

Matthew 25:14-30

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ 21 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ 23 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’

24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’

26 But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.

28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

## PARABLE WITH A TWIST

I want to revise my definition of a parable. Last week I said again what I often say. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. But, this week I want to add one word to that definition. A parable is a surprising earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

That is, most parables have a twist. The earthly story doesn’t go, as you would expect it to go.

For example, when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan people would have been flabbergasted. Samaritans were not good people. But, in the parable the Samaritan is the guy in the white hat.

In the story of the Prodigal Son the actions of the father are beyond belief. He should have kicked his son out of the family instead of welcoming him back home. But, he doesn't do it.

So, what is the twist in our story for today? It is the amount of money that the master gives to his slaves. We all know the story. The master gives 5, 2 or 1 talent to his three slaves. How much he gives each one depends upon his estimate of the slave's ability.

But, here's the surprise. All the slaves were given a huge amount of money. One talent was equal to twenty year's wages for a common worker. Therefore, two talents would equal forty year's wages, and five talents would have been equal to a 100-year's wages.

Who gives his slaves that kind of money? And what kind of master, after giving his slaves this amount of money goes away and stays away for a long time?

I had a cousin who owned a gas station in a good location. He made great money. But, then he decided to take it easy. Instead of coming in to work each day he just checked in from time to time and let his employees run the business.

Do you know what happened? That's right. His employees started dipping into the till, and he soon had to sell his business at a loss.

Looking at this parable from a business standpoint the actions of the master makes no sense. He seems to be setting himself up for failure. Leaving that much money in the care of slaves seems like a recipe for disaster.

But, the master does not hesitate to do it. The master is generous, and he trusts his slaves.

#### BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

We have to be careful about turning a parable into an allegory, but in this case I think it is safe to say that the master represents God, and the slaves are you and I. God has entrusted us with many blessings.

Some of us have more than others, but all of us have been given way more than we deserve. And we have been given time to use those blessings. What are we going to do with them? What are we going to do with the gift of life?

This is a question for every human being to answer, but it is an especially important question for those of us who know the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

If we believe that God in Christ has not treated us as our sins deserve but instead has forgiven us, what is our responsibility? What does this great blessing enable us to do? How can we pass on the joy of God's love?

### THE SAFE COURSE IS NOT ALWAYS THE BEST ONE

The key point in this parable is having enough faith to take a risk for the master.

The slave with five talents and the slave with two talents are both able to multiply the blessing. The slave with one talent just buries it in the back yard for safekeeping.

Now, for us, that seems like a foolish thing to do. But, actually in those days that was the safest thing to do. Any kind of commerce was risky in the ancient world. The banks weren't federally insured.

In fact, according to one scholar, Eduard Schweitzer, the Jewish law of the day read, "Whoever immediately buries property entrusted to him is no longer liable because he has taken the safest course conceivable."

This was the attitude of the religious leaders in Jesus' day. Let's take the safest course conceivable. William Barclay wrote,

"The useless servant took and buried his talent in the ground, in order that he might hand it back to his master exactly as it was. The whole aim of the Scribes and the Pharisees was to keep the Law exactly as it was. In their own phrase they sought to 'build a fence around the Law.'"

Often we make decisions like that in the church. Leaders want to take the safest course conceivable. Quite often the church just wants to survive, to preserve what she has. But, this does not work very well. We cannot use God's blessings very effectively if every decision is made based on anxiety about the future.

### BEYOND SURVIVAL

God's people have to learn how to go from being survival oriented to being mission oriented. How do we do that? How do we go beyond survival?

I suggest we begin by having a proper view of God. I suggest we begin by having an abiding trust in the love and forgiveness of God.

God has given us so much. And we need to count our blessings.

We have been entrusted with the greatest treasure of all, the treasure of the gospel, the good news of God's love and forgiveness as revealed in Jesus Christ.

So, what are we going to do with that treasure? Do we hide our light under a bushel? Do we bury that treasure in the back yard for safekeeping? Do we become overly obsessed with our own salvation?

Or, do we share that good news with others? If we really believe that the gospel is a treasure, then shouldn't we invest that treasure in the lives of others?

John Wesley once wrote, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

## RISK MANAGEMENT?

You might be tempted to say that he's not realistic. You might say that this "do-gooder" attitude does not take into account the way even the best of intentions are subverted and perverted by the ways of the world.

Spreading the good news in word and deed is risky business. Suppose we fail? Suppose we expend all our resources? Shouldn't the church be as concerned as anyone else about risk management?

We even talked about risk management at one of our Bible studies. And of course it is important for us to be wise stewards of what God has given us. We shouldn't throw away the blessings God has given to us.

But, from a spiritual standpoint risk management just doesn't seem to be a big concern in the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus. Jesus tells this parable right before he gives everything on the cross of Calvary. What kind of risk management is that?

And don't say that we are not called to take some risks too. Didn't Jesus tell his disciples (and us) to deny themselves, take up a cross and follow him?

Following Jesus is not a new form of risk management. We want to think about being safe and secure in the arms of Jesus, but those who followed Jesus in the early church were anything but safe and secure. Following Jesus is a risky business.

Suppose we are not successful? Suppose we spend our money and time and effort in an attempt to spread the gospel, and it is rejected?

That has happened. Churches have closed because no one came any more. Mission work has been spectacularly unsuccessful at times.

More than one minister has asked himself or herself, "Have I really made a difference? Has all the work been in vain?" Life long members sometimes become so discouraged with the church that they leave and decide never to return again.

## TRUSTING IN THE GENEROSITY OF THE MASTER

The point is this. In the parable the bold actions of the first two servants increase the master's resources. But, it could have easily gone the other way.

