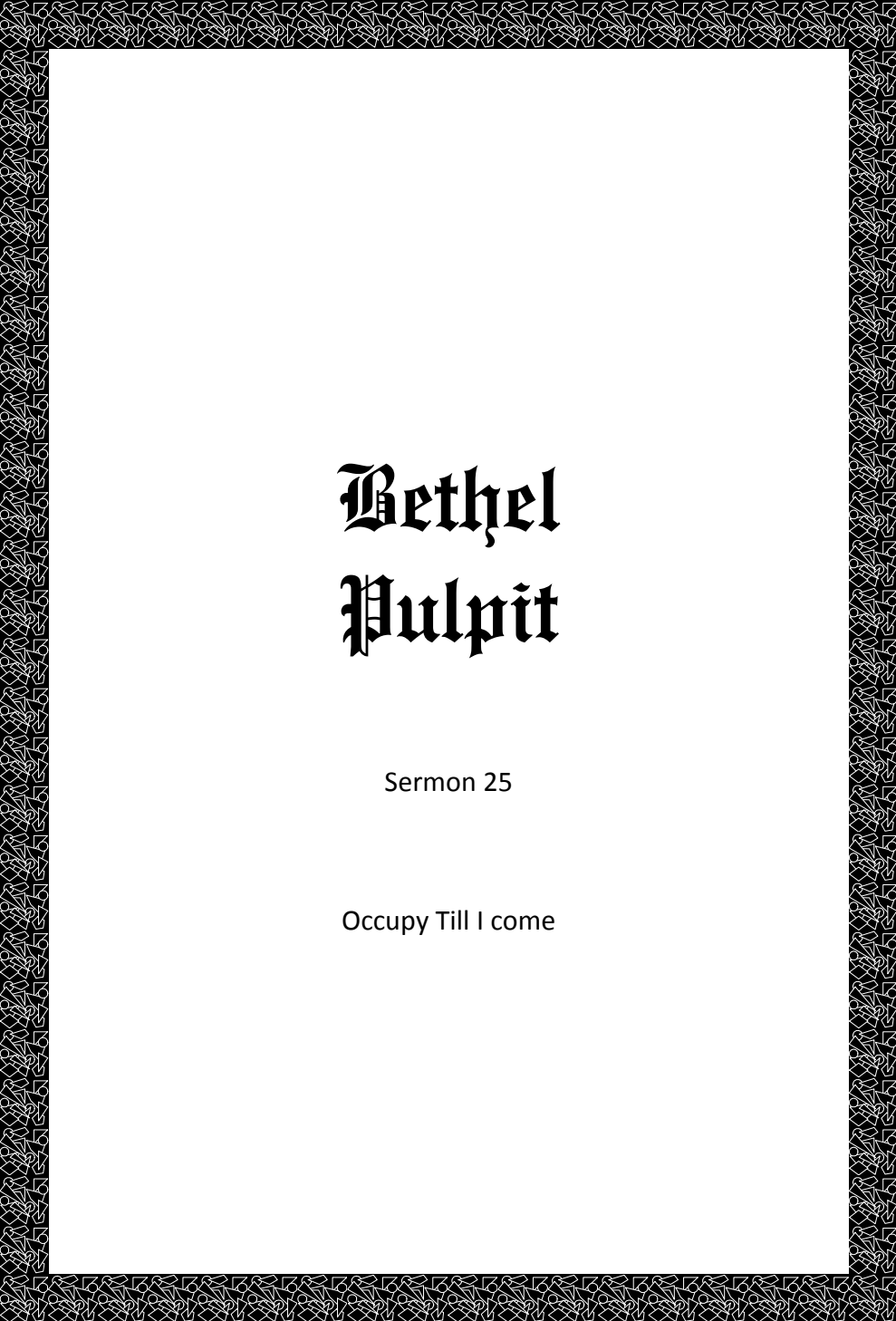




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 25

Occupy Till I come

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 16th August, 1987**

Text: *"Occupy till I come" (Luke 19. 13).*

This is almost the last of all the wonderful parables that the Lord Jesus told. How when you and I come to the parables, we need to be very careful. Many people have acted most foolishly in trying to over-spiritualise the parables, in making *this* mean something and *that* mean something else. I think you will find that the purpose of the Lord Jesus in the parables was always to teach one plain, chief, vital lesson, and you see, we need to seek the mind of the Spirit in it. There was an old Lancashire minister who continually used to stop and say, "What is the mind of the Spirit in this passage?" I have often thought since what a good point it was. What is the mind of the Spirit?

