

Consider Your Works: Faithful or Slothful?

14 "For *the kingdom of heaven* is like a man traveling to a far country, *who* called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. 15 "And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.

16 "Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. 17 "And likewise he who *had received* two gained two more also. 18 "But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.

19 "After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. 20 "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' 21 "His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' 22 "He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' 23 "His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

24 "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.

25 'And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, *there* you have *what is yours*.'

26 "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. 27 'So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. 28 'Therefore take the talent from him, and give *it* to him who has ten talents. 29 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. 30 'And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (Matt. 25:14-30)

At the end of a year, a parable like this is helpful to enable us to consider our works and evaluate. The end of a year reminds us that at some point, there will also be an end to this interlude period. As we end the year and take stock of what we have done, and how we have done it, so there will come a day when our lives will be over, or the church age will be over, and we will take stock of our whole lives. Only then, it will not simply be a private, inner evaluation, but one done by our Lord and Master, who knows all things perfectly.

Jesus told this parable in the context of a larger teaching beginning in chapter 24 about His Second Coming. And after narrating some of the events leading up to His return, He then gives several parables about people who claim to be His but will not be ready for His return. He pictures a steward who gets drunk and starts fighting with the other servants because the lord seems to delay his return. He pictures ten virgins waiting for the announcement of the Bridegroom's approach, only five of whom are ready. After this parable, He speaks of the judgement between sheep and goats.

So these parables are really about the kind of behavior of people waiting for His return. They are about living in an interlude period: the period between the master being present. That's where we live: in the church age, between the first and second comings of the Lord.

And like all parables, they really carry one main idea. In these parables, each tells the story from a different angle, bringing in more details but each really says the same thing: The Master's absence produces opposite reactions in different people. Some are watchful, while some are careless. Some are faithful, while some are slothful. But then, at some point, the absence of the master concludes, and he returns. The watchful and faithful have one reward, the careless and slothful another.

Jesus told this parable because it represents real people, real responses. The parable divides everyone here into two groups, and there are no others.

Now, we can study this parable by simply looking at the two kinds of people found here: the faithful stewards, and the slothful stewards.

I. The Faithful Stewards

14 "For *the kingdom of heaven* is like a man traveling to a far country, *who* called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. 15 "And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.

The man in this parable represents the Lord. He goes into a far country, which in that day meant he would be gone for months, perhaps even a year or more. This man delivers his goods to them. It doesn't mean he gave them away; it means he entrusted them to look after his goods as if they were their own. This is what we mean by stewardship: a steward manages the goods of another, and when that master returns, he expects to see an improvement on what he invested.

But as he entrusts his goods, he does not do so equally. He knows his stewards, he knows what each one can handle, what each one is good at, where each one is gifted, and so he distributes his gifts differently: one gets five, one two, one one. Now, it's important to understand that these were large sums of money. A talent was the largest measurement of money. Estimates vary, but one talent was around 35 kgs of silver. That represented around twenty years' annual wages for one person. One talent was a fortune. Two talents was double that fortune, and five talents was equivalent to receiving, at today's exchange rate, around R40 million.

The talents are not meant to simply mean how much money God gives you. They represent how much God invests in each person. It is the abilities God gives you: athletic, mechanical, musical, artistic, entrepreneurial, mathematical, linguistic. It is the intellect God gives you, and the education He allows you to have. It is the family He places you in, and the town, and the city, and the country, and the century in which He has you live. It is the body He gives you with its appearance, and ability, and health. It is the church He places you in, and the people He surrounds you with. It is the career or vocation He gives you, and the money He sends your way. And it is the precise amount of years He gives you on this Earth. This constitutes the small fortune He puts into your hands.

Now why does He not simply give everyone the same? God apparently delights in variety and complementarianism, not in uniformity. God is not concerned that you have less or more abilities than another. That's a part of His design. The abilities are as much a gift as what is entrusted to them.

But the parable is not about us getting different abilities and opportunities. The parable simply recognizes that fact. Instead, the parable is really about faithfulness. Faithfulness is not the same as ability. These servants had different abilities, and the master recognized that. Faithfulness is not the same as opportunity. A servant with greater ability will probably have greater opportunity. Both ability and opportunity are God-given. Faithfulness is what you do with God's investment in you. Ability and opportunity are from God, humility must come from you.

And notice what the faithful stewards did with their investment.

16 "Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. 17 "And likewise he who *had received* two gained two more also.

Both of them went and traded. The word traded is simply the Greek word for work. They went out and worked with the talents they'd received. How often did they go out and work? We assume they did so every day the master was absent. They kept investing what they had been invested with. The one with two did not envy the one with five, nor become discouraged because he had only brought back two. The master wanted a return in keeping with what he had invested.

What would be a return on God's investment? When what God has poured into your life produces things of eternal value. The money, ability, time, upbringing, education, gifting is turned into an evangelistic witness, a building up of God's church, a growth in knowledge and truth, a shaping of creation in God-glorifying ways. It is converted into glory to God. That's why 1 Corinthians 10:31 says.