Suppose the first servant's trading skills were not so sharp, and he lost five talents instead of gaining five more? Suppose the second servant put his two talents in a savings and loan that went belly up? Would the master have been so happy with his servants then?

I think the faithful servants were able to serve and take risks with their talents because they believed in the generosity and the forgiveness of the master. They trusted in the goodness of the master who had entrusted so much to their care.

The Master does not judge us based upon our success (or our apparent lack of success). The Master judges us on the basis of our faith. The Master judges us on what we believe about Him.

What do we believe about God? Do we believe that God can even use our mistakes and our losses for the greater good? Do we believe that God is at heart a gracious and giving God?

If we believe that we will be willing to take risks for the kingdom. We will even be willing to risk utter failure because we know in God's hands the worst situation can be changed for the better. Even a cross can become the source of eternal salvation.

The real problem with the third servant was not that he didn't make any money. The real problem with the third servant is that he didn't trust in the goodness of the master.

Did you notice how he describes the master when he returns the talent that he buried? He said that his master was "a harsh man" who reaped where he did not sow. And it was this view of the master that prevented him from using the talent in a more productive way. He was paralyzed by his fear of the master.

Many of us talk about the grace of God and God's forgiveness. But, it has been my experience that we often say one thing and do another.

An ungracious lifestyle belies a different view of God. Instead of trusting in the grace and forgiveness of God we trust only in what we can do. We think that it is better to try and keep what we have, to bury our talent and our lives in the back yard.

The basis of all sin is described in the story of Adam and Eve. What was this original sin? It was this: they did not trust the goodness of God.

Adam and Eve were willing to believe the lie that God was holding out on them. God didn't want them to have the forbidden fruit because the fruit would allow them to become like gods. And this mistrust and fear brought death and separation into their lives.

This same fear keeps us from being who we are called to be in Christ Jesus. This fear keeps us on a kind of self-imposed road to perdition. This fear keeps us from recognizing and enjoying the many blessings that God has already given us. Instead of focusing upon the overwhelming blessings of God, we focus upon what we don't have and the bad things that might happen.

#### LUKEWARM IS NOT HOT ENOUGH

The folks in Bible study noted that the judgment of the third servant seemed rather harsh. The master took the buried talent and gave it to the guy who had ten talents. And the worthless slave who let fear rule his life was left out in the darkness where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Salvation does not come to everyone. Some are judged for their lack of faithfulness. This is always a hard word to hear.

But, it should be noted that the one talent servant had a long time to do something with what he had been given. It was he who turned the blessing into a curse.

He did not rejoice in the opportunities. He did not trust in the goodness of the master. He just sought to preserve what he had.

In the first church I served there was an elderly couple that didn't come to church. More than that, they didn't go to the grocery store, nor did they visit their family or friends. They were practically prisoners in their own home.

Now they didn't have to live this way. It was a well-known fact that they had inherited a lot of money. They were in good health for their age.

But, one day something happened that frightened this couple so much that it changed the rest of their lives. While they were attending church someone broke into their house and stole some of their prize possessions.

From that day forward they rarely left home because their sense of security had been violated. They stayed home in order to make sure that all they loved was safe and secure.

Did they live a safe and fulfilling life? Did their actions achieve the security they desired? No. These were some of the most miserable and fearful people I have ever met.

This is what happens when we let our lives be ruled by fear instead of faith. If our motto is safety first, last and always, our life will not be worth the living, and it certainly will not be the life God in Christ would have us live.

I am reminded of a passage from the book of Revelation. The risen Christ sent a letter of rebuke to the church at Laodicea. He wrote, "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold or hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." (Revelation 3:15-16)

Lukewarm is not a good temperature for food or for Christians. The Christian life is an adventure. Sometimes we succeed. Sometimes we fail. But, always we try. We step out in faith.

#### A FAITH ON THE MOVE

A minister used to come home frustrated with his leaders and say, "If someone says we haven't done it that way one more time, I'm going to pull my hair out." I wonder if God doesn't feel the same kind of frustration with us when we are so timid and cautious in our approach to life and faith.

When I read the Bible, I read about people who go from one challenging situation after another. I read about people whose faith and nerve are tested at every turn. I read about people who fail miserably and lose everything. And yet they are forgiven and restored to new life.

What I do not find in the Bible are people who are allowed to stay in one place very long. God's people are always on the move, from Egypt to the wilderness, from the wilderness to the Promised Land, from the Promised Land to captivity in Babylon, from Babylon to the return.

You know, in a way they never find that land flowing with milk and honey. They never find that place where they can quit striving. That place didn't exist for them or for us.

The world is constantly changing. We are constantly changing.

But in this uncertain world God is calling us to do something with the treasure he has given us. God is calling us to multiply the gift of forgiveness.

#### LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

The treasure of the gospel is like no other treasure. The only way we can lose it is by trying to keep it to ourselves, by burying it in the back yard of our life. The only way we can lose it is trying too much to keep it.

A man was crossing a rough mountain in Wales on a stormy night. As the moon shone dimly through the clouds, he thought he could make his way without the lantern, so he put the lantern under his coat to protect his hands from the biting wind.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew open his coat, and as the light shone forth it revealed the edge of a large quarry. If he had gone one more step, he would have fallen to his death.

Never again did he hide his lantern inside his cloak.

It is dangerous to hid our light under a bushel or bury our treasure in the back yard. God doesn't want us to hide the treasure He has given us. God wants us to use that treasure to glorify Him and illuminate our life's path.

The Bible tells us, "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power, of love and of self-control."

In perfect love, fear can be cast out. In the parable the servant doubted the character of his master. He thought that he was a hard man. And that did seem to be the case in the end.

But, our Master is not hard. Our Lord is gracious. In his perfect love fear can be cast out and we can dare to live with courage and faith.

Amen.