This, of course, is the parable of the pounds, to be clearly distinguished from the similar parable of the talents. The two are not the same: there are various differences. They were spoken on different occasions. Here was a nobleman about to go into a far country to be made king. Before he went, he called his servants and gave them each a pound. He spoke these words to them: "Trade with that pound. See what use you can make of it." The generality of the people hated him and said, "We will not have this man to reign over us." When he returned, he called his servants to give account. One by his trading had made ten pounds, another had made five, but one had simply wrapped his in a napkin and it had done no good at all. He tried to make excuses, but his lord would not receive them. The pound he had was taken from him and given to the one that had ten. He was condemned as a wicked servant and then also the lord's enemies had to be taken and slain.

We must seek the mind of the Spirit in it. People, even godly people, godly ministers, godly divines, have made these words to mean various things and it all ends in confusion, especially when they come to the taking the pound away from the one who had it to give it to someone else. Their whole explanation has floundered. If you and I read the word carefully in its context, we have a clear clue to the meaning. We are told

that the Lord Jesus spoke a parable “because He was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear.” We are told simply the reason why the Lord taught this parable. The great number thought that as He was on His way to Jerusalem, when He reached there He was immediately going to set up an outward kingdom and overthrow the power of the Romans. If you remember that, the purpose of the parable is very simple, very clear.

Its teaching is twofold. Firstly, the end is not yet. The final consummation of all things is not immediately at hand. The Lord’s purposes are not yet fulfilled. Like this nobleman who went into a far country to receive the kingdom, so the Lord Jesus must ascend into heaven, there to live and there to reign, there to intercede. But one day He will come again, and so, secondly, till He come His people are not to be slothful, not to be careless. They are not to sleep. They are to seek to walk in obedience to His will. They are to be His witnesses. They are not to waste their time. They are to redeem the time because the days are evil. They are to continue. They are to persevere even to the end.

Now as I understand it, this is the plain, clear, simple meaning of the parable. There were those who thought that the kingdom of God would immediately be set up on earth and the Lord would reign as an earthly king. No. The Lord Jesus must ascend to heaven. There must be that long waiting time. It has now been well nigh two thousand years. During that time the Lord’s people are to watch. They are to pray. They are to redeem the time. They are to honour their God. They are to walk in obedience to His will. So perhaps I have disappointed you – I do not know – because really I have not made the pounds signify anything at all. But may we ever be kept from fanciful interpretations of Scripture.

Now before coming to this very close, solemn word, “Occupy till I come,” I just want to pause and make one or two observations. One is more an expounding of the text. In the days when the Lord Jesus was here upon earth, often this kind of thing happened. A person was to be appointed king, but first he must journey to Rome and there from the Roman emperor he must receive his credentials and be authorised to reign as king. In this very town of Jericho where the Lord Jesus was preaching, Archelaus was reigning. Just before this, he had gone to Rome to receive authorisation that he might rule in Judaea. So when the Lord Jesus told

this parable, it was something which would immediately have struck a chord, something which would be uppermost in the minds of the people, especially because there were so many who rightly hated Archelaus and did send a message to Rome saying they did not want this man to reign over them.

And then just a second thing. You notice these two men who had profited in their trading, who had gained, you notice the way that they spoke. The first came saying, “Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds.” Grace will always make a man humble. If you have any attainments in divine things, you will not lay claim to them yourself. This man might have said, “I have traded well. I have been a faithful servant. I have profited and because of all I have done, I have gained ten pounds for thee.” But he did not say that. He said, “Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds.” And the second said the same. He said, “Lord, thy pound hath gained five pounds.” I know this is only the language of the parable, but isn’t this the way the Lord’s people speak? They put the crown on the Lord’s head. It is the Lord Jesus and Him alone who is to be honoured.

