

FOCUSED ON FAITH: BE NOT AFRAID

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Matthew 25:14-30

To us here in worship, scripture is important. Scripture holds a powerful place of reverence in our lives. We treat it with awe and respect. Its words are truth. And because we approach scripture with such seriousness, we want to make its words not only truth but truthful. After all, if it is God's Word then it must be an accurate description of life as we know it. The problem with this approach (and I'm guilty of this, too) is that we tend to miss the point of some passages. We try to shove scripture into a shape that fits our world.

For example, we see this in the parables. Parables are teaching stories told by Jesus. Some parables are reflections of life as we know it—the Parable of the Good Samaritan, for example. In that parable, a traveler is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. A man comes to his aid and saves him. Yes, that could happen, and that story fits into our experience. But then there are other parables that are completely outlandish. Two weeks ago, we looked at the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in which those who were invited to the wedding of the king's son refused to attend. Don't waste your time trying to create a real world scenario in which people would turn down the king's invitation. That's not the point. It is a preposterous proposition.

Today we are looking at another parable—the Parable of the Talents. This one is also based on a preposterous premise. It is about a man who is about to go out of town for an undetermined period of time. He calls in three of his servants and gives them responsibility over his wealth. To one servant he gives five talents, to another two talents, and to a third just a single talent. As the parable explains, he gives to each according to his ability. Then the man leaves town. Now, a man taking a trip is not that preposterous, but entrusting eight talents to his servants is. A talent is a preposterous amount of money. We have appropriated this Greek word for talent and applied it today to the abilities that some people possess—a talent for music, a talent for art, a talent for juggling chainsaws. But the meaning of talent in this parable is money—a ridiculous amount of money.

A talent is a measure of gold roughly equal to 6000 denarius. A denarius is a day's wage for a laborer. My back-of-the-envelope figuring tells me that a talent today would be worth a little over one million dollars. To the people of Jesus' day, a talent would have a time component as well. One talent represents twenty years of work. The first servant was given five talents, or the equivalent of one hundred years of labor—essentially a lifetime.

So, a man goes on a journey and entrusts his servants with five million dollars, two million dollars, and one million dollars respectively. Right away, the people hearing this would be snicker with disbelief. “That’s preposterous.”

The first servant, the one with five million dollars, takes the money and does business with it. Maybe he invested it in a hot real estate deal or maybe he bought some Bitcoins¹. It doesn't matter. He worked the money and doubled it. The second servant does the same and doubles his millions from two to four. (Where are these guys when you need a new investment manager?) The third, he chooses not to do any business—no investing, or buying property, or speculating on pork bellies. He does nothing other than dig a hole in the ground and bury the million dollars.

After a long time the master of the servants returns from his travels and he calls the servants in for an accounting of the money in their care. The first reported how he had doubled his money. The master is pleased and says to him, *Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.* The scene is repeated with the second servant who is also invited into the joy of his master.

Then we get to the third servant, the one who buried his million in the ground. He approaches the master saying, *I knew that you were a harsh man... so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.* The master is not too happy with this and calls the servant *wicked and lazy* and tells him that at least he should have placed the money with the bankers where it would have collected interest. That would have been better than nothing. The master orders that the million be taken from the servant and be given to the one who has ten million

The master says, *For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have nothing even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* It is from here that the parable goes from being a teaching to a commentary on the end times. The judgment on the money-burying servant is to lose everything and then be cast into the outer darkness.

As we hear this parable we asked the question, “Why did the third servant bury the money?” The answer, clearly, is fear. He says so, in fact. He says that he knows the master to be a harsh man who takes what he has not earned. In his fear, he hid the money.

It is easy to see that this parable plays as an allegory and the master is God. And for the third servant, the master is indeed harsh because that is how the servant chooses to view master. If you believe that God is demanding and

¹ Bitcoins were in the news this week as their value spiked.

judgmental, then that is the god you will find. But to the other servants who were entrusted with money, the master is trusting and gracious. That is how they choose to see him. He hands over seven million dollars and walks away.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent—one Sunday to go until the celebration of the birth of our savior. From the very first chapter, this gospel of Matthew has established that Jesus is Immanuel—God with us. Christmas is the celebration that God is truly with us in our lives and calls us to a divine relationship. Weeping and gnashing of teeth—that is the fate of those who regard God as harsh. The truth is found in the negative space of this parable, with the first two servants who view the master differently, who were willing to risk the master's millions. What we see in this parable is that when we view God as those first two servants do, then there is really no risk, the gifts of God will always multiply.

This parable is about waiting. As we wait for the day of the Lord, whatever that may look like, how do we wait? Do we take what God gives us and bury it in the sand or do we take what God has given us and work God's will with it? In the parable, the servants are servants of the master. They are extensions of him. In his absence, they become him to the world. As God's people, we too are extensions of God; we are to be extensions of God's work. Matthew has made it clear to his people that God's kingdom is accompanied by feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, and serving the least—doing God's work.

In this season of Advent, how do we choose to wait? As we have seen in this sermon series, we are to Be Awake, Be Hungry, Be Dressed, and Be Not Afraid. We are to wait for God with faith and then we may here our master say, *Well done, good and faithful servant.*