

THE MASTER'S GIFTS

Matthew 25:14-30

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

November 22, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The Gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 25, verses 14 through 30. In this Gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us to live in faithful expectation for his return. 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. ¹⁵To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰And 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.’ ²¹His 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.’ ²²And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’ ²³His 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.’ ²⁴He 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, ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ ²⁶But 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? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰And 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.

How do you think of God? What kind of God do you see in this parable? Do you see a gracious and benevolent God who abundantly rewards those who are faithful over little? Or do you see a harsh master, who reaps where he does not sow, gathers where he scatters no seed, and punishes his lazy servants? It's sounds like a tale of two gods, but it's not two gods. It is one God. And the parable is specifically about Jesus. It reveals the character of the Triune God:

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Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are all of one will and mind. But the master in the parable is specifically Jesus.

There was a heretic early in Christianity named Marcion. He taught that the God in the Old Testament, the one who created the world, was a mean God, but that Jesus is an entirely new God. He was the God of love. Marcion could not reconcile the judgment of God with his wrath, so he made two separate gods. But when we read the Bible, it's really not like God is full of wrath in the Old Testament and love in the New Testament. God is love (1 John 4:8). He always has been and always will be. We find the same loving God in both Testaments. And in both, he also has judgment and wrath. Jesus demonstrated both love and wrath in his ministry.

There's also a feeling today that people think of God the Father as the judgy one, but Jesus as the accepting one. This is not true. All three persons of the Trinity are of one mind and will. They have the same love and the same judgment.

This is another parable about the return of Jesus. During this part of the church year, we hear a lot about the last things, also called "the end times," things like tribulation, persecution, the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment of all mankind, and the new creation.

If you've ever tried to study the end times, which you absolutely should, you may have gotten confused. This is unfortunate. Biblical end times teaching should not be confusing. Many end times teachers get distracted, and distract their hearers, with speculation about things we really don't know. This comes at the expense of the clear parts. They get distracted with speculation about the antichrist, rebuilding the temple, finding a red heifer, or counting blood moons. There's a certain intrigue to the mysterious visions in the Bible. So they get all wrapped up in the mysteries, and they neglect the clear parts.

There is a temptation in theology to become bored with the fundamentals. God made the most important parts clear, so that we can understand them. So the atonement is clear. Jesus took our sins in his body and paid the price for our sin. He took our punishment. He removed the consequence of sin, which is death, so death could not hold Jesus, and he rose again on the third day. God made it clear. Jesus died and rose again for you. But we might despise its simplicity and take it for granted. We might say, "Yeah, yeah, I got that. What else?" We should learn other parts of theology, but the atonement is our grounding for everything else. So also, with the end times, we might despise the simplicity of the fundamentals in favor of the mysteries. And we might spend so much time on the mysteries that they become the main thing instead of the fundamentals. It's a form of idolatry. We love our own intellect, and we trust it over what God has chosen to plainly reveal. So my advice for you as you study the end times is to keep the fundamentals as your grounding. Then, as you try to understand the mysteries, you will see that the mysteries are not teaching something else. Rather, they are teaching the fundamentals in a different way. And it's all grounded in the atonement. The same Jesus who died and rose again for you is coming again to take you with him into his Kingdom.

The creeds are very helpful in keeping the fundamentals. The Apostles' and Nicene creeds, which we use both of in our worship, focus on what we know. It's not that the creeds create the fundamentals. But the men who wrote the creeds asked, "What are the central articles of biblical doctrine?" And they put those things together, and we repeat them over and over again. The Apostles' Creed confess that Jesus "ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from where He shall come to judge the living and the dead." And at the end we confess, "I believe in ... the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." The Nicene Creed teaches those exact same things, with only slight differences in wording.

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So we focus on these fundamentals. There are five of them listed in the creeds: First, Jesus is the king of all things now. He is at the right hand of the Father, and there he exercises sovereign rule over all of creation. Second, he is coming again in bodily form. Third, when he comes he will raise all the dead, not just believers, but all people. Every body will be physically raised. Fourth, Jesus will judge all mankind. And fifth, he will take his believing saints into his new creation where we will experience perfect and eternal life with him. These are the fundamentals: Jesus reigns over all things now. Jesus is returning. Jesus will raise the dead. Jesus will judge all mankind. And Jesus will take his believers into the new creation. The creeds keep these fundamentals before us always.

Some end times teachers create new doctrines, which are not clearly taught in the Bible. But the worst part is that these new doctrines obscure the clear teachings of Scripture.

