

IT'S A GIFT

Matthew 25:14-30

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

November 19, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 25, verses 14 through 30. It is on page 702 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches that there is a right way and a wrong way to understand God, this life, and the Judgment Day. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Matthew 25, beginning at verse 14, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁴ "For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' ²³ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no 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 answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' "

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's unavoidable—the judgment of God, that is. It's not our favorite subject to talk about. It makes us sound mean and unloving. We don't like to think about God as a righteous judge who will condemn real people to eternal destruction. Maybe we're okay with the concept of hell if

it's only reserved for the devil, the demons, and maybe a few really awful people like Adolf Hitler and people who do bad things to children. But to think of hell being populated by real people—even people we know personally—that's a bit uncomfortable. But it's unavoidable. The Bible teaches the realities of judgment and hell and the wrath of God. We really can't avoid it. So this week the lectionary wisely boxed us into a corner. If we don't like the **"weeping and gnashing of teeth"** (Matt. 25:30) of the gospel lesson, we look to the epistle lesson and find **"sudden destruction"** (1 Thess. 5:3). And if we don't like that we go to the Old Testament lesson and find punishment (Zeph. 1:9), wailing (1:10), plunder, demolition (1:13), bitter crying (1:14), wrath, distress, anguish, trouble, ruin, darkness, gloom, clouds, and blackness (1:16). And all of it at the hands of God. We have nowhere to go. We're going to have to deal with it.

And I don't just mean that we're going to have to deal with it in a theoretical way—like it might happen to other people, but we are exempt from any danger. Jesus teaches this parable just to his disciples. It's not directed against the **"wicked Pharisees."** They're not even there. It's a warning for Christians. In fact, all three of the parables in Matthew 25 do this same thing. In each parable, it's people who look like they're ready or might even be called servants of the master who are left in **"outer darkness"** (25:30). And it's those who think they have done what is necessary who are cast into **"eternal punishment"** (25:46). These are warnings to Christians. They should cause us to examine ourselves and see if we might be the hypocrites, because it is someone. And the thing about hypocrites is they might not know they are hypocrites.

The purpose of these parables is not to make us look around and think, *I wonder which of these people will be cast into "outer darkness"?* Instead, they should make us ask, *"Is it I Lord?"* (26:22) That's really the point.

Jesus begins this parable by linking it to the previous one, where he concluded by saying, **"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour"** (25:13). And now he tells another parable with the same point. That day will be like a master returning to settle accounts with his servants. He entrusted to them his property, and now he returns to see what they have done with it. The servants don't know when the master will return, so they are simply called to be faithful with what he entrusted to them during the interim.

The master, of course, is Jesus, and the servants are his disciples—not just the Twelve, but all of his disciples throughout the history of the Church. This includes you and me. And he entrusts to them his property. He apportions it differently to each one based on their ability. To one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one talent.

Now a talent was worth about twenty years' wages. That's a lot of money. So for the servant who received five talents, that would come out to about a hundred years' wages. Even the servant who got just one received a large sum. The master is entrusting these servants with quite a bit.

At first glance it might seem like the master is unfair—like he's discriminating between his servants. Now he is making a distinction between them. But he's not unfair. It's his property; he can do with it what he wants. And he's really being gracious to the servants. He doesn't give them more than what they can handle, and he doesn't give them less. He gives to each of them the right amount.

Probably the most common interpretation of the talents is that they represent spiritual gifts. The idea is that God gives each of us certain gifts or abilities that are to be used for the

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work of his Kingdom. And this much is true. Some gifts seem more spiritual, while others seem more ordinary, but they're all gifts from God and are to be used for the building up of the Church.

Now this could be what the talents represent. But Jesus doesn't tell us exactly what they represent, and the talents aren't really the point of the parable. The point has to do with faithfulness in what we've been given. So I think it is better to understand them more broadly as everything God entrusts to us. This includes our spiritual gifts, but also our families, our property, our jobs, and all our responsibilities. It includes God's Word and Sacraments and even this creation, which he placed under the care of our first parents (Gen. 1:28). As we await our master's return, we are to be faithful in everything he has given us.

In the parable, two servants are faithful while the other is wicked and lazy. The difference among the three servants really has to do with their understanding of the master. The first two servants understood their master to be kind and generous. I'll explain that more in a moment. So they acted under the impression that the master is kind and generous, and, in the end, he turned out to be just that.

But the third servant was afraid of the master. He understood him **"to be a hard man"** (25:24), and he acted accordingly. Out of fear he buried the talent in the ground. That way, at least he wouldn't lose it. But that's not what the master wanted him to do with it. So in the end, the servant found the master to be the hard man he expected. All three of the servants really found their master to be exactly who they thought he was.

Now this doesn't mean God is just whoever we think he is. God is who he is, regardless of who we think he is. But to those who trust in his grace on account of Jesus Christ, God is gracious. And to all who disregard Christ and expect to be judged by our performances, that is exactly what will happen.