That's why Colossians 3:17 says:

Not all your life is a life of conscious communion with God. But all of your life can add up to glory to God, if the choices you make are wise stewardship choices of how to use your time, how to use your money, how to use your education.

Now we read of the master's return:

19 "After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. 20 "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' 21 "His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' 22 "He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' 23 "His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

Now here is to me an awe-producing thought. One day, the lord returned and settled accounts with his servants. What does it mean to settle accounts? It means to give a full accounting of what was given, and what was returned. The master is doing an audit of his servants. He is making sure nothing is stolen or gone missing. Investing twenty, forty, or 100 year' worth of salary in these three men is a lot of money, and the master has a right to want a full account of what was spent, and what income was generated.

Here is an unsettling truth. One day, God will settle accounts with you. God has a full record of everything He has invested in you. One day, God will write in one column the full amount of money, time, abilities, opportunities, education, truth in one column. And then in the second column He will examine what return you brought on that investment. Here is what I invested in you: debit column. Now, let's examine what you spent that on, and how much of that has become permanent glory for me.

Both five and two-talent stewards are clearly happy and unburdened in their consciences: they are eager to show their master their successes. It suggests to me that the Christian who has lived his or her life well will not struggle to find evidence of having lived for God. He or she will easily name the souls they prayed for, witnessed to, and discipled. They will easily remember the missionaries they supported, the worthy Christian causes they gave to, and the believers they had mercy on. They will point to how they built up and strengthened God's church through teaching, or exhorting, or administering, or serving, or showing mercy, or

helping. They will quickly point to their testimony at work, their testimony in their families, their testimony among unbelievers, and say how it largely was ambassadorial of King Jesus. People who took the Master's investment and traded, worked with it, will not be scratching their heads and wondering what they did for Christ. With deep gratitude, they will eagerly point to what God's investment in them produced.

Now look at the master's response. To the man with ten,

21 "His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

Look at the identical response to the man with four

'23 "His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

God does not judge the man with four as having done less well because He brought back less. No, he commends him in precisely the same terms as the one with ten. To both, there is first a commendation: well done! Congratulations! Excellent work! You are good, you are faithful! Wouldn't that be reward enough, to hear your Lord call you *faithful*! If eternity had nothing more than God being pleased with me, that would Heaven enough.

But second, there is a further committal. Since you proved your faithfulness over few, you are ready for greater. One of the rewards of Heaven will be increased authority, increased responsibility, increased usefulness. If your heart is right with God, that will sound like a reward. If not, it will sound like a curse.

And third, there is comfort given. The faithful are welcomed into the joyful presence of their lord. It wouldn't be joyful if the lord himself was a peevish, fretting, miserable sort of fellow. But if he is joyful, celebrating, and given to laughter and delight, then what they are being welcomed into is the happy presence of their lord.

The Christian who puts his entire life on God's altar, to be burnt up for God's purposes, can expect this kind of abundant entrance into Heaven. That's because this Christian is always thinking of how to convert God's investment into something permanent. How can I turn this into everlasting joy? How can I turn this into eternal riches? How can I convert this into permanent pleasure?

But we turn now to the second type of person in this parable.

II. The Slothful Steward

First, notice what he did.

18 "But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.

This steward receives least of all, but as we pointed out, it was still a fortune. But instead of going to work each day and trading, he buries it. Why? He was at least hiding it from thieves, thinking that if he returned it to the master intact, he couldn't be accused of theft.

But read between the lines. How long does it take to bury something? Maybe an hour's work, if he buried it particularly deep. What did that steward then do every day while the other two

were trading? If the master were away for months or even years, what did the steward do every one of those days?

We know he wasn't about the master's business. Presumably he just pleased himself, looked after his own interests, took care of his own health, his own body, his own family.

What does this represent? This is the person who has heard the Gospel. He or she has heard truth every Sunday. She's received Bibles, books and sermons aplenty. God has entrusted health, many decades of life, an able mind, and more money than most people who've ever lived have seen. Truckloads of goods, unbelievable conveniences and comforts, a storehouse of knowledge, surrounded by mature Christians. But this person scorns all that. She's more interested in her health and her appearance, more concerned to be super-mom, more interested in social media. He's more concerned to look fashionable, be well-travelled, seem smart and educated, and taste every tree of pleasure in the garden of life. So that's what he or she spends his time on, spends his money on, spends his health on, spends his intellect on. What could be invested in eternity is buried: buried in excuses, buried in procrastination, buried in continual promises, buried in sheer neglect.

A life of worship of the Triune me: me, myself and I. My children, my family, my health, my comforts, my conveniences, my reputation. Everything God invests in him, he spends it on himself. His focus is not on the permanent, the eternal, the everlasting. His focus is on the experiential, the present, the tangible. Put simply, he walks by sight, and not by faith.

But this man, like the faithful, will also have the day where God settles accounts. What is amazing is that this man has all along been preparing an argument to defend his having buried his talent. He knew what he was doing when he did that. He knew his master would not be pleased. So watch now as the man delivers his excuse for living as he did.