A lot of end times teachers create a list of expectations. There are certain things, they say, that must occur before Jesus returns. They actually teach that Jesus cannot come back yet, because certain signs have not been fulfilled, or at least, not the way they say they have to be fulfilled. But the signs are not a checklist that we can cross off to mark how close we are. The signs are a reminder to us that Jesus' coming is certain. When we see wars and disasters, we remember, *Oh, yes; Jesus said these things will happen, and his coming is certain.* When we see injustice and disaster in the world, we remember that Jesus has promised to establish perfect justice forever. That's the point of the signs. If you ever hear someone say, "This or that has to happen before Jesus returns," that person is a false teacher. Do not listen to him. Jesus teaches that we must be ready at any time.

Jesus teaches this in many places. We learned it from the parable last week, and we learn it again this week.

Last week we heard about the ten virgins or bridesmaids (Matt. 25:1-13). Five were foolish and five were wise. The wise were ready for the bridegroom to come, but the foolish were not. And that is like us waiting for Jesus to return. Some will believe in him and be ready for his return, and some will disbelieve. They might appear to be Christians, but they don't actually trust in Jesus, and they don't believe he is returning. Therefore, despite their appearance of godliness, they're not actually ready. And when Jesus returns, they will be shut out of his kingdom. The focus of that parable was on faith. We are ready when we trust in Jesus for salvation. When he returns, he will vindicate our faith. All of our waiting and suffering will be revealed to be worth it when Jesus appears in glory.

The focus of this parable is on faithfulness, which is not the same thing as faith, but the two are certainly related. Faithfulness flows from faith. Those who believe that Jesus died for their sins, rose from the dead, and is returning again will live in faithfulness to him. If Jesus is our master, who has graciously saved us, we see the value of faithful obedience to him. So faithfulness flows from faith.

We see this in the servants. The two faithful servants rightly understood their master. And this right belief led to faithfulness. But the third servant misunderstood his master, and it led to unfaithfulness.

The master is Jesus, and the servants are his disciples, including us. He entrusts to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one talent. A talent was worth about twenty years' wages. So it's a big deposit, even for the servant who received just one.

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Some say the talents represent spiritual gifts. The idea is that God gives each of us certain gifts or abilities that are to be used for the work of his Kingdom. And that's 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.

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 it's 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 our care (Gen. 1:28). As we await our master's return, we are to be faithful in everything he has given us.

Two servants are faithful while the other is wicked and lazy. The difference among the servants is their understanding of the master. The first two understood their master to be kind and generous, so they acted on that belief, and, in the end, he turned out to be just that.

But the third servant was afraid. He understood the master **"to be a hard man"** (25:24). 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. 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.

This doesn't mean God is whoever we think he is. God is who he is, regardless of what we think. 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.

The first two servants understood the master to be kind and generous. They knew the talents were not a deposit, but a gift. But the third one sees it as a test that he might fail. So when the master returns, the third servant digs up the talent and brings it back. He says, **"Here, you have what is yours"** (25:25). But he's the only servant who tries to give it back.

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

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 makes it sound like the servants are giving the money back. But they're not. The word (ἴδε) really means "Look" or "Behold." The servants say, **"Look, I made five more,"** or, **"Look, I made two more"** (25:22). It's more like a kid saying to his parents, "Look at the turkey sculpture I made!" They show the master what they did, but they don't try to give it back, and the master doesn't want it back. This is confirmed at the end when the servant who had the ten talents still has all ten (25:28). The master never took a penny back from them. Instead, he comes back to reward them and give them even more.

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. 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. This is exactly what the master intended.

Then 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). Five talents or two talents seems like a lot. But Jesus calls that **"little."** God has given us this life. He gave us our bodies, our families, our homes, our friends, our jobs, our church, and much more. Every good thing is a gift from him (James 1:17). It might seem like a lot, and it is. We should be

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very thankful already. But, in the end, all the gifts of this life will seem little when Jesus says, **“Enter into the joy of your master.”** As if the 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.*

If we think God is a harsh judge, then this life is a test, and the Judgment Day is a reckoning. 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 why he hanged beaten, bloodied, humiliated, and dead on a Roman cross. If you think God wants to judge you harshly for your sins, there's just one question you'll have to answer: *What was Jesus doing on that cross?* Because if he wasn't paying for your sins, then there really isn't a good reason. Jesus on the cross is the sacrifice for your sin. And on account of this, God forgives you. 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. To disbelieve is to reject the gift. Unbelief is like burying Jesus' righteousness 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.

Faith rightly understands Jesus to be a kind and generous master. So this life is a gift, and the Judgment Day is just more gift. So 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 sin. But it is freedom to use and enjoy them faithfully and in service to our neighbors. We do this with confidence that when our master returns, he will welcome us into his eternal joy.

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

He who testifies to these things says, **“Surely I am coming soon.”** Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)