So all three of the servants in the parable meet the master they expect.

The first two servants understood the master to be kind and generous. That's why they acted faithfully with what their master gave them. They understood the talents not to be a deposit, but a gift. And this is the surprise of the parable.

At least most of Jesus' parables seem to have these surprises in them. The character who represents God almost always does something unexpected. So when a master gives a massive amount of money to his servants and says, "I'll be back," we expect that his return is for the purpose of collecting on his investment.

But that's not what the master does. And the two faithful servants know this, but the third one doesn't. So when the master returns, the third servant digs up the one talent and brings it back. He says, **"Here, you have what is yours"** (25:25). But he's the only servant who does that. He's the only one who tries to give it back.

The two faithful servants show the master what they did, but they don't offer it back to the master and the master doesn't ask for it.

Now, some translations might have the word "here." The servant says, **"Here, I have made five talents more"** (25:20). I really don't know why they translate it that way. It kind of makes it sound like the servants are giving the money back. But they're not. The word is really "See" or "Behold." The servants say, **"Look, I made five more"** (25:20), or, **"Look, I made two more"** (25:22). They show the master what they did, but they don't try to give it back, and the master doesn't want it back. And we notice at the end, the servant who had the ten talents—he still

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has all ten (25:28). The master never took a dime back from the faithful servants. Instead of coming back to collect from his servants, the master comes back to reward them and give them even more.

And this is the surprise. It's not what we would expect a master to do. Maybe he gives the servants a commission on the profits. So when the one servant earns five more talents, we might expect the master to let the servant keep one or two as a commission. Perhaps an incredibly generous master would let the servant keep the entire profit of five talents. But only a fool would let the servant keep the initial investment as well. But that's what the master does. The one servant keeps all ten, and the other keeps all four. That's because the initial investment wasn't an investment. It was a gift. And that's why they were faithful with it. Instead of dreading the day the master would return and ask for his money back, they used it like it was their own. And this is exactly what the master intended.

So they don't try to give it back, and the master doesn't ask for it back. In fact, he piles on even higher. He says, *"Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master."* (25:21, 23)

"Enter into the joy of your master." As if these ten or four talents aren't enough, the master now shares with them everything he has. He brings them into his house. *It's all yours! My joy is your joy. My heaven is your heaven.* This makes the four and ten talents, which are quite a bit of money, seem like pennies.

The two faithful servants understand their master to be kind and generous. So they see the master's property as a gift to them. Therefore, they use it faithfully and joyfully. And in the end they receive grace upon grace.

The problem with the wicked and lazy servant was simply that he didn't recognize the gift to be a gift. He expected a collection. He expected a reckoning. And that's what he got. His judgment was really the result of him rejecting the gift and even trying to give it back.

So we learn from this parable that there is a wrong way and a right way to understand God, this life, and the Judgment Day.

We could understand God to be a harsh judge. If we understand God to be a harsh judge, then this life is a test, and the Judgment Day is a reckoning that will not go well for us. So if this is the case, we should repent of our unbelief. And by "repent," I simply mean trust in Jesus as the atonement for our sins. For as much as hell is a reality, the truth is, Jesus has already dealt with it for us. That's what the whole God hanging beaten, bloodied, humiliated, and dead on a Roman cross thing was all about. So if you think God wants to judge you harshly for your sins, there's just one question you're going to have to answer: *What was Jesus doing on the cross?* Because if he wasn't paying for your sins, then there really isn't a good explanation for why the Father would put his own Son through that. Jesus on the cross is the sacrifice for your sins. And on account of this, God forgives you. So faith simply trusts that when God looks at us, he finds us to be righteous on account of Jesus' death and resurrection for us.

This is God's gift to you. Now, to disbelieve this is to reject the gift. Unbelief is like burying it in the ground until the Judgment Day, digging it up again, and handing it back to God, saying, "This isn't mine." If that's the case, you will find God to be the harsh judge you expect. So don't do that. That's the wrong way to understand God, this life, and the Judgment Day.

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The right way is to understand God to be a kind and generous master. If we understand God to be a kind and generous master, then this life is a gift, and the Judgment Day is just more gift.

So if this life is a gift, and it most certainly is, then we're not crippled by fear of what God is going to demand from us at the end. Instead we are free to use and enjoy the good gifts he has given us. It's not freedom to abuse the gifts. That's called sin. But it is freedom to use and enjoy them faithfully and in service to our neighbors. We do this with confidence that when the master returns, he will welcome us into his eternal joy.

If God were a harsh judge who demands a strict account from us, we would all be found lacking. But that's not the right way to understand God. We understand him to be generous and kind, because he is on account of Jesus Christ. So we understand this life to be a gift. And we understand the Judgment Day to be even more gift. On that Day he will welcome us into the never-ending joy of our master. So we receive grace upon grace for all eternity. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.