

“SPIRITUAL GIFTS - INVESTING TALENTS”
A SERMON BASED ON MATTHEW 25:14-30
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2017
10 a.m.

Some of Jesus’ parables, the stories he told, are quite disturbing.

They just don’t seem very nice.

It is disturbing because if we have tended to believe anything about Jesus,
it is that he is nice.

Whether it was bringing children close to bless them,

or stopping to talk with a group of lepers and heal them,

or sticking up for the woman caught in adultery,

Jesus has been the epitome

the perfect example of compassion, and gentleness.

So if Jesus is anything, he is nice.

And I expect nice people to tell nice stories.

But this parable, this story Jesus told isn’t particularly nice at all.

It is unnerving, unsettling, upsetting.

It isn’t nice.

A master goes away for a while,
leaving his slaves, his servants,
responsible for some very significant resources.

The first slave was given five talents to look after.

The word talent here does not mean abilities or gifts,
like a stage talent

A talent was an amount of money.

If you are in England, a friend may ask you
if you might spare a few pounds.

If you look down, grab your belly in your hands and say,
“well I suppose I could.”

You can be confident in knowing
that you have probably missed the fact
that your friend wants to borrow money.

In England a pound is a unit of money.

In this Biblical setting, a talent is a unit of money.

It is a huge unit of money.

There are scholars who have argued that a talent is likely

the equivalent of 15 to 20 years wages of a labourer.

In today's funds, if a labourer had wages of \$50 000 dollars a year,
a talent at fifteen times that, \$750,000 dollars.

And the first servant was given five of them.

It sounds like the beginning of a nice story.

A master saying,

Here's almost 4 million for you to look after while I go away.

The second slave got two talents to look after.

A million and a half dollars to care for
while his master went away.

Even the third slave.

He got one talent,
about 3/4 of a million to look after while his master went away.

It starts out as a pretty nice story.

It could be written up in a labour journal with the title

“Getting the most from your staff.”

And in this story the servants do very well.

The first and second servant both double their master's money.

When the master returned after a long time away,
they were able to present him with the original amount of money,
times two.

Not surprisingly the master was pleased.

He said to each of them.

“Well done good and faithful servant.

You have been faithful with a few things.

I will put you in charge of many things.

Come enter into the joy of your master.”

The third servant did not do as well.

In fact, fearing his master, his master who expected so much,

he took the cautious approach.

He took the money and buried it.

Now to our modern ear,

this third servant may sound like a bit of an idiot.

Why would you bury over 3/4 of a million in the ground somewhere?

As with most Bible accounts, you need to understand the context
to best understand the story.

Saving strategies were different in that time and place.

Having a spot where you buried your valuables
was actually considered prudent and wise.

If your city was about to be overrun by an attacking army,
and you don't have a Swiss bank account,

or an offshore Caribbean account,

the wisest thing you could do was bury

your family heirlooms and treasures

in a place only you could remember.

An invading hoard could pillage your home,

but they wouldn't dig up every field for miles around.

There is a hint of this practice of burying valuables in Matthew 13,
where in another parable,

a man is described as finding treasure buried in a field.

It was not unreasonable or thought foolish to bury valuables.

In modern day terms what this third servant was doing

by burying valuables in the ground
was akin to taking the money,
and putting it in a safety deposit box.
He didn't invest the money, but he kept it safe.

As this story unfolds,
You might expect Jesus to be
sympathetic and understanding of the third servant.
Even though the money the servant had in his care wasn't doubled,
he protected his master's capital.

The story tells us that each servant received an amount,
in keeping with his ability.
The third servant received less,
presumably because he was less able or less experienced.

So even though he had not made any gains.
At least his capital was preserved.

Today, if a mutual fund company guarantees to protect your capital,
that is considered a plus.
It is a protection against risk.

Worse things could have happened than returning the money intact.

The market could have taken a dive.

Over 3/4's of a million could have become a hundred thousand.

The servant could have stolen the money and disappeared.

Got a place near the water and retired.

The third servant doesn't seem to be such a bad guy.

But the story takes a difficult turn.

The third servant presented the master with his capital, returned intact.

You might expect a comment such as,

well, it isn't a great return,

but you kept my money safe, thank-you.

But the master in this story gets very angry.

You evil and lazy slave.

You knew that I was demanding did you?

You knew that I pick where I didn't plant

and harvest where I didn't put seed?

Well then why didn't you at least put my money in an account

where it would have at least gathered some interest?

The master spoke to another servant.

Take the talent from him.

Give it to the one who has ten talents.

For to those who have, more will be given,
and they will have an abundance.

But even those with little,
even what they have will be taken from them.

Now take this third servant, this worthless servant,
and throw him into the outer darkness,
where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.”

End of the story.

When I read it I want to say,

“Jesus, what are you doing?”

The servant wasn't such a bad guy.

He was just timid.

He didn't lose the money.

He just didn't make any additional money.”

This is not a nice story.

I have a lot of sympathy for the third servant, for a number of reasons.

He wasn't irresponsible.

he did an accepted practice at the time.

He put the money in the biblical safety deposit box.

He buried it in the ground.

The master knew he was of lesser ability or experience.

The servant was only given one talent to look after.

because he didn't mess with his master's stuff.

He was told to look after the money. He did. He returned it.

All of it.

Why unleash on the guy?

I kind of expect the same sort of sympathy from Jesus.

But I don't see it.

In using this story for teaching,

Jesus doesn't seem to be conveying patience or compassion.