24 "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25 'And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, *there* you have *what is yours*.'

He attempts to blame the master for expecting too much of him. You are a hard, demanding taskmaster. You expect to reap where you didn't sow. You want money out of thin air. You want the impossible. You expect too much. I felt overwhelmed. I felt intimidated. I was scared. So I hid your talent, and look, I have returned it to you undamaged.

Now amazingly, this man probably thought he would get away with this kind of argument. Of course, the two other stewards standing there with double the money stand as an immediate contradiction of his theory and an indictment on him. And the master is not so stupid as to miss the fact that after he had buried the talent, he hadn't done a day's work in his service. His problem was not the master's hardness, but his own slothfulness.

But what Proverbs tells us is that the slothful man has a habit of persuading himself that he is right.

Proverbs 26:16 The lazy *man* is wiser in his own eyes Than seven men who can answer sensibly.

See, he knows better than you why he can't do this or that. No one understands his plight.

13 The lazy *man* says, "*There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!*" (Prov. 22:13)
I can't go out and work. There's danger! I might get burnt out! I might contract yuppie flu.

There is the Christian who always want to do less. He always feels overwhelmed and always wants a reason to give up what he is doing now. Life is always making too many demands on

him, and he resents it: he resents his demanding boss, he resents his wife's expectations, he resents his children's demands, he resents his church's demands. If you told him his problem was slothfulness, he would hate you forever, because as far as he is concerned, he is one of the busiest, most exhausted men in the world. But lazy men can be busy. And typically, lazy men are always exhausted, because theirs is a spiritual lethargy. Inwardly, they still want the world served to them, inwardly, they have not accepted the curse laid on Adam and his offspring, inwardly, they still think it is all unfair. What exhausts them is not the labour, it is their chronic expectation that life should be easier.

That's why you don't commit ministry to men who are unable or unwilling to do the basic minimum, or who are always looking for reasons to do less. You commit ministry to those who wish to spend and be spent for the Lord, who would rather burn out than rust out.

But look how the master responds to this:

26 "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. 27 'So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.

First, instead of commendation, there is condemnation. The other two were *good and faithful*; he is called wicked and slothful. His problem is not that the master is hard, or that he didn't have enough resources. The problem is that he is stubbornly selfish, and deliberately lazy. God does not accept lesser ability as an excuse for no return. The person with two contrasts with the person with one, because while both had less ability, one chose to double the little he had, the other chose to hide it.

He answers the man's charge with a simple fact: had he been truly interested in the master's welfare, the very least he could have done is invested the money and let it earn interest. The fact that he did not even expend that much energy, but resorted to a quick and easy bury in the backyard approach shows that the steward had no intention of trying to bless the master. He just wanted to wash his hands of serving the master, and not be blamed for losing it.

Second, instead of committal, there is confiscation.

. 28 'Therefore take the talent from him, and give *it* to him who has ten talents. 29 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.

You couldn't even take care of the one talent, then what would have been yours will now be given to that faithful one. The rewards, the responsibilities, the riches that were within your grasp, now become someone else's.

Third, there is casting out.

30 'And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

In Christ's parables, outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth refers to Hell. So was this person a true believer? Obviously not. What this shows is that there is a kind of slothfulness which believers repent of. But then there is a kind of chronic, stubborn slothfulness that is a warning sign that Christ may be absent. If the branch remains barren year after year, it may be because there is no life in it. A chosen and stubborn selfishness, a deliberate and preferred slothfulness, year after year is a sign not of weakness, but of

rebellion. And as Samuel told Saul, rebellion *is* as the sin of witchcraft, And stubbornness *is* as iniquity and idolatry. (1 Sam. 15:23)

If your motto is, no one will make me serve, no one can force me to be more involved, no one can put more burdens on me, then you should be concerned about your soul, because that is not how five and two-talent stewards speak. They say things like, “How can I invest more in God’s kingdom? How can I multiply what God has given me for His glory? How can I transform my time and money and ability into permanent wealth, eternal joy, everlasting pleasure?” Christians don’t resent the labour for the Master, nor do they seek excuses to get out of it.

If this last year feels like you were a cross between faithful and slothful, then let me urge you to remember that the Lord always enables what He commands. If He commands you to reap where He hasn’t sown, then trust Him and reap anyway. If He commands you to go when there seems to be no strength, go anyway, Because God will provide what He demands, He will enable what He requires. And maybe this poem will remind you of His tenderness toward you.

He came to my desk, with a quivering lip
The lesson was done
“Have you a new page for me, teacher?
I have spoiled this one.”
I took his page, all soiled and blotted
And gave him a new one, all unspotted.
Then into his stirred heart I smiled
“Do better now my child.”

I went to the throne with a trembling heart
The year was done.
“Have you a new year for me, Father?
I have spoiled this one.”
He took my year, all soiled and blotted
And gave me a new one, all unspotted
And into my tired heart He smiled,
“Do better now, my child.”