bright side.

While the world, as such, and the nation Israel have rejected the Lord Jesus, God still offers Him to individuals. We, each for himself, may receive Him as our *personal* Savior, while God holds the judgment of the world in abeyance. And so, strangely and wonderfully, though the nations have rejected Him He seems to be brought closer to *us!*

“He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not.

“He came unto His own and His own received Him not.

“But as many as received Him, to them gave He [the] power [right] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name” (John 1:10-12).

How simple! How wonderful!

Against the dark, black background of Jerusalem’s great persecution of Messiah and His followers we should read Romans 5:20, 21:

“...But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.”

We are living today under *the reign of grace*: not the reign of *law*—that is past; nor the reign of *Christ*—that is future; but THE REIGN OF GRACE.

To demonstrate the riches of His mercy and grace, God *saved* His chief enemy on earth, the leader of the rebellion: Saul of Tarsus, the blasphemer, the persecutor, the evil-doer, and committed to him *“the dispensation of the grace of God”* (Eph. 3:1-3).

This is an evil age, the age of the rejection of the Son of God, but at the same time it is the age of *grace*. Indeed, the exceeding sinfulness of man serves to emphasize the true character of grace, for grace is the kindness and love of God to the guilty and underserving (See Eph. 2:1-10).

Thus, while “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” we may be *“justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”* (Rom. 3:23, 24):

“In whom we have redemption, through His blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace” (Eph. 1:7).

“The gospel of the grace of God!”

This is our glorious message to a world of lost sinners. Let us not confuse it with “the gospel of the kingdom.”

The Ant and the Raven

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The character of this age is one of exceeding sinfulness on man's part but exceeding grace on God's part and our lives must be lived in accordance with these facts.

Nowhere does Paul, the apostle of *this* dispensation, instruct us to "take no thought for the morrow." Indeed, he teaches distinctly that parents should lay up provision for their children (II Cor. 12:14) and that

"If any provide not for his own and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel [un-believer]" (I Tim. 5:8).

Our Lord said to the rich man: "*Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor...*" (Mark 10:21). But that was while the earthly establishment of His kingdom was being proclaimed. Nowhere does Paul, the apostle of the *ascended* Lord, teach us to do this. He *does* say:

"Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy;

"That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate [Lit. generous contributors]" (I Tim. 6:17, 18).

The apostle of grace *does* say, by inspiration:

"...see that ye abound in this grace [giving] also" (II Cor. 8:7).

He *does* say:

"...he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully" (II Cor. 9:6).

He *does* say:

"...God loveth a cheerful [or joyous, Gr. hilarious] giver" (II Cor. 9:7).

But nowhere does he exhort believers in this present evil age to sell all they have and give to the poor, taking no thought for the morrow.

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UNDERSTANDING WHAT THE WILL OF THE LORD IS

How much is gained when we thus rightly divide the Word of truth!

When once we see that the dispensation of justice and righteousness has been held in abeyance and that today God is dispensing grace to a condemned world, we will have no difficulty in accepting these words of Scripture at their face value. We will not need to resort to forced and unnatural interpretations.

To be always explaining away simple commands of God because they seem impossible to practice consistently must at last affect our consciences and our spiritual lives.

On the other hand, it will contribute much to our spiritual peace and joy to understand God's purpose for us in this present dispensation, for God does not expect of us what cannot be accomplished apart from His presence here in Christ.

Best of all, greater spiritual power will attend our ministry as we appreciate more fully the singleness of God's wonderful purpose in the present dispensation.

We do not work miracles as the twelve did (Acts 5:12-16). We do not all live out of one fund, as they did (Acts 4:32-35). We are not promised that whatever we ask in faith we shall have, as they were (See Matt. 21:22 cf. Rom. 8:26-28; Eph. 3:20; Phil. 4:6, 7).²

No, this program of Messiah's kingdom is held in abeyance while the sin and rebellion of the world go on. We are left here as ambassadors on enemy territory, with just one wonderful message: "*the gospel of the grace of God.*"

It is ours to go to rebels against God, both Jews and Gentiles, offering them forgiveness and peace, by grace through faith in Christ:

"That he might reconcile both unto God in one body, by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby" (Eph. 2:16).

"Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17).

Endnotes

1. The Church of that day must not, of course, be confused with the Church of *today*, which is called "the body of Christ." God has always had His Church (*Ekklesia* a called out assembly) but the Church of today is "one *new man*" (Eph. 2:15) composed of Jews and Gentiles reconciled to God in one body by the cross (Eph. 2:16).
2. See the author's booklet: *Unanswered Prayer*.