In fact the message is one of judgement instead.

Take what the servant has away from him.

Give it to the who already has ten,

and cast this worthless servant into the outer darkness.

Not exactly a story you follow with the hymn,

‘Gentle Jesus meek and mild.’

This isn’t a typical spiritual gifts passage.

But as well as learning last week that the Holy Spirit himself is the source of all the spiritual gifts that manifest in us.

a second fundamental question you need to have clearly answered before learning what spiritual gift you might have or be given is,

‘What am I doing, what will I do, with what the Master has given me?’

It is a question for us to consider

as we realize that with the spiritual gifts given to us,
there does seem to be an expected return.

Will what I return to the Master to earn his favour?

Will the Saviour, the Judge, say to me, to you,

‘Well done good and faithful servant?’

How can we know that we will receive a well-done,
rather than a throw the worthless servant into the outer darkness?

What is the criteria?

Is it really about the return on investment?

Is that what's going on? God is only interested in more?

I want to suggest this morning that this parable is more a parable
about the heart of a servant
than it is about the amount the master received in return.

I want to ask you a rather simple,
but also I feel, a rather penetrating question.

Who do you think the third servant was working for?

At the surface the obvious answer
is that he was working for his master.

But listen to the third servant's words when the master returned.

“Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did
not sow, and gathering where you did not gather seed.

So I was afraid,
and I went and hid your talent in the ground.
Here you have what is yours.”

What was this servant’s motivation, his primary concern?

Was it the desire to succeed?

Was it the desire to promote his master’s interests?

Was it the desire to become a more capable servant?

None of those things were driving his behaviour.

The third servant’s motivation, was fear,

fear for himself, and protecting himself,

it was his self-interest that motivated him.

He acted out of fear.

Fear shaped his service.

His service was self-serving.

He put the money into the ground,

into the safety deposit box, to avoid risk, to avoid making a mistake,

to avoid his master’s disapproval.

In his fear,

he was no longer serving his master.

He was serving himself.

He was serving his own need for security.

He was serving his own need for comfort.

He was no longer serving his master.

The reason Jesus tells this harsh parable,

is for our protection,

Throughout the Bible, from Adam and Eve,

to the churches in Revelation,

the most dangerous thing a person can do,

is prioritize themselves ahead of God.

I challenge you to look at any example of a person receiving

judgement in the Bible,

without exception

they put their own agenda before God's.

Those that serve themselves,

out of fear, out of greed, out of a desire for independence from God,

they end up on the outs with God, in the outer darkness
where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The other two servants were working on behalf of their master.

Their motivation was to make their master successful.

Their one desire was to do the best they could for their master.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is given

the power of the Holy Spirit came on the disciples
to empower them to be witnesses,
to carry out the work and the mission of God.

We work for the master.

We do not work for ourselves.

We do not work for our own affirmation.

We do not work to alleviate our own feelings of neediness.

We do not work to bring glory to ourselves.

We do not work to gain success for ourselves.

Spiritual gifts are for our work for the Master.

We work to make him a success.

The implications are broad.

Our actions and decisions and ministries,

the use of spiritual gifts we are given

must come from a desire to make the Master a success,

to carry out God's mission, being a witness to Christ.

Our spiritual gifts; and actions and decisions and ministries

are intended to build the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

We cannot be motivated by fear.

Fear of changing, fear that things will feel different or unfamiliar.

Fear of giving, worrying that we won't have enough resources

for ourselves.

Fear of trying, not wanting to fail, not wanting to expend the effort.

These are selfish motives.

These are not motives that seek the best for the Master.

The good and faithful servants are those

working in a way that the Master will benefit.

The Master benefits through the growth of his kingdom.

Through the witness being given to Jesus the Saviour.

Serving the Master means reaching beyond ourselves,

our own needs, our own fears, our own motivations,

and doing what will benefit the Master and his kingdom.

This parable ended with the third servant receiving judgement.

If we are serving ourselves, we are no good to the Master.

The Master said, take his talent away from him,

give it to the servant who has ten.

Everyone who has will be given more,

and he will have an abundance.

Whoever does not have,

even what they have will be taken away from them.

When we serve ourselves, our world shrinks.

When we serve God, our world gets bigger.

You have likely heard in the media,

or through denominational channels

a discouraging picture of the state of the mainline churches today.

Weaker, numbers dropping, doors closing.

It could be said,

that these are congregations who are receiving the judgement

that the third servant did,

where even what they have is being taken away.

The reality is there is a surge of growth in churches

around the world right now.

There are church movements happening filled with young people.

There are churches trying to manage the constant stream

of people coming to them looking to connect with God.

To those who have, more will be given.

Congregations that are asking the question,

'How can we serve the Master?' will be given more.

Rather than serving their past, their comfort level, their fears,

congregations who are serving their master,

receive in abundance and are given more,

their world gets bigger.

Just look at what has happened for us through Nicaragua,
and Project Share, and VBS and Habitat for Humanity.

We have seen it here.

The more we use our gifts,

the more we take what the Spirit has laid on our hearts,

and use those gifts to invest in the kingdom,

the more we will see

Pay attention to your motives for service,

Be mindful that with your spiritual gifts

you are to serve God, and fulfill his purposes.

And when you do, you too will hear the words,

Well done good and faithful servant.

You have been faithful with a few things,

I will put you in charge of many.

Come and share your Master's happiness.

Amen.

(when we are doing what we are supposed to in God's purposes, it all comes together - watch the screen)