And just another small point. This unfaithful servant began by finding fault with his lord and master, just like Adam did in the garden, just like Eve did, “Thou art an austere man.” And the more he tried to make excuses, the more he condemned himself.

I just want to make one solemn point. What was the terrible sin of this wicked servant? What had he done? Well, he had not done *anything* and that was his sin. You say, “Is it a sin not to do anything?” Beloved friends, it is a sin not to do *anything* if the Lord has commanded us to do *something*. We think of that word, “Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord.” They did not do *anything*. They had not done anything wicked. They did not do *anything* when they should have done *something*. This man in the parable had not been stealing. He had not been cheating. He had not committed adultery. He had not killed anyone. He had done *nothing* when his master commanded him to do *something*. This is a very deep, vast point, but in the old Church of England prayer book, the daily prayer asks to be forgiven the sins of omission as well as the sins of commission. That is, not just the things we have done wrong, but the things that are right that we have not done and should have done. “We

have left undone those things that we ought to have done, and we have done the things we ought not to have done. There is no health in us. Therefore have mercy on us, O Lord, miserable sinners.” Although we do not have the prayer book, we agree with the prayer. May we be delivered from the sins of omission. There may be something tonight with one of you and you ought to do it, and you know you ought to do it.

I seem to have spent quite a long time clearing up the context and establishing the principle and seeking the mind of the Spirit here. Now, “Occupy till I come.” It is a solemn word to each one of us. Just as these servants each had a pound and they were told to occupy till their lord and master returned, so each of us has a life to live on this earth. We have this time here till He shall come, whether that be the last great day, His second coming, or whether it be when He comes to us in death. But the Lord says, “Occupy till I come.” We were created for one purpose, to honour and glorify God. Our little lives are given to each of us to honour and glorify God. By nature not one of us does honour and glorify God. Our little lives are given to us as a time in which to prepare for eternity. Not one of us by nature is concerned about preparing for eternity. But the Lord Jesus solemnly says, “Occupy till I come.” In other words, may your chief business and my chief business be this, to be prepared for when He does come, for most surely He will come. His second coming will usher in the end of all things, the great judgment day, eternity, the final separation, heaven and hell, and that for ever. “Till I come.” O what a mercy that it is still the day of grace! The old-timers, in the old dissenting chapels, used to sing Dr. Watts’ well-known hymn. I know there is a measure of legality in it, but there is a measure of truth in it.

“Life is the time to serve the Lord,
The time to ensure the great reward;
And while the lamp holds out to burn,
The vilest sinner may return.”

But the time is short and the days are evil and we know the certainty that the Lord will come, but then there is the uncertainty of *when* He shall come. We do not know, but it would appear that perhaps none of us may still be on earth at the time of the Lord’s return. But the day of your death, the day of my death, will be as the Lord’s coming to us personally. “Occupy till I come.” Be in earnest. May this be your chief,

your great concern. Do not take it for granted. Death is ours in Adam and by our personal sin. May we never be satisfied short of life in Christ. O may it be the great question, “Am I ready to meet God? Am I made a real Christian, washed in the Redeemer’s blood?”

“Occupy till I come.” Then be occupied in this, be it your chief, your great concern to seek an interest in the Saviour’s blood, to seek a preparation to stand before His face, to be made right and to be kept right. Now may this be our chief occupation. There is one thing that really matters above everything. “One thing is needful.” “Occupy till I come.” Seek to make your calling and election sure, to read your title clear to mansions in the skies. There is no room for slothfulness here, no room for idleness here, no room for slumbering here.

“Occupy till I come.” But then you see, it is a special word to the people of God. Just as these servants were each given a pound, we are given a life to live. No-one else can live it for us. And we are called not to waste our time, not to mis-spend our time. We are told to “redeem the time, for the days are evil.” Now how much time have you mis-spent even today, even yesterday, even this week? All time which is not lived to God’s glory, seeking His will, desiring to follow Him, is time wasted, time mis-spent. That does not mean, of course, that a man must be always on his knees. He must not; he cannot. But the old Puritan divines used to speak of a person’s work that he did as his “calling,” and your work should be your calling – not just a job in which you can make more money than anyone else. That is not the standard of the New Testament. “Occupy till I come,” in that calling wherein the Lord has called you. The New Testament speaks of it as a calling, not a job, and the old divines used to speak of it as a calling. John Newton said that if a man was a road sweeper he should try to sweep the streets better than any road sweeper in the town. I have been told of a godly man in Wiltshire who was a road sweeper and he was summoned to the county offices. He wondered what he had done, and when he came there, he was rewarded and told that the few miles of road that he kept in order were better kept than any other road in Wiltshire. In that menial position he honoured his God and brought glory to His name. The old seventeenth century hymn says,

