

Matthew 25:14-30

14 'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." ²¹His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." ²³His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew; my namesake. Matthew reports Jesus using some rather harsh language and making some frightening judgments against people – the Pharisees he calls "whitewashed tombs which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth... You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?"

Living in Thanksgiving

Today's our focus is on Thanksgiving, but when we read this parable, which focuses in on the third servant who is cast into outer darkness, we may feel more nervous than thankful. We may be fearful that this Master will find us lacking in some way and cast us into outer darkness, so we better get to work getting some return on God's investment in us.

But Jesus' parables can be a bit tricky for us. They usually have some unusual features that we may not recognize in part because we are not familiar with the language or the context. We have to ask ourselves how we would have understood the story had we lived in Palestine in the first century. And the funny thing is that we would have been more puzzled hearing it back then than we do hearing it in English in the twenty-first century. Jesus used parables to challenge the conventional way of thinking, but over the years we've translated and interpreted Jesus'

parables to give them the conventional meaning that they were never supposed to have. When we study what the parable says in the context in which Jesus originally presented it, we actually end up rather confused and uncomfortable, precisely how Jesus wanted his audience to feel, because Jesus wasn't just offering platitudes; he was challenging us to see things differently than how we conventionally see things.

Consider first of all that property owners were not held in high regard by many in Jesus' audience. The Old Testament speaks frequently of the injustices committed by the rich in robbing the poor of their land and forcing them into indentured service, or slavery. But then we have a stranger twist; I may have opened your eyes to it in the skit that we did, because I took liberty in re-translating the translation of the Bible translation that we used today. In the original language (i.e. Greek), the master does not give the servants US dollars but *talents*. Now what is a talent? What is it worth? Well based on what I read, you probably realized that it was worth *a lot!* If you read the original Greek it says that the first slave was given five talents, and you're probably thinking that they are coins, like a silver dollar or something. But a single talent was equivalent to about 20 years wages for the common worker, so my calculation is pretty conservative (if a single talent represents 20 years wages, five talents would be 100 years' wages).

Now stop here for a minute and imagine Jesus' audience. You know there were some folks who thought he was crazy. We have an insanely rich landlord giving huge sums to his slaves. He uses the same sorts of exaggeration in other parables and sayings – like before you point out the splinter in your neighbor's eye you should remove the LOG in your own eye. He says that the kingdom of God is like a woman who makes bread by mixing yeast with 3 *measures* of meal, which is equivalent to something like 100 cups of meal. Jesus really tested his audience's power of imagination.

But the point is not simply to exaggerate but to point out the Master's generosity. We get caught up in the language of "master and slave," so much so that we would hardly imagine a slave receiving a million dollars from his master. I mean, if we imagine what a slave was worth, it would likely be far less than a million dollars, so based on our preconceptions of slavery this parable hardly makes any sense at all.

But the point that Jesus is making from the start is that the Master is ridiculously generous. He's like the father of the prodigal son, who is insulted by his own son yet *graciously* gives him his inheritance early so he can squander it, then spends his days looking out over the field waiting for him to return so he can run out there and welcome him home and throw a party for his homecoming. It just doesn't make sense based on our experience.

Jesus is telling us that God is beyond our expectations, that his grace is beyond our expectations. The first two slaves recognize that generosity and respond appropriately. They respond with THANKSGIVING – not just telling the master, "thank you very much for the bankroll," but *showing* their appreciation by using their gift to please the master.

If you stop and think about it, you receive an awful lot from God. You are here now, alive and warm, able to see and hear. What's better is that you have family and friends who love you, who you can laugh with and cry with. You have intelligence that enables you to imagine and calculate and comprehend. You have the ability to appreciate art and music. And most of us are given years and years to enjoy these gifts. God's generosity is so hard to comprehend. But the reaction that should prompt in us is a desire to do things that please this generous master. And there's a great synergy that happens when we live our lives in a way that pleases the master; the master is joyful and we are joyful. When slave 1 and slave 2 report to the master and tell him of his return on investment the master invites them to "enter into his joy." The master receives joy from watching his slaves use the gifts that they received and make something out of them. You know Christmas is approaching, and we can all relate to being a child or watching a child receive a gift that she really likes. As a parent, there's no greater joy than watching the joy in your child as she play with the toy that you got for her. You enter into her joy and she enters into yours. It's a regular joy fest.

But the third servant hasn't discovered that joy; he only sees the master as hard, demanding, threatening, and he lives his life in fear of reprisal. Not only that, but he actually accuses the master of gaining his power by ill-gotten means; "gathering what he did not sow and reaping where he did not scatter seed." There are people who would give humanity credit for all that is right in the world and give God the blame for all that is wrong. No doubt there were bad masters back in Jesus' day, but if my master gave me a couple hundred thousand dollars, I don't know if I would hold such a harsh opinion of him.

And that is the symptom of an unthankful heart. Instead of recognizing and celebrating the gift, one is suspicious of the giver. There's a lack of faith and a lack of trust in the master. One assumes that the master gained his fortune by unjust means, and one uses that assumption to justify our ingratitude and our unwillingness to serve and our unwillingness to forgive the master for the sins we may have fabricated in the first place.

God has given us more things than we can count, and among them is the choice to be grateful of what God gives us resentful of what God has not given us, to use the gifts God gives us to bring God greater glory or to bury our talents, to enter into the master's joy or to remain in fear of the master, to trust in his goodness or to doubt his integrity. I pray that you would recognize all that God provides us, to use those gifts to enhance his glory, and to enter into his joy. Amen.