“Who sweeps a room as by Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.”

“Occupy till I come.” Of course, this word at first perhaps sounds strangely on our ears, “*Occupy* till I come.” But perhaps we shall understand it better if we think of a way in which we still use the word. If you had a man working for you, you would not say, “Occupy for the whole of the day.” But we do use it in this sense. Perhaps you go to a certain place and ask to see someone and you are told you cannot see him because he is “occupied,” which means he is busy, he is engaged, so busy, so engaged, that he just cannot see you. In that sense perhaps we would rather put it like this, “Be occupied till I come.” There is no excuse for a lazy Christian, no excuse for a child of God wasting his time. “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.”

“Occupy till I come.” Now of course there are a few things especially. One is this. Occupy *in prayer* till I come. You see, this is one place in which we need to be busy. This is one place where we need to redeem the time, in secret, earnest, prevailing prayer. “Occupy till I come.” You will have to keep on praying all the way to heaven. There will never be a time when you do not need to pray, and surely none of us really pray as much as we should. We read of some of the old godly saints and the number of hours they spent in secret prayer. You say, “Life is different today.” Well, wasn’t it Luther who said he was so busy that he could not possibly hope to get through all his work unless he had two or three hours’ prayer before he started? There used to be an old saying that in harvest time the farm labourer who spent time sharpening his scythe was not wasting his time, and of course that is scriptural. Ecclesiastes 10: “If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength.” “Occupy till I come” – in prayer. “Continue in prayer.” “In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.”

And then another thing – *the Word of God*, meditating on it, reading it, loving it. “Occupy till I come.”

There is one thing and you may think that this does not altogether fit, and perhaps comes in strangely – *the Lord’s supper*. Why do I bring the Lord’s supper in here? Because the concluding words of each administration of the Lord’s supper are these: “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death *till He come*.” So the concluding words of each administration of the Lord’s supper are

somewhat similar to this: “Till He come.” Now here the Lord Jesus says, “Occupy *till I come*.” I wonder if there is sufficient burden and exercise concerning the Lord’s supper, both concerning those who do not come to it and those who do. Often when we think of an open profession of the Lord’s name, we think of believers’ baptism. Now that is a once-and-for-all profession. Now the Lord’s supper is a continual profession. “Till He come.” “Occupy till I come.” “As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till He come.”

“‘Do this,’ He cried, ‘till time shall end,
In memory of your dying Friend!
Meet at My table, and record
The love of your departed Lord.’”

“As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till He come.”

“Occupy till I come” – *in obedience to the Lord’s will*, in following after Him. Of course, this is not legal ground. Why does the Lord Jesus say to His people, “Occupy till I come”? Well, because of what He has done for them in laying down His life for them. It is not on legal ground. It is sweetly constrained by His love. It is with a desire to honour Him that His people seek to walk out this word, “Occupy till I come.” So you see the first side of it really is this: until the Lord comes, whilst our days on earth are lengthened, they are to be devoted to the Lord. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” One thing and only one thing is needful. O may it be well engraven on our hearts, “Occupy till I come.” So this is the first thing. The Lord has gone up to heaven to receive the kingdom. One day He will return, and until then may the things of God be our chief, our great concern – constrained by His love, to walk worthy of the Lord Jesus, to honour Him.

“Occupy till I come.” And then the other side of it, in the sense of persevering, continuing, carrying on. “Occupy” – not just today, or tomorrow, but – “Occupy *till I come*.” You see, these servants had not just to trade with these pounds for a day or a week. However long their lord delayed, whether it was a year or twenty years, they had to occupy till he came. In a word it is this:

“Jesus Christ, your Father’s Son,
Bids you undismayed go on.”

No doubt there are a few of you here tonight and you are downcast, you are tried, tempted. Things are not going well in your pilgrimage. You are disappointed. Everything seems to be going wrong and your temptation is to give it all up and to turn back. This is the Lord’s word to you: “Occupy till I come.” Sometimes it is a word specially spoken to a dear child of God in the depths of trouble and sometimes the Lord’s meaning then is more like this: not just to occupy till I come at the end of all things, but more like this: dear child of God, I am not going to leave you always in this pathway of affliction, in the deep waters of sorrow. One day I am going to come for your deliverance, for your relief, to set you free, to make you rejoice again. Now “occupy till I come,” till that day shall arise. “Ye now therefore have sorrow: but” – one of the Lord’s wonderful *buts* – “but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”

“Occupy till I come.” And now that dear one, so sad, lonely, disappointed, the way you are to occupy till the Lord shall come is this. “Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in Thee: yea, in the shadow of Thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.” One day they will, and until then, “in the shadow of Thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.”

“Occupy till I come.” Of course, it is a special word to those who are called to serve the Lord: a godly minister, a deacon, or one that in some special way the Lord has called to serve Him, or it may be in the sense of having to care for the Lord’s aged people or a mother having to care for little ones. The Lord calls His people to follow Him, to serve Him, in many ways, but if the Lord calls you in it, then you will be tried and tempted and often you will be ready to give up. “Occupy till I come.”

“Go, labour on; spend and be spent,
Thy joy to do the Father’s will;
This is the way the Master went;
Should not the servant tread it still?”

“Occupy till I come.” I think of Elijah. He came to that spot on one occasion when he could not go on a day longer. Everything was

wrong. He fled from Jezebel. He sank down under a juniper tree, “and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.” He was ready to give everything up. The Lord Jesus kindly, full of compassion, drew near and said, “Occupy till I come.” “And the Lord said unto him, Go, return.” First He fed him. First the water and the cake, and then the spiritual food, and he went in the strength of it many days.

“Occupy till I come.” O that this might be a word to many. You young people, some of you setting out in life, perhaps there are things to which the Lord has called you. It is not just the beginning. It is the carrying on, the completing. “Occupy till I come.” Church members, it is one thing to make an open profession. “Occupy till I come.” So often we are like David. “O that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest.” If only we could go to another place, or something different, or something more attractive, or something more exciting, or something better. Usually the Lord will have us to continue to labour and serve Him in the place where we are – usually – He is sovereign. When Jerusalem’s walls were rebuilt, every man repaired the piece near his home. There is a lot of wisdom in the children’s hymn: “You in your small corner, and I in mine.” It is not to seek these exciting things, these things with a lot of noise. “You in your small corner, and I in mine.”

O that there might be that solemn realisation, how quickly our little lives are passing away. We have only one life to live. O may it be a life lived by the faith of the Son of God. With some of us, with many of us, the greater part of our life is now past. May it be,

“While our days on earth are lengthened,
May we give them, Lord, to Thee.”

I think it was on Thursday evening I saw a most beautiful sunset on the Cornish coast, looking out over the sea. There was the sun going down in almost a cloudless sky. Everything was quiet, everything was hushed and beautiful; just a seagull here and there. It seemed so slowly that the sun was going down, you could hardly see it move. There seemed to be such a beauty about it – and suddenly it was gone, right down behind the sea, and it could be seen no more. I thought like this, that with some of us our sun is now beginning to go down in the sky. Some of you young people, your sun is just rising. O may you heed this word, “Occupy till I

come.” But with some of us our sun seems to be going down in the sky and we look back over our lives, our fair pretensions when we first began in the things of God, and we could weep and weep with bitter shame and sorrow and repentance when we think of mis-spent lives and the whole of our Christian profession, and preaching, and ministry, just like one dark blot. Our sun is going down and soon shall be gone for ever and the place that knows us shall know us no more for ever. Then this word rested on my spirit: “Occupy till I come.” O that there might be that desire in our hearts tonight that our remaining days might be lived to the Lord’s glory. “Occupy